Building Community: Time Well Spent

Successful group work hinges on the group’s ability to work together. Don’t take for granted that groups will do this naturally or on their own. You can greatly enhance the effectiveness of group work by dedicating time, at the outset, to build collaborative relationship among the teams.

Five example activities

Two Basic Introductions:

1. Card-pair
Students pair up with a student who they are not sitting close to. For example, students in the back row pair with those in the front, or students in the left outside row pair with students in the middle row, etc.

Instructors hand each pair two cards. Students write their name on their card, and then spend two minutes writing a personal response to one of three questions. For example:
   - What are two words that describe you and why?
   - How are you different from your friends?
   - What is one of your strengths?

The pair swaps cards, read them, and spend five minutes discussing their answers.

Add-on: Members of each pair stand and introduce their partner to the class, using the responses on the cards.

2. Easy Continuum
Without talking, students organize themselves in a line based on a simple factor – height, eye color, casual to professional dress, etc. This can take a few minutes to do, but should be given the time that it needs – and the key is, students shouldn’t talk about it, but “communicate” by looking and moving around.

Once the students are organized, students count off from each end: the leftmost student is “1,” and the rightmost student is “1,” etc.

Students pair up with their number, introduce themselves, and then each member of the pair asks the other member a question, which they answer.

Add-on: Once the introductions are done, students sit with their partner for the class period. The instructor uses a paired collaborative learning activity, such as “think-pair-share” during the class period, with these pairs working together.
Three Group Collaboration-Building Exercises:

1. Two things I want you to know
   Students get into the groups they will be working in. Each student introduces themselves and tells the group two things they’d like the rest of the group to know about them.

   **Variation:** Students get into their groups, and spend three minutes deciding on three words that describe them. Then, they share those words with their group and explain their choices.

   **Add-on:** This exercise can be done with the whole class at once, and is very effective at establishing community quickly. Students can choose when they come forward to speak, or the instructor can assign an order – for example, row 1, followed by row 2, etc, or, one student can have a (soft) ball and toss it to another student, whose turn it becomes to speak.

2. Questions
   Students get into groups and spend two minutes writing two questions they would like to ask someone when they don’t know them. The first student in the group asks their first question, and everyone in the group answers it, followed by the second student, and so on, until all members’ questions have been asked and answered.

3. Storytelling
   This exercise builds speaking and listening skills while building group community.

   Students get into their groups. Before this activity begins, the instructor explains that members of the group will have one of two tasks: storyteller or listener. Everyone in the group will have a chance to perform both tasks during the exercise. The instructor should also explain that the storyteller’s job is to tell a story on the topic the instructor announces, and to talk for three minutes. The storyteller’s job is to tell a story – with a beginning, a middle, and an end -- that is rich with detail. If they finish before time is called, they must go back and fill in details of the story. The other group members’ only task is to actively listen to the story. At the end of the three minutes, the instructor call time, and a new speaker takes a turn. Continue until all members of the group have been both storytellers and listeners.

   Topics should be open-ended, have the potential for students to share from personal experience, and not require outside knowledge. This is not a “knowledge-sharing” exercise, but a “community-building exercise,” where stories draw from students’ personal experiences. It doesn’t matter what the students talk about as much as that they practice speaking and listening to one another. Effective topics include: “hope,” “education,” or “conflict.”