Effective use of student groups

In face to face classroom instruction, small group activities are an efficient way to provide interactivity, generate interest, facilitate low risk reflection and experimentation with new content and provide the instructor with a tool for formative or summative assessment.

Group formation
Ideally, groups should be heterogeneous and not based on existing subgroups such as fraternity brothers, native speakers of the same (non-English) language, or boy/girlfriends. Groups should be as diverse as possible in order to maximize number of perspectives brought to bear on a task. It is typically a better idea for the instructor (as opposed to the students) to form the groups, as the instructor is better able to help avoid initial subgroups and promote heterogeneity. For ad hoc groups doing relatively quick exercises, however, this is not really a critical issue. It is when this group work is scaled up and includes products/papers/deliverables that are worthy of formal evaluation, it becomes more important for the instructor to form the groups.

Conditions to promote team development (adapted from Michaelsen, 2002)

Decision tasks. Tasks that would be easily divided among team members should be avoided in favor of tasks that require consensus on concrete decisions based on analysis of a complex issue. Essentially, the task should, by its nature, require the entire group to interact. In cooperative activities, all participants share the same information and are working on the same task; roles (described below) can be used to promote full participation. In combining activities, each participant has different information that must be combined with others’ information in order to complete a task; a strip story is a simple example of this. A jigsaw activity begins with a cooperative activity in which each group becomes “expert” on a separate part of a larger problem. Then they break up and recombine into new, heterogeneous groups composed of one expert from each of the previous groups and work on the larger problem (distributed problem solving.)

Proximity & discussion. Take advantage of mobile furniture, ask students to physically move around to find space to work together, or find alternate space that allows the group members to be physically proximal and able to have a comfortable discussion. Additionally, provide ways to let groups make their thinking visible and physically document their work: whiteboards, laptops, big post-its, newsprint, etc.

Immediate feedback relative to other teams’ performance is important for group members to have their work validated. Group work made visible, as described above, facilitates this.

Individual accountability. Build into the group activities the expectation that each individual, not the just the group, is accountable for completion of the task. This may take the form of requiring pre-class preparation before entering groups, calling on individual students in class to report back to the whole class, collecting individual work or basing a significant part of individual grades on behavior that promotes team success. More on this in “assessing group work,” below.

Group activities in which the participants have the same information and same tasks (cooperative activities,) “social loafing” may strike! One way to address this is to assign roles within the group so that each student has a unique responsibility in addition to contributing to the primary task. In introducing these roles, start simple and rotate responsibilities in subsequent activities. Some possibilities, adapted from http://www.utexas.edu/academic/cte/hewlett/faqs.html:

1. Facilitator. Responsible for getting the group started, keeping it on task, and involving all members.
2. Recorder. Responsible for keeping a record of what happens in the group meeting.
3. Spokesperson. Responsible for summarizing group decisions for the larger class.
4. Time keeper. Responsible for keeping group on task and on time.
5. Reality checker. Responsible for noting group decisions and whether they are realistic.
6. Spy. Responsible for getting info from other groups when appropriate.
Assessing Group work

Use a "ticket in." Require students to work individually outside of class on the group assignment (e.g., complete a worksheet, write and/or answer discussion questions) and to bring their individual work to class. This serves as their "ticket in" to the group work. Students without their ticket are not allowed to participate in group work that day. Also, both verbally and in writing, specify and discuss the grading criteria you will use based on your objectives. Consider letting students have some input into these criteria before they are finalized, as student control increases the sense of ownership and responsibility the students will have for the group activities.

Another way to involve students in the assessment process is to require a brief, written division of labor report from each group (how often did they meet, who was present, who did what parts of the group project or assignment). This reminds the students who is and isn't doing their share and gives you information to use when grading. Consider the use of peer input into the students’ grades (e.g., 20 percent of the grade is determined by peer ratings).

One possible scheme for grading group work is to base each student's grade on a combination of the group grade and an assessment of their individual work or effort (you can use the division of labor report, peer ratings, and "tickets in" to determine the individual grade portion). (This section adapted from McKinney)

Resources


Hewlett Project, University of Texas. http://www.utexas.edu/academic/cte/hewlett/


