Best Practices in Using Student Groups to Promote Learning

Properly used, assigning learning tasks to groups promotes student engagement and learning. Group tasks give students a far less threatening situation in which to share ideas, disagree with each other, and push each other to understand more deeply. They also promote appreciation for the way others think. For shy students, they provide an opportunity to raise questions, or even to speak up in class as a spokesperson. How can we help students work effectively in groups?

- **Give groups important work to do.** Students quickly learn when instructors mainly give students busy work, or throw something to groups at the end of class. Groups can help identify key questions students have on the lesson, develop charts of key points, make connections between ideas, and be integral to the learning experience.

- **Group size.** 3 to 5 members works best, but 5 might intimidate shy students, can lead to side conversations and some students slacking off as others do all the work.

- **Expect some socializing.** When groups are first formed, people have to get to know each other. Factor that time into your tasks

- **Composition.** We are social creatures, and it does help students when they connect with others in class, but too much socializing and not much gets done on the task. Particularly with younger students, mix and match people yourself. Watch and listen to early interactions to see if there is a decent mix of socializing and task orientation.

- **Help students work well in groups.** Make suggestions for how to make their group work effective. Even better, ask the class to build a list of ideas with you. See if they come up with a timekeeper, someone to take notes, some way to stay on track, and sharing emails. Suggest they have a rule
about hearing everyone out, and sharing speaking time. Make sure to get
the list printed up, and consider giving an assignment where you only
email clues to one person in each group, whose responsibility it is to
contact the others (nice incentive to share emails!).

✔ **Use groups often.** The more different times you assign tasks to groups,
the more students will learn how to work well in groups. Start with
shorter tasks of 3 to 8 minutes. Remind them to have a timekeeper, and
give them notice when they have only a minute left.

✔ **Use groups throughout class.** Spreading group work throughout class
sends a message that this is serious, that you expect groups to help with
learning tasks. In fact, *start* some classes with group work.

✔ **Don’t help all the time.** Resist the temptation to help groups, or to give
your opinion in disputes. On the other hand, do not distance yourself.
Consider helping a bit, but then creating a norm where if a group wants
your help or input, someone raises their hand and asks you to come by as
their “consultant.” Remind them you are not a referee!

✔ **Have group projects handed in periodically.** There is no need to have
everything handed in, but collecting group reports regularly sends the
message that these are important. Make comments to the group on their
work. Suggest ways to improve.

✔ **Regularly grade group work.** Students know that what really counts in
class are things that are graded, so collect and grade group work regularly.
Be clear how group work contributes to their overall grade.

**Bonus!**

✔ **Ask regularly for your students’ help** by requesting input into how you
give directions and use groups in class. Make it clear that you want to help
their groups succeed.

✔ **Expect some problems and have relief valves.** One relief valve is to
schedule group evaluations where members can speak with each other
about their participation. Another relief valve is to say that after XX
weeks, you will move people to new groups. Another is to say that groups
that are struggling should get in touch with you to discuss the problem.
Involve students by having them help you create a group experience review
form for the class.
No. 1 – The All-Important First Day of Class
No. 2 – Ways to Make Your Teaching Life Easier
No. 3 – The Crucial Second and Third Classes
No. 4 – Ways to Show Students that You Respect Them
No. 5 – Promote Effective Student Study Skills
No. 6 – Components of a Well-Planned Class
No. 7 – Observe Your Teaching Tendencies
No. 8 – Ways to Keep Your Students Learning
No. 9 – Ways to Get Feedback on Teaching from Students
No. 10 – Using Short Writing to Assess Learning
No. 11 – Getting More (and Better) Student Questions
No. 12 – Mixing Things up Mid-Semester
No. 13 – Engaging Different Input Preferences
No. 14 – Helping Students Stay the Journey
No. 15 – Ways to End Your Course
No. 16 – Resources for Learning and Teaching
No. 17 – Create a Memorable AND Functional Syllabus
No. 18 – Ways to Build Your Students’ Self-Efficacy
No. 19 – Practical Study Tips to Share with Your Students
No. 20 – Laddering Thinking Skills
No. 21 – Learning Based Ways to End Lessons
No. 22 – Ways and Reasons to Be Vulnerable While Teaching