

Resource Guide

Effective Group Work: A Primer

Any activity involving multiple students can be classified as group work. When you have learning objectives that seem appropriate for group work, you should carefully consider what type of group work will fit best with those objectives. Davis (2009) identifies three types of group work:

- 1) **Informal Learning Groups** – Informal groups that work together during one class period; may range from a class-wide discussion to groups of 3 working on a task.
- 2) **Formal Learning Groups** – Established for specific tasks (e.g., paper/project); may work together for an extended period of time.
- 3) **Study Groups** – Long-term groups primarily for support; especially useful in large classes to allow students a place to turn when assistance is needed with class requirements.

Once you've identified the type of group work, you will need to spend time thinking:

- **Forming groups:** For informal group work you may use the seating arrangement of the class or allow students to self-select groups. For formal group work, McKeachie and Svinicki (2014) recommend avoiding allowing students to self-select their groups, instead advocating using some criteria to group students together. Group formation criteria may be related to your goals for the group work, such as wanting groups to have diverse opinions, grouping members with different traits (e.g., major, year in school).
- **Group size:** Davis (2009) recommends groups no larger than 7 students and Burke (2011) recommends 3-4 students per group. Both consider smaller groups to be better as they reduce students' reliance on their fellow group members to complete their share of the work.
- **Assigning Tasks/Giving Instructions:** For informal group work, clear instructions can be the difference between effective group work and unfocused group work. For formal group work, clearly designating the students' responsibilities as group members helps them remain aware of their individual responsibility to the group. You may also assign specific tasks to be handled by each group member.
- **Cooperation vs. Collaboration:** Depending on your goals for group work you may want your students to work on individual parts of a project and then bring them together (cooperation) or for all group members to work together on all aspects of a project with each member having a voice (collaboration). Davis (2009) stresses encouraging interdependence regardless of the type of group work you employ. See [this blog post](#) for more information on cooperation and collaboration.

- **Assessment:** The assessment of the product of the group work is situational but, for formal group work, you may consider ways to keep track of each group member's progress. Additionally, you will need to decide how to assess individual group members. Davis (2009) recommends giving students a chance to evaluate their group and themselves. You may ask students to allocate points between the group members or assign percentages to each group member, splitting 100% of the work between all members according to contribution.
- **What if a group isn't "working:"** Sometimes, a group doesn't function well. Maybe there is no natural leader or there is tension between group members. You may be tempted to break the group up or make changes, but Burke (2011) recommends sticking with the groups as you've formed them. Changing groups will throw off the dynamics of other groups and the problematic group, possibly doing more harm than good. Learning to work with groupmates despite a lack of natural team chemistry is a skill that is applicable beyond the classroom. Encouraging students in "problem group" to work through it will help them develop this skill.

Resources

Burke, A. (2011). Group work: How to use groups effectively. *The Journal of Effective Teaching*, 11, 87-95

Davis, B. G. (2009). *Tools for teaching*. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons.

McKeachie, W. & Svinicki, M. (14th eds.). (2014). *McKeachie's teaching tips*. Cengage Learning

Slattery, J. M., & Carlson, J. F. (2005). Preparing an effective syllabus: Current best practices. *College Teaching*, 53, 159-164

For more information or to discuss how you might incorporate these ideas into your courses, contact the Reinert Center at ctl@slu.edu.