Brookes Briefing: Small group teaching learning and assessment

> 'Good learning, like good work, is collaborative and social, not competitive and isolated. Working with others often increases involvement in learning. Sharing one's own ideas and responding to others' reactions sharpens thinking and deepens understanding.' (Chickering & Gamson, 1987, p. 3)

Engaging students in group work facilitates this social interaction, encourages students to build collaborative learning communities and supports the socialisation that aids student integration and retention (Tinto, 2012). Group work provides opportunities for students to learn to collaborate and cooperate in order to problem-solve (Chickering and Gamson, 1987). Through group work students recognise that they can learn from each other, and that informal feedback from peers is as essential to their learning as the receipt of formal feedback from lecturers and tutors.

There is great variance, across disciplines, in what is meant by a small group. For example Jaques & Salmon (2007) use 2-5 to mean small groups and 8-40 for large groups, although those of you teaching hundreds of students at one time may call 8-40 small. All our teaching is done in groups of various sizes, however for this briefing this means purposeful groupings of 2 students and more, as a subsection of a larger group, in order to achieve an in-class or extended task that progresses learning, but may or may not be assessed.

From groups to teams

Most importantly, small group teaching is 'any teaching situation in which dialogue and collaboration within the group are integral to learning.' (Mills & Alexander, 2013, p. 4). This means that it could be anything from in-class activities that encourage exchange and engagement, to shared discovery and study groups where everyone in a group contributes something different. See Mills & Alexander (2013 pp. 29-30) for '10 small-group teaching ideas to try', Gibbs & Habeshaw's 'Quick tips' (1989 pp. 74-78) and Jaques & Salmon (2007 pp. 104-18) who list different activities, tasks and structures for learning in groups and remind us to pay attention to the characteristics of different size grouping which will necessitate different strategies (ibid p. 11).

The terms 'group' and 'team' are often used interchangeably, though there is a subtle difference which relates to the degree of interaction and collaboration. You might find it helpful to distinguish between groups that are gathered in a shared space to work on specific in-class activities, or individual tasks that are then pooled, and teams that develop a relationship to work collaboratively on a specific objective or assessed activity. You may begin by creating groups of students to work together in class, but the ultimate aim, particularly in respect of producing a specific output, is that they should become a team. Teamwork: builds interpersonal skills,

prepares our students for life after university, and contributes to a sense of belonging (Manion et al, 2020)

Principles and Practices for small group teaching learning and assessment

Group work is based on the principle that effective learning is collaborative and involves discussion, active participation and purposeful intent. This necessitates a facilitatory approach to teaching. The academic/lecturer/tutor 'role is to facilitate rather than to direct, to coordinate as much as to communicate, to inspire rather than to inform.' (Mills & Alexander, 2013, p. 4). This approach is often referred to as 'the guide on the side', a facilitator of student learning rather than the 'sage on the stage' (Barr & Tagg, 1995). This means that the subject expert teacher creates the learning environment in which the teams can work effectively. This may include some exposition, but largely encourages student exploration and discovery through carefully planned activities or guided discussions.

Plan for effective learning environments (including small group teaching) by:

- Preparing: planning: designing and structuring our sessions.
- Thinking about group set up, roles, setting boundaries and paying attention to inclusivity.
- Avoiding challenges by providing clear instructions, expectations, aims and outcomes up front.
- Evaluating the learning that takes place (throughout the process, assessment *for* learning, and at the end, assessment *of* learning).

Principle 1: Prepare and plan

Do not assume your students know what you mean when you ask them to work in groups. You will need to prepare them (Mills & Alexander, 2013, p. 30) and yourself (ibid pp. 30-31) including opportunities to get to know each other and to establish expectations (see Principle 2, below).

- Consider the impact of the set up of the physical learning space and how you can manage virtual groups (Jaques & Salmon, 2007). For example, think about the way layout and impacts on interaction. Encourage students to physically move to work with those around them, when face-to-face. Consider how you can promote, monitor and encourage discussion in virtual spaces through the provision of tasks, checkpoints (Davidson & Katopodis, 2020) and the use of shared documents such as a set of slides that holds outputs from each group on a separate slide.

- For in-class group work make sure your instructions are clear (leave the task up on a screen / slide or ensure it is visible to those in breakout rooms via collaborative tools like Padlet or an accessible shared slide) and indicate time on task. For more extended group work you will need to put in more groundwork, such as starting with smaller tasks to socialise and build up the capacity to collaborate.

Principle 2: Be proactive in the creation of groups

Consider ways in which groups might be selected, or self-select and the rationale for your approach. For example, if you are setting a 5 minute ‘buzz’ task in a class, you may suggest self-selecting close-proximity groups i.e. turn around and work with the two people behind you. Alternatively if you are setting up a longer term, assessed projects you may carefully select teams based on a number of criteria. Whatever your selection approach, aim to establish a positive learning environment and build compassion and understanding towards those who find it difficult to contribute because of various issues to do with comfort levels, different abilities and previous experience, as well as pressing life commitments.

- Gibbs (2009) reminds us that self-selection can embed inequality i.e. result in the streaming of groups. To avoid this Oakley et al (2004) recommend that teachers should create diverse student teams to avoid isolating at-risk minority students and to make effective use of time availability outside class.

- Introductory ‘getting to know you’ tasks are recommended, these may be simple ice breakers that help to break down barriers and forge connections or something more targeted.Preskill & Brookfield suggest techniques for the promotion of ‘Discussion in culturally diverse classrooms’ (2005 pp. 223-256). Oakley et al make use of a ‘Getting to know you’ template (2004 pp. 24-25) as a precursor to more extended teamwork and to help ‘convert the class into a learning community’ (ibid, p. 13).

- Pay attention to group size: ensure that it is suitable to finish the task, for example it may relate to the number of activities that need to be completed if each member takes responsibility for one. Groups of more than 2 produce more diversity of opinion and ‘guard against ‘ghosting’ (Davidson & Katopodis, 2020), but in-class group work may begin with groups of 2. Groups of larger than 4 may need more support due to a lack of group management and facilitation skills (Gibbs, 2009).

Principle 3: Set expectations and clarify responsibilities

For a team to function effectively, especially for longer term projects, setting clear expectations, boundaries and responsibilities is key.

- In order to encourage more interaction and avoid any prolonged dysfunction Oakley et al advocate the creation of team identities (names), assigning roles to team members and the dissolution and reformation of teams every 4-6 weeks, unless you have signed requests to stay together from everyone in a team (ibid, p 13).

- To mitigate against challenges such as those who struggle to contribute and lack of engagement establish your expectations from the outset. Use explicit ‘ground rules’ (Gibbs & Habeshaw, 1989, p. 72), ‘team policies and agreements’ (Oakley et al, 2004, pp. 13-14), and ‘rules of engagement’ (Mills & Alexander, 2005 p. 30). These should outline expectations and responsibilities and explain how disputes or problems should be dealt with and at what stage you should be involved. McCrea et al outline effective disciplinary procedures culled from the literature that include ‘warnings, penalties and expulsions’ (2016 pp. 3-4).

Principle 4: Ensure the learning is evaluated: use both assessment *for* and *of* learning

Jaques and Salmon remind us of the 'close relationship [between assessment and evaluation strategies] where group learning is concerned' (2007, p. 217). A key way to avoid or mitigate challenging situations is to evaluate learning as you go along. This does not mean multiple questionnaires, but should include a scaffolded approach of support.

- Include check-ins, use observation, ask for proof of progress such as evidence of regular interaction through meeting notes or discussion forum records and the results of the collaboration.
- Scaffold tasks and include intermediate stages that students have to complete. You may reduce scaffolded support as students progress through their course in order to increase autonomy.
- Make sure you are clear how group work will be assessed by explicitly linking to the learning outcomes for the course and outlining how marks are assigned in the assignment brief.
- Brookes assessment policy does not allow group marks as this can lead to a lack of engagement and is largely deemed unfair by students. Marks must be awarded to individuals for their contribution to a group task.
- Break up the task into smaller activities that can be completed by individuals.
- Make it clear whether the assessment is focused on process or product. Bowe et al provide 'Methods for Deriving Individual Marks from Group Work' (2016, pp 4-23) including the use of peer and self-assessment which may be supported by online tools.

References, resources and further reading

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