

Setting up and managing small group work

What is to establish and manage work for students in small groups?

Teachers rely on small groups when the learning's objectives require deep interaction among students, aiming to teach students how to work in teams. Also, teamwork in small groups is useful to take the most on diversity within the classroom and to develop habits such as respect and collaboration among the students.

It is fundamental for teachers to assign tasks that require and promote collaborative work setting up small groups if possible (ideally three or four students) for everyone to participate. Assigned tasks should promote interactions among the students, who must discuss, suggest, make questions, make decisions together, and manage both time and resources assigned. In general, tasks that do not have only one way or procedure to be solved and do not lead to just one result, allow to elicit deeper conversations and more creative approaches. For example, solving complex problems or developing projects, present more opportunities for the team members to feel the need to collaborate and interact with each other, and to give space for deeper and authentic conversations. If the task is too simple, that is to say, it could be solved by just one student without any help from others, there is no motivation for students to collaborate.

To carry out work in small groups, teachers delegate their authority and give clear instructions that allow groups to work in a semi-independent way. Also, teachers implement mechanisms to make students be responsible for their own individual and collective learning. Teachers have the authority as evaluators of the process and results of the tasks, but not as a continuous supervisor of the steps followed by the group. On the contrary, teachers give enough freedom to their students, watching over them systematically, intervening strategically to strengthen rules and roles of the team work, open stuck discussions to new possibilities, and to deliver feedback about both, progress and process of each group.

What is not to Establish and Manage students' work in small groups.

- × To organize the classroom in teams, where students sit as if they were part of a group, but, actually, everyone is carrying out the same task individually (“collaborative seatwork”)
- × To divide the class in small groups to carry out mechanical tasks, as the specialization within a factory. If every member does the same task and it does not require interaction among the members, then there is no collaboration and the main goal of working in small team is purposeless.
- × Asking students to form groups spontaneously, without making sure that the assigned tasks could be resolved more efficiently in groups than individually. The work in small teams, on the other hand, is deliberated, planned, and full of purpose. Teachers divide the class that they want to engage in group work in advance, because they foresee that the complexity of the objective requires collaborative work.
- × To create small groups where there is a hierarchy among the students. On the contrary, one of the purposes of working in small groups is to give equity in the classroom, offering a space where each member of the group can have the same status. The aim is to distribute the teacher’s authority in an equivalent way among the students. This does not mean that everyone has the same role, or that could not be a leader, but that the roles are distributed in advance and equitably regarding the responsibility or challenge involved in the task. Also, teachers must create rules to be sure that nobody will monopolize the conversation and every voice would be heard.
- × To organize every class around work in small groups. As any other pedagogical tool, work in small teams suits better for some tasks than others. Truly strategic teachers resort to working in small groups only when it is considered the best method to approach an objective.
- × To divide the class according to skills, establishing advanced, intermediate and basic level groups. This kind of differentiated instruction allows teachers to work in homogenic groups. On the other hand, for working in small groups the aim is that every student could benefit from the diversity within the group.
- × To constantly interrupt the students’ work with comments and suggestions, supervising and leading steps to follow. Instead, during the work in smalls groups, teachers observe and intervene just to redirect the students to use the group resources, reinforce rules and deliver feedback about the progress.
- × To divide the class in groups and assigning each member a task that could be carried out successfully without any collaboration with the rest of the group. This may result in individual work, where each member is responsible only for their part, but not from the group results. Instead, it is advisable to assign tasks that include collective and individual products/results/reports. Thus, students will be responsible for their own learning, but also the learning of their partners.

Strategies

Planning the work

- To create diverse groups, formed by students with different skill levels in different areas. To ensure, also, that the task is complex enough to need different types of expertise that each member of the group has.
- To optimize the time that it takes to set up groups, familiarizing students with a panel where the group member and roles are shown.
- To give clear and specific instructions. Give cards or guides with written or graphic instructions in case the class includes nonreader students. Likewise, clarifying the objectives of the teamwork, giving an evaluation guideline or heading to establish achievement expectations and criteria of evaluation
- To assign roles to each member of the group as facilitator, synthesizer, moderator, material supervisor, secretary, etc. With younger students, give a pin or mark to each student with the role and tasks to do. To avoid problems related with hierarchy, publicly assigning roles (to be clear that it was the teacher who assigned them), frequently rotating them (avoid that same student being always the facilitator) and explaining clearly each one's responsibilities.
- To be sure that the assigned task results not only in a final product, but in a report that explains the process the group went through to obtain that product and the contribution of each member. Consider the possibility of assigning this task to one member of the group, who should discuss with the others before writing the report. However, it must be assured that every member of the group can explain the whole process and the work result, not only the one entrusted to this task.
- In long term projects, monitoring the learning process of students through individual report folders, where every student keeps track of their own work and group progress.

Rules and routine to work in small groups.

- To train students in collaborative work, using games and cases to model the need of teamwork and behaviors that suit better. For example, training students in hearing each other, mutual help, respectful discussions, etc.
- Establishing rules for team work, modeled by teachers and explained with specific behaviors. Some recommended rules are:
 - To express ideas clearly.
 - To respectfully hear each other.
 - To allow everyone to speak.
 - To ask about each other's ideas
 - To give arguments to support ideas
 - To ask mutually for help and help others when they ask.
 - To set a plan to carry on a task.
 - To consider the task finished when everyone has finished his or her part.
- To teach students self-evaluation during the process of teamwork, by using simple questions that correspond to the previously established rules. For example, ask "is everyone participating?", "are we hearing each other?", etc.
- To teach and model specific language to develop productive discussions. For example, promote using statements from an "I" perspective (instead of saying "You talk too much", say "I feel I have no space to speak") and positive paraphrasing (instead of "Don't interrupt me" say "Can you let me finish?") to solve conflicts.
- To teach specific formulas to promote discussion and collaborative work. For example, formulas to clarify ideas, synthesizing ideas of other students' comments, to make reference to what someone else says, confirming understanding of an idea, expressing disagreement, taking up a topic, inviting those who haven't participated, etc.

Organizing space and materials

- **Organize the classroom** in a way that promotes collaboration among group members. Take care that the noise level allows groups to easily hear each other and the teacher when monitoring each group's work.
- Observe how groups work by using **observation guidelines** that allow to deliver feedback in a more specific way to the groups.
- Always conclude the group's work with a closure stage **with the whole group**. Use closing time to reinforce the learning objectives for the groups to report results of their work and compare different approaches to the assigned tasks, to comment about the process of teamwork, and reinforce positive behaviors and deliver feedback about both, the final work and how they experimented the process to get to it.

This document has been elaborated by Montserrat Cubillos, framed in the project “Observatorio de Prácticas Pedagógicas”, based on the next references:

http://www.soe.umich.edu/academics/bachelors_degree_programs/uet/uet_hlp/

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