

Managing Small Group Learning

Described below are some suggestions for managing learning in small groups. Teachers who are using more active learning models in their classrooms and teachers who are preparing for teaching in extended periods of learning (block schedules) often find these tips useful.

Strategy # 1: Be purposeful

There are a variety of small group learning structures that contribute to increased student learning and productive use of classroom time. Here are some specific examples of small groups at work:

- *Study groups* - review previously taught material in preparation for a teacher made test or quiz.
- *Drill teams/drill partners* - serve as coaches and trainers to each other to learn new material.
- *Problem solving teams* - propose, build, and test a solution to a problem by making drawings, models, and prototypes.
- *Laboratory teams* - carry out experiments and inquiries by sharing observations, procedures, conclusions, and materials.
- *Research teams* - conduct investigations by sharing ideas, information, and responsibilities.
- *Expert panels* - groups of students who have become expert in some aspect of a class study or unit.
- *Enactment groups* - teams of students who prepare, rehearse, and present an "enactment" of a significant literary, historical, or scientific event to the rest of the class or an audience beyond the class.
- *Shop/lab/studio helpers* - student leader teams, pairs, or trios of students who serve as work group supervisors in a course for younger students.
- *Interdisciplinary investigation team* - sometimes called area studies teams, these groups of students are assembled by interest or skills required to complete a study of a community resource.
- *Debate team* - students who research a controversial issue and marshal arguments for and against a particular position.
- *Jigsaw team* - each student has something that he or she reads and teaches to the others in the group.
- *Student Teams Achievement Divisions* - the teacher presents (teaches) new information, which the students review (study) in teams, followed by a test and recognition (certificate) of team performance.
- *Teams/Games/Tournament structures* - the teacher presents (teaches) new information, which students review (study) in teams, followed by a game (tournament) in which students are matched by ability and bring points back to their study team. This is followed by recognition (certificate) of team performance.

Strategy # 2: Prepare students for success.

Teachers using small group learning structures teach the skills of teamwork as if it were the content of the class. They drill the skills of teamwork using simpler tasks and build to more complex assignments.

1. Change group composition frequently so that students of different backgrounds, academic achievement levels, and social skills learn to work together. This capacity is build to familiarity, insights, and trust.
2. Organize the work so that each team member contributes to the achievement of the team goals.
3. Use teacher observations, tests, checklists, and individual assignments to measure each student's achievement.
4. Promote group responsibility by holding groups accountable for completing specific tasks or project steps during work sessions.
5. Teach, model, and assess the social skills you expect teams to demonstrate: Listening, taking turns, encouraging, and supporting each other, staying on task, cleaning up the work area, etc.
6. Pick the right sized task. It must be challenging enough to keep students interested, but easy enough for students to achieve success (with effort) in the time allotted.
7. Include a very specific assignment or menu of options for teams to work on. "Every meeting results in a product" - a list to create, a diagram to draw, an outline to display, a form to fill out.
8. Anticipate that not every group will finish at the same time. Have a classroom poster or handout with a list of "what to do if you finish early" items on it.
9. Teach teams how to assess how well they work together. Encourage "team reflection" as part of every activity.

Strategy # 3: Keep flexible and be vigilant.

1. Use flexible grouping strategies.
 - o Teacher-determined groups
 - o Student-determined groups
 - o Teacher and student-determined groups
 - o Chance determined groups
 - o Skill/interest determined groups
2. Analyze task criteria. What are the learning objectives? What content, skills or attitudes should students be able to demonstrate?
3. Study the classroom environment. Small group work may require different arrangements of chairs, desks, and tables in classrooms. Teachers often devise systems and procedures for storing and retrieving papers, materials, and tools. Classroom noise levels may increase.
4. Provide time for practice and rehearsal. Students need to practice and demonstrate new skills and knowledge. Small group learning can motivate students to work on the repetitive tasks needed to master a skill or concept.

5. Introduce tools for critical and creative thinking. Creative thinking and problem solving tools can be provided by the teacher acting as team advisor or coach, or may be integrated in a work session warm-up at the beginning of a class.
6. Coach students to success. The teacher's role during small group work is to serve as monitor, supervisor, and coach. Sometimes the coach must blow the whistle and redirect the group, so it can complete the assignment. When to intervene:
 - The group is off task
 - The group has difficulty starting or completing the task
 - The group experiences interpersonal conflict
 - The group cannot organize to get the work done
7. Evaluate progress. Individual student progress is measured by individual performances and products. Group progress is measured by group performances and products. What standards must small groups achieve? What criteria will you use to determine that the task has been successfully completed? What rubric or rating scale will let you assess individual or group proficiency in executing the desired skill or demonstrating the required knowledge.
8. Encourage self-assessment. Two important outcomes of alternative approaches in student assessment are better understanding of self and increased responsibility for one's own learning. The teacher provides opportunities for both individuals and groups to use self-assessment tools, to reflect on progress over time, and to set new goals for performance.

Ideas to Consider in Developing Assignments for Small Group Work

1. Introduce the unit or project to the whole class at once, so everyone knows what different groups will be working on and can get a big picture view of how various components of the unit or project fit together.
2. Require students to construct something - a model, a prototype, sketch or drawing. The construction should give you insights into how students perceive concepts, time, history, or relationships.
3. Offer both required tasks and student choices. Give students more latitude in choosing the topic to investigate and the format for reporting/demonstrating their learnings.
4. Have students to learn from first-hand experience part of the time. Have them survey parents, students, faculty, or community members in order to generate new data for their small group research.
5. Expect students to conduct library research on a current political, literary, scientific, or sociological debate in which they :
 - Use at least three sources for their research (e.g., books, personal interviews, articles, newspaper reports, etc.)
 - Construct an argument for or against the issue citing their sources as support.
 - Present the argument to an audience beyond the classroom.
 - Present the argument using visual aids, a pamphlet prepared for the public, oral presentation, a slide show, etc. Encourage creative ideas.
6. Have students keep a journal or daily learning log in which they write responses to specific prompts that you provide.

7. Plan a culminating activity (trip to a museum, visit to a tidepool or mountain top) or field investigation (urban planning, weeds in a lawn, water quality at a local pond) which explores community/regional resources.
8. Assign small group tasks which require students to read, write, reflect, listen, speak, construct, or perform during some period of their group work.
9. Require students to present, report, or demonstrate what they have learned at the end of the unit. Provide a range of options for students to choose from, but ensure that students try each option at least once during the school year. Options could include a media demonstration, videotape, written report, oral report, a performance such as a song, dance or skit, hands on demonstration, model or prototype, project, display, design or drawing.

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