Purposeful Uses of Small Groups

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The Challenge

Over the past half century, the instructional model for university education has broadened to encompass small student groups convened around some shared topic or problem. Many large-enrollment courses already include a component for smaller-scale instruction, often referred to as the "recitation" or "lab" section. Still other courses make use of "breakout" groups. However, despite the prevalence of this model for instruction, many instructors are still unclear about what is supposed to happen during small group work or how to maximize this instructional technique to yield more robust learning.

The Literature

The principle guiding philosophy behind group work—referred to in educational literature as "cooperative learning"—is that student understanding and students' active engagement are directly correlated: the more active students are in the course, the more they'll learn (Fink, 2004). [2] The passivity of large-scale lectures, in which students receive information from instructors, may be one component of effective instruction, but for students to integrate and apply new knowledge they must engage more actively with the content. This activity can often take the form of discussion, hands-on experimentation, team projects, and other techniques, most of which are more appropriately facilitated in the context of a smaller student gathering. However, cooperative learning often runs into predictable challenges, including uneven labor distribution (one student does all the work), lack of direction (students "discussing" content without advancing their knowledge), ambiguous accountability (instructors encountering confusion on how fairly to grade students when learning is collaborative rather than individual) and so on.

However, cooperative learning can become a transformative event in a student's education, if instructors purposefully and carefully structure the work of student groups.

What Instructors Can Do

First, it is critically important to be clear from the outset on the rationale for cooperative learning in the first place: *why* do you want the students to work in small groups? This instructional technique may not be appropriate for all courses, so if instructors are unclear on the foundational motivation for using group work, it might be best to exclude this technique until such time as the rationale becomes clear.

Once instructors have decided to incorporate cooperative learning, numerous decision points and questions arise that must be resolved during the planning phase for the group work to be successful. Attached is guidance for anticipating these questions and options for answering them. [3]

Conclusion

Small groups, when structured well, can provide essential learning opportunities for students to delve deeply into course content, learn from each other, and reinforce their own understanding through interaction with others. When instructors are clear about their intentions for small groups and the instructional goals for cooperative learning, both student and teachers are likely to find the experience enjoyable, productive, and memorable.

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[2] It is important to note that cooperative learning is *not* team-based learning, an instructional strategy on which L. Dee Fink has written extensively. For more information, see *Team-Based Learning: A Transformative Use of Small Groups*, edited by Larry Michaelsen, Arletta Knight, and Dee Fink. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2004.

[3] This chart is based on L. Dee Fink, "Beyond Small Groups: Harnessing the Extraordinary Power of Learning Teams" in *Team-Based Learning: A Transformative Use of Small Groups*, edited by Larry Michaelsen.

Figure 1: Questions for Planning Cooperative Learning

Decision point	Options	Considerations
Where will the groups' work be carried out?	In-class	The instructor or TAs are available to offer immediate feedback and guidance if necessary. Low-stakes, non-evaluative observations of group process can also give insights into how students are processing the content.
	Out of class	This option requires students to schedule time independently, which might be challenging for students with busy extracurricular lives
How will the students be graded?	Group grade—all group members receive the same score based holistically on the final product and/or group process	Students may feel frustrated that they do not have individual control over their grades. However, it does provide great incentive to hold peers accountable and to raise the level of the work.
	Individual grade—student are judged individually on their performance	Allows for granular assessment of individual performance; however, this may counteract the cooperative ethos instructors may have desired to build by using small groups in the first place.
How many students will be in each group?	Under 5	This is a good rule of thumb for cooperative learning. Groups larger than this become unwieldy.
How are student groups organized?	Students self-select groups	The "affinity effect" means that students will often gravitate toward those of similar interests, backgrounds, and intelligence levels. This homogeneity may or may not be desirable based on the context of the course.
	Instructor randomly assigns groups	Students may be forced to interact with those they may not have chosen themselves, moving them out of their "comfort zone" into a more challenging context. However, they may also chafe at the loss of personal autonomy.
	Instructor assigns groups along a criterion	Students can be strategically grouped heterogeneously by skill level, ensuring that a more advanced student has opportunities to "peer instruct" a less skilled group member.
What role(s) will students play in the group?	None	Students are likely to perform their large-group identity on a smaller scale, meaning that some may be likely to dominate and others may avoid responsibility or engagement.
	Pre-determined roles, such as facilitator, recorder, time keeper, presenter, and so on	Ensures that all students are engaged and held accountable for participation. You may allow self-selection of roles or assign them.
What are the expectations for the groups' processes?	Explicitly described guidelines for group norms and expectations	This element is essential to ensuring effective cooperation. Don't assume that students know how to function in groups or that they will organize their process efficiently. Provide guidance and tips for their interaction.
Will groups be dynamic or static in terms of membership?	Same groups all semester	Groups develop cohesive identity, have opportunities to practice and refine group process, and so on. If students don't like their groups, however, they may grow frustrated as the semester wears on.
	Groups change during each session	Opportunities to engage with more personalities and gain exposure to more points of view. Less experience with developing sustained group process over time.