

Small Group Instruction Management

Peer group work, often referred to as cooperative or collaborative group activities, can be very rewarding for students and teachers. Such group work encourages active student involvement and direct encounters with subject matter and problem-solving. Through group interaction students learn to express themselves verbally with greater clarity and to work cooperatively with other people.

However, successful peer groups do not just happen. A teacher must plan and prepare for such activities very carefully. While there are many objectives which can best be met through the use of such groups, the approach can create many problems. Students may have difficulty getting along with others in the group. They may waste time. Some students may fail to participate while others dominate their groups. In some groups the workload may not be shared equally.

Many of these problems can be prevented. This presentation will offer some suggestions for avoiding some common pitfalls and for coping with some common problems associated with this teaching method.

Some Keys to Success

One key to effective group work is to design tasks which are particularly suited to cooperative effort. Such tasks have the following characteristics:

- * Everyone has a chance to participate
- * Everyone will benefit from the experience
- * Products are possible only through cooperative effort
- * Products will be better as a result of working together

If the task is something students could do better alone, then don't have them do it in groups.

Another key to effective group work is to prepare students well for the experience.

Students who are being asked to work in groups need to know the following facts:

- * What the group goal is
- * Why they are working in groups
- * What the teacher's expectations are
- * How to evaluate the effectiveness of the group's cooperation
- * What to do when problems arise

Many students may never have experienced work groups before or their prior experiences may have been negative. The only functional model they may have is that of a social group. Social groups often revolve around establishing and maintaining a hierarchy of power or status. Students need to be taught that collaborative work groups function differently.

Another key to keep in mind is that collaborative groups provide opportunities for students to practice what they have learned. It is usually helpful for the teacher to plan some whole class activities which will help students develop the skills they will need when they work in small groups. Teaching and modeling the necessary skills (i.e., kinds of responses to make, questions to ask, suggestions to offer, etc.) before asking students to practice in their groups is usually a wise move. At the same time, group work offers the opportunity for students to share and explore ideas and approaches which may lead to new insight. Students working in groups often go beyond the teacher's aims. The teacher should be alert to this progress and ready to acknowledge it when it occurs.

1. Whenever groups are used, students must know that how they work is just as important as the product they produce and/or the content they learn. This means that the teacher must intervene when groups are not working well even though tasks are being completed and some members are learning the content. Further, at least part of the evaluation should include an assessment of how well the group worked.
2. Every group member must feel some responsibility for the learning of others in the group. However, there must also be individual accountability, a chance for each person to prove that he/she has learned the material.

Getting Started

Even before students begin working in formal groups, the stage must be set for the event. You should try to use some of the following kinds of activities at the beginning of the year or the beginning of a unit in which you want students to work together cooperatively (If your classroom has been competitive up to this point, you may need to do several of these kinds of things in order to reorient students):

1.) Start with some non-threatening, get-acquainted activities, such as these:

- * interview in pairs and introduce each other to the class
- * have each student bring an object that is special to him/her but small enough to be carried in one hand. Classmates ask questions to find out why the object is special to the person. This works best if the teacher brings in something and the class questions her/him first. Then repeat the procedure with two or three students before the whole class. Then, supposedly for the sake of saving time, continue in quickly formed small groups.
- * sit in a circle and share favorite things. See how many others in the class like the same things. Divide into groups on the basis of interest and give time for sharing ideas.

2.) Start small by having students work in pairs on two or three tasks, such as these:

- * interview pairs and write the introduction, sharing it with your partner.
- * pair off and give a simple diagram to one member of each pair (see "Simple Sketches" in handout materials). The member with the diagram must give oral directions for drawing the diagram while his or her partner draws. To make this more difficult, have partners sit so that the direction-giver cannot see the drawing. Compare sketches. Exchange roles and complete the same task using a new diagram. Discuss how a direction-giver can help the drawer without doing the drawing for him or her.
- * pair off and perform a creative drama mirrors exercise. Have students start with simple, slow hand movements. Then have them work on moving feet and legs. They can then focus on head movements and facial expressions. At the end, have them try everything together, but in slow motion.
- * pair off and share favorite books or favorite vacations or things they like to do in their spare time.

Once students seem comfortable with pairs work, switch to triads for some activities and then to groups of four or five.

3.) Another way to start is to have one group working independently while the teacher works with the rest of the class as a whole. Gradually add small groups and decrease the remaining class size until everyone is in a small group.

Preparation for Group Work

Once students have had some preliminary experiences and have begun to become acquainted with each other, they should be ready for some training in how to work in full-sized, goal-oriented groups.

1.) Have students participate in some activities which illustrate how group work can be beneficial and why everyone needs to contribute, such as the following:

- * 5-squares game (see materials for further reading) with follow-up discussion of the importance of giving and sharing in a group
- * count the rectangles (see materials for further reading) with follow-up discussion of two heads being better than one and the importance of reaching consensus rather than majority ruling
- * round robin writing (see materials for further reading) with follow-up discussion of shared creativity as thought-provoking without losing one's individuality within the group

2.) Plan some special activities which focus on effective group involvement and troubleshooting problems, such as these:

- * hold a fishbowl discussion (one group in the center discusses while everyone else sits around the outside and observes) with follow-up class discussion of behaviors that helped the group's progress and behaviors which hindered or which did not help the group.
- * hold a fishbowl discussion with assigned roles (i.e., dominator, rejecter, leader, questioner, verbal abuser, non-attender, summarizer, diverter, etc.) with follow-up discussion of who was doing what and the effect this had on the

group. This works especially well if the original fishbowl discussion proceeded quite smoothly. Also, this kind of demonstration can be repeated at any time that groups seem to be having problems. Roles can be set up to match the actual behavior of people who are interfering with the groups.

* have a general class discussion of what to do if group members do not cooperate. These suggestions can be listed and made into posters which can be displayed in the room for reference.

The First Attempts

Initial small group activities are crucial. They should be carefully designed for success. These are some guidelines which seem to work:

1. The teacher should choose the group members, mixing a variety of factors such as sex, maturity, verbal proficiency, general skill levels, etc. Each group should include a range, but not the highest and lowest in the same group. It is often helpful to ask students to list two or three people with whom they can work (as opposed to get along with) and anyone with whom they absolutely cannot work. These lists should be used when groups are created.
2. The first few tasks should be very specific and objective. Students should know exactly what is expected of them in terms of both behavior and content learning. Controversial topics, personal subjects, and things which call for criticism of others should be avoided initially.
3. There must be an end product which the group must create together. Something in writing which all group members sign works well (i.e., a list, checklist, fill-in-the-blank sheet, minutes, work report, etc.). An oral report can also work if the reporter cannot be selected in advance by the group.
4. A time limit must be specified. Students need to know how much time they have to complete the task. Usually this should be a time limit which is close to being realistic, but which is a bit short. This gives students a chance to request more time and for the teacher to reward groups for working well together and keeping on task.
5. Directions for the task should be given to the groups in printed form, one copy per group. This gets the groups working as groups quickly and removes the teacher from the dominate position. It also cuts down on teacher talk. Further, it gives students practice in purposeful reading.
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7. Be sure that students have the skills they need to succeed on a task. Students can teach each other, but if no one in the groups has a necessary skill, the whole group will flounder.

The following are examples of some initial tasks which get groups off to a good start:

* Have the class read a short story silently as individuals. Then form groups for discussion. Each group is to review the story to make sure that everyone comprehended it. Then each group is to make a list of the main events in the plot. The time limit would be about 10 to 15 minutes, depending upon the age of the students and the difficulty of the story. At the end of the time, lists are shared orally to produce a single class list which is written on the board. Signed lists are collected.

* Have students read an oral tradition tale before class. Form students into groups. Each student must retell his/her tale to the group. Each group member is to write down whether he thinks the tale is a fairy tale, myth, legend, folk tale, or fable and why. These writing are then shared with the group and

discussed. The group is to reach consensus about the type of tale. The teacher then selects one member from each group to retell his or her tale for the class (by careful observation the teacher should be able to spot different types of tales being told so that the examples are varied). One member of the teller's group then states what kind of tale was told and why the group identified it as this type of tale. The class can then agree or disagree. Lists of characteristics of various kinds of tales can be made as discussion progresses. As a follow-up, the groups can choose one kind of tale and write a group story of that sort.

The Teacher's Role

When students work in small groups, teacher behavior must also change. The major focus must be on helping the groups achieve their goals. However, the teacher should not try to control all the behavior and flow of information. Rather, he/she acts as a stage manager, seeing to it that the stage for learning is set and that a supportive, cooperative environment is maintained and that resources which groups may need are available. The following guidelines should help the teacher get groups working well:

1. As groups work, the teacher should circulate around the room observing groups and individuals carefully. Let students know that you are aware of what is being said and done in each group. Make notes and share your observations with individuals or the group.
2. Without being obtrusive, model effective group participation by listening and occasionally contributing. Ask the group or an individual a question or redirect a question to a quiet group member. Act as a resource person only when you are sure that no one in the group knows the answer or when it is clear that there are equally strong but opposing viewpoints.
3. Try to keep your sights on long term goals rather than short term ones. Lack of progress during one class period may need to be overlooked. Give groups time to learn to work together.
4. Be prepared to step in at any moment and deal with any discipline or group functioning problem, but give group members a chance to try to work out the problem by themselves first. If you are asked to step in, ask the group to define the problem and then ask them what they have already done to try to solve the difficulty. Avoid just stepping in and solving the problem for them.
5. Work to make the groups autonomous. If every group needs the teacher's help all at the same time or if the teacher has to give permission before the group can go on to another activity, time will be wasted and discipline will deteriorate. Groups waiting for the teacher's attention will create disturbances. As much as possible, provide reference materials and teach students to use them so that they can find answers to many of their own questions.
6. Take class time now and then to reinforce the idea of effective group work and solving problems in the group. While this takes some class time away from the content initially, smoothly functioning groups will cover more content later, so this is time well spent.
7. Be prepared to work individually with the three or four students who have serious problems working with others. How you handle these situations will depend on the individuals. Students who are willing to work in a group but whom others shun should be included in a group. However, there are a few students who have such poorly developed social skills that they cannot get along with anyone. Sometimes they can be paired with a willing partner. However, if the problem is one of self-control, dominance, or abusiveness, they may need to be separated.

One effective technique is to allow them to listen to a group's discussion but not take part.

Assessment and Evaluation

When students work in groups, the teacher will need to adjust the types of assessments and the methods of evaluation that are used. The following ideas may help you get started:

1. Keep anecdotal records of group progress, products, and how well students work together. If possible, use checklists to aid in assessing. Keep students informed of what you are noting about their involvement and learning.
2. Have students evaluate the group's functioning and their own participation frequently.
3. Make individuals accountable for the functioning of the group. When this is possible, make everyone in the group accountable for what others in the group learn. For example, reward the group that produces the highest total scores on a test or makes the greatest amount of improvement in composition. Include group processes in the grades. However, allow yourself the flexibility of also giving an individual grade which rewards those who are making the best progress in content knowledge or contributing more than their fair share to the group.
4. Tape record each group periodically. Give them written and/or oral feedback on what you hear when you listen to the tape.
5. Once groups are working well, decrease the emphasis on group functioning and increase the focus on content learning, but do not ignore the former.

Tips and Suggestions

The following are some ideas that you might find helpful:

1. Have students use a talking stick. Only the one with the stick may speak. This person selects the next speaker by passing the stick.
2. Describe and model six-inch voices (audible only six inches away). Have students get rid of the desks so they can talk face to face or side by side. (Credit for this idea goes to Helen Hollingsworth.)
3. Separate groups physically with dividers (e.g., cardboard segments, bookcases, desks, etc.), but be sure you can see them all.
4. Assign roles to group members (i.e., leader, recorder, questioner, summarizer, etc.). Periodically reassign the roles to others in the group.
5. Have students rehearse actions which may cause problems such as moving the furniture around.
6. Videotape yourself and the groups. Analyze what is working and what isn't.
7. Use a specific cueing device to signal that students are too loud and another to cue that the class should cease talking and listen to you or others. However, do not call the class to attention and then expect them to wait quietly while you do something else. They won't; they will start talking, or rather socializing, in the groups. This contradicts your expectation of staying on task while in the groups. Also, if you do this too often, they will stop attending to your cues.

Probably the most important advice is to keep in mind that group work is only one of many instructional strategies from which to choose. Select it when it seems to be the best vehicle for achieving the educational outcomes you desire.

For certain kinds of learning, group work doesn't succeed. Don't try to make it fit when it isn't the best choice.

Recommended Further Reading:

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