Setting up Group Work: Guidelines for Teachers

### The importance of group work

Cooperation and student interaction with other students have a significant impact upon how students learn, their confidence, self-esteem and levels of engagement, and how they feel about the subject, teacher and school.

Group work is primarily concerned with developing positive interdependence amongst students as they work together to achieve a common goal. At its best, group work should provide the opportunity for students to maximise their own learning and that of the other students in their group.

### The teacher’s role

The teacher is pivotal in the success of group work and there are several components in the teacher’s role:

* careful design of meaningful tasks
* inclusion of academic and social skills objectives
* informed choice of group composition
* clear exposition of the task and positive interdependence
* facilitating and monitoring the learning process
* evaluating student learning and providing effective feedback

This document provides guidance on the processes involved in setting up the group work to maximise the opportunity for students to engage in meaningful learning as individuals and as a group.

### Initial considerations

… on the roles to be given to group members

… which social skills are to be developed

… how to assign students to groups

… which resources are required

… on the size of the group

**decide…**

... how to arrange the classroom

… on the academic tasks to be set

…how to allocate resources

…how to evaluate and give feedback

### These environmental factors are important in facilitating positive interdependence within groups. Students need to be sitting close together and face-to-face to allow for meaningful interaction. Careful consideration of the classroom environment also helps to facilitate teacher movement and monitoring of all group members.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **The environment** | **Advice** | **Benefits** |
| **Arranging the classroom** | arrange desks so students face each other be an effective facilitator and move easily around the roomarrange desks to minimise disruption to other groups | facilitates interaction teacher monitors the learning of all studentsgroups concentrate on their work |
| **Resources required**  | make all necessary resources available in advance of the taskprovide resources needed for individual roles e.g. a stopwatch for timed activities | prevents time wasting |
| **Resource allocation** | limit resources for each groupplace resources in a central locationensure equity in resource allocation to all groups | students share resources and interact with each other |

### A well-structured group ensures that positive interdependence and promotive interaction can take place. It is agreed that small groups work best in the initial period whilst students develop their collaborative skills. Consideration should be given to the group composition and it is acknowledged that a mix of academic ability and learning styles is the most desirable.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| The groups  | Advice | Benefits |
| Group size | * consideration should be given to the academic task, the students’ ability and the time available
* ideally group size should range from 2 or 3 members to a maximum of 6
* large groups can make it difficult for students to contribute effectively
 | * small groups allow students to develop collaborative skills
* larger groups provide opportunity for more interaction between students
 |
| Group composition | * different strategies can be used to randomly assign group members e.g. choosing a group number from a hat
* beneficial to have a range of student abilities, learning styles and interests within each group
* consider the personality, temperament and gender of group members
* minimise any change to group composition
 | * random allocation means students are aware of the expectation to work with all others
* careful choice of group members supports the development of social skills
* group stability allows bonds to develop and helps to generate a feeling of success
 |
| Roles of group members | * provide descriptions of the role requirements for each student
* monitor how students perform in their roles and provide feedback
* groups evaluate how well members are carrying out their specific duties
* suggested roles: initiator, information seeker, progress monitor, summariser, planner, and gatekeeper. More information on roles can be found in the Effective Participation in Group Work Guidelines available at [Research Advice](https://www.sace.sa.edu.au/the-sace/students-families/exams/research-advice)
 | * roles encourage interdependence in the group
* helps to develop social skills
* ensures individual accountability
 |

### The task must have an academic objective and a shared group goal. It is important that the task warrants group work and is not just an activity which students could complete independently whilst sitting together with fellow students. The task and positive interdependence should be clearly explained to the class and it is beneficial to provide written instructions for each group.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| The Tasks | Advice | Benefits |
| Academic tasks | * the academic task should have a shared group goal
* make the success criteria explicit and linked to the shared goal
* incorporate individual accountability into the assessment of the group, e.g. by returning results to the individual and to the whole group
* provide written detailed and supportive instructions
* provide only one copy of these instructions to each group
* attach time limits to specific tasks within an assignment
 | * develops responsibility for each other’s success
* ensures understanding of the task and goal
* prevents students from “freeloading”
* reduces the need for teacher intervention during the task
* encourages sharing and interaction
* time limits provide focus and reduce inactivity
 |
| Social skills | * prior teaching of teamwork skills
* set group ground rules
* monitor the behaviour of groups and also the individual contributions of members
* students explain the instructions to each other and also share the information about their individual roles with the group
* groups analyse how well they work together
* a self and peer evaluation form is available at [Research Advice](https://www.sace.sa.edu.au/the-sace/students-families/exams/research-advice)
* provide feedback on individual contributions and group cooperation
 | * develops leadership, decision-making, and conflict resolution skills
* ensures appropriate behaviour including: taking turns to speak, active listening, and encouraging all group members
* ensures understanding of the group task and individual roles
* groups make decisions about what behaviours should continue or change
 |

### What to avoid

**Time spent in the same team**

* too long together in the same team can result in boredom
* alternatively, not enough time to form relationships can hinder the development of collaborative skills

**Student self-selection**

* can result in friendship groups which creates distraction
* can leave a ‘remainder’ group, those who haven’t been chosen by others

**Teacher role**

* don’t verbalise instructions, this will result in further explanation later on
* do not answer individual questions, these should be answered within the group

**Disbanding groups which aren’t working well**

* can leave students feeling a sense of failure which they carry forward to their next group
* doesn’t help students to develop skills such as conflict resolution, resilience

### References

Johnson, DW & Johnson, RT *Introduction to Cooperative Learning* <http://www.co-operation.org/home/introduction-to-cooperative-learning/> , accessed 25 September 2014

LiHuary, D & Pillero, P (1995) *What are some strategies for helping students work in groups?* <http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/content/cntareas/science/eric/eric-7.htm> , accessed 26 September 2014

McIntyre, T *Competitive vs. Cooperative Learning Formats* <http://www.behavioradvisor.com/CoopLearning.html> , accessed 25 September 2014

Prince George’s County Public Schools Electronic Learning Community, *A Guide to Cooperative Learning* <http://www.pgcps.pg.k12.md.us/~elc/learning1.html> , accessed 25 September 2014

Smith, K. A. (1996), Cooperative learning: Making “groupwork” work. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 1996: 71–82