Three different ways of using small groups

L. Dee Fink (2004) identifies three different ways of using small groups. Her terminology can accommodate most of the terms, and variations thereof, used in the literature.

Casual Use

- Easy implementation ("Turn to the student next to you and talk about this.")
- Little or no advanced planning
- Uses relatively ad hoc exercises
- No need to worry about grading, course structure, etc.

Cooperative Learning

- Frequent use of carefully planned and carefully structured groups
- Inserts small group activities into preexisting course materials
- Calls for attention to: accountability issues, group formation, student roles, etc.
- Does not change the structure of the course
- Prompt feedback is desirable but not necessarily critical
- Peer assessment is advantageous but not vital
- Size of groups: 4 of fewer

Team Based Learning

- Makes small group work the primary in-class activity
- Calls for procedures that support the transformation of “groups” into “learning teams” (no special roles are assigned)
- Takes advantage of the special capabilities of learning teams
- Often requires a change in the structure of the course
- Prompt feedback is of critical importance
- Peer assessment is vital
- Size of groups: 5-7 (no more than 8)

Sources


---

1 Some authors (e.g. Mills & Cottell, 1998) make a distinction between collaborative and cooperative learning, with the latter being the more structured of the two.