8.6 Group Work: Simple Tips for Success

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Our community college students sometimes have a hard time building community on campus. As we all know, most students work fulltime, drive to campus just for their classes, and leave immediately after. Of course that’s not the case for everyone, but many of our students miss out on the community they might build at a four-year school. In-class group work is an effective, pedagogically sound tool, and group activities definitely help foster relationships among our students. Some instructors are reluctant to employ group work in their classrooms. My training included a strong collaborative bias, and I have always found meaningful, productive group work to be a necessary component of every one of my classes. If instructors purposefully utilize group activity, they will find their students building stronger relationships in and then out of the classroom, and they will find collaborative learning a valuable use of class time.

A brief message about concerns: Yes we have disabled students in our classrooms. I have used every one of these methods in classrooms with wheelchair-bound students, and I have never had to say, “Hey. If you’re in so-and-so’s group, make sure you go to him because he’s in a wheelchair and cannot move about easily.” Students are generally very cognizant of their fellow classmates, and they naturally move to where they need to, to accommodate one another.

Another important thing to consider: Groups of three or four students are optimal. Any larger, and things tend to get unruly, and you’ll inevitably lose some involvement with quieter students. See #3 below for help with that concern.

Ten helpful tips for successful group work.

1) **Purposeful activity:** Students know time wasters when they see them. And busy work is just insulting. If you plan a meaningful activity with clear objectives and a well-contextualized lesson, group work is usually effective. As with any classroom technique, if you throw together a group activity, it will go down in flames, and your students will let you know. Make sure your groups participate in meaningful dialog and interaction.

2) **Product:** There should always be a meaningful, pedagogically grounded product as a result of group activities. Whether students create something drawn, some sort of solution to a problem, a piece of collaborative writing, or anything presented to the class, a product keeps students more on track and responsible for their work.

3) **Choose a group sheriff:** When there are unusually quiet students in a class, choose those students to be the sheriff of their groups. Each sheriff’s job is to ensure every group member speaks and that the group stays on task. Giving the quiet students this job allows them to hold themselves accountable to participate in the group while maintaining order in the group.

4) **Randomize group membership:** Oftentimes, instructors have students fill out index cards
5) **Comfort groups for difficult or more personal products:** When students need to complete a task that’s more serious or one which could lead to more personal responses, it’s sometimes a good idea to let the students group themselves into comfort groups (people with whom they’re used to working). When something artistic is necessary, I use comfort groups because students usually build trust with these group mates, and many are not comfortable with art. Being in groups with people they trust allows them to be a bit more uninhibited.

6) **Fun ways to put students into groups:** In the spirit of full disclosure, I learned many of these strategies in Mary Gross’ “Names, Games, and Groupings” Flex workshop a couple of years ago. Of course, an instructor can put her/his own spin on these to fit any class/activity/desired outcome.

   a. **Puzzle piece groups:** Print out photos related to your class activity. If you want six groups, print out six different photos. For instance, when I teach “Sonny’s Blues” by James Baldwin, I print out photos of jazz greats: Charlie Parker, Thelonius Monk, Bix Beiderbecke, Chet Baker, Billie Holiday, etc. I then write either directions or discussion questions on the back of the photo. I cut the photo into as many pieces as there will be group members in each group. Then each student takes a piece out of an envelope. The students must then find their “puzzle buddies,” sit in a group, and follow the instructions on the back of their puzzle. I’ve done this with every class at every level, and the students really appreciate the perceived effort that goes into making these groups happen. Even if you don’t print instructions on the backs, you can still use this method simply to group students as well.

   b. **Candy:** I pre-sort candy so that I have several pieces of several flavors. Each student blindly chooses a piece, and finds their group mates by finding the other students with the same color/flavor candy. This one works well once a semester, as with many of these strategies, because students find ways to stack the groups once they know the strategy.

   c. **Playing cards:** Works just like the candy grouping. Isolate as many cards as you would need for student groups, fan them out and let students “pick a card.” I always tell them not to worry; we’re not gambling. Once students pick a card, they find their group mates by completing a three-of-a-kind, four-of-a-kind, straight…whatever I’m in the mood for.

   d. **PowerPoint teams:** When I want to pre-ordain the groups, I’ll sometimes create a PowerPoint slide with the groups already mapped out. I usually asterisk a student as the group sheriff, and I name the groups something fun/clever. If you prefer to avoid fun/clever, number the groups and
it works out just as well. As mentioned above, students seem to recognize the fact I took time to build the slide and make the groups, so they take the group work a bit more seriously.

7) **Interaction with groups:** It would be awfully strange if students worked on an activity while the instructor sat at a table/desk ignoring their efforts. Group work is sometimes extremely tiring on an instructor. To be an effective facilitator, move about to each group to answer questions, guide conversation if necessary, and to show students you’re just as invested in the outcome of this work as they are…or should be. Sometimes you’ll have to give students hints to assist them, and that’s great. It’s as if you’re playing on their team, and they appreciate the guidance.

8) **Coming together at the end:** Once the group work portion of an activity is accomplished, reconvene as a whole class to either have certain groups present their products, or have a whole class discussion where representative voices are heard. This meeting at the end will be the culmination of their work, and if you skip this step, students might not understand why they worked in groups to begin with. This issue leads me to #9.

9) **Classroom assessments:** Any time you want a gauge of how your group activity worked, run a short classroom assessment at the end of the lesson. You can have a quick write and share, or you can have students anonymously address a question and turn it in. CATs (Classroom Assessment Techniques) are extremely valuable, yet we sometimes attempt to cram so much into our classes we might skip this important element of instruction.

10) **Have some fun, dangit!:** Students need to know academia isn’t all about stress, pain, and worry. Show them being smart is fun and cool. Some group activities can produce laughs while producing strong critical thinking skills. If you like to have fun, incorporate some of that into your activities. The students will respond!