

Setting up groups

Assign group members

Students tend to self-select homogeneous groups when they choose their own partner. Maximizing heterogeneity increases a group's positive outcomes.

You might arrange students:

Randomly: This is good for quick/ casual group work. It is easy and fast.

By demographics: Distribute resources across teams – e.g. competency, ethnic and gender diversity, extroverted and detail-oriented attitudes.

By experience or skill: The deeper the students' backgrounds with the content, the smaller the groups can be. When students don't know very much about the subject, larger groups can increase discussion and discovery.

Due to the nature of content: If the content is challenging, controversial, or uncomfortable, smaller groups are better. Learners are less likely to open up about these subjects in larger groups.

By the complexity of the task: As a rule of thumb, the higher the complexity of the task (how much the learners must move around, how they will interact with each other, the number of steps required, higher difficulty, etc.) the smaller the group.

Establish how long groups will work together

Groups might work together for a class period, for a few weeks, or over the course of the full semester. Groups that stay together longer can form strong working relationships that allow them to delve deep into course material; groups that work together for a few weeks and then change partners give students the benefit of collaborating with many learners, renegotiating group roles each time.

You might have students:

Work in pairs for a day

Work in groups of 3-4 students for several weeks

Work as a team of 4-5 to solve a complex problem over the course of a unit

Consider whether or not to assign roles

Assigning roles ensures that students understand who is responsible for what. It also helps individual learners focus their own tasks within the group's effort.

A student who is assigned the role of "skeptic" might be more inclined to voice disagreements than she would otherwise be; the "timekeeper" may feel more able to keep the group on task when the group understands this is his role.

Some instructors prefer to let students self-select the roles they feel most comfortable in. Others feel that students should be challenged to try new roles. Decide what is best for your learning objectives.

Some possible group roles:

Facilitator/Leader

- Makes certain everyone contributes and all voices are heard
- Keeps the group on task
- Organizes the final project

Recorder

- Keeps notes on important thoughts expressed in the group
- Distributes notes to the group
- Writes final summaries

Checker/Reporter

- Checks for accuracy and clarity of thinking during discussions
- May also check written work
- Shares summary of group with the class
- Speaks for the group, not just personal view

Skeptic

- Questions ideas and decisions at critical moments
- Provides a "devils advocate" point of view

Sources:

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