

Preparing Students for Group Work: Teaching Essential Collaboration Skills

Group work has become common practice in college teaching. Faculty use it for a range of purposes: to refocus students' attention span during what otherwise would mostly be lecture; to stimulate students to share and develop their opinions; to have students in the science lab perform experimental procedures; to work on a group project for a part of the semester; etc. The increased popularity of group work is also due to the demands of the work world which tells us that teamwork, writing, and oral communication skills are the key to success in the job market.

Unfortunately, group work and team skills have traditionally not been part of the graduate training that faculty received and often run counter to the competitive inclinations academic careers have typically favored. It is therefore not surprising that many faculty have difficulties making learning groups work in their classes, since neither the faculty nor the students tend to have a good grasp at what the component skills of effective group work are and how to teach them. As a result, students are often merely instructed to "form groups and discuss." But sometimes neither the results nor the process are what one might hope for. The following paragraphs try to address this dilemma by providing a breakdown of the skills that need to be considered and some tips for teaching them.

Our main suggestion is: Help students *explore* amongst themselves and with you, the instructor, what skills they need to learn and how to alter behavior that gets in the way. Collaboration or group work skills cannot be taught directly, they need to be experienced. As with other learning and study skills, collaboration can best be learned by a mixture of doing and reflecting. This starts with a discussion of group norms.

Set Aside Class Time to Determine Group Norms

M.T. Towns, reported in B. Mills (1998), has students first answer questions about group work independently, and then work toward team expectations:

Working in Groups—Your Personal Viewpoint

Next class meeting will be our first problem solving session. During these sessions you will work with three or four other students to solve a problem. In order to prepare you for working in a group, answer the questions below:

1. List what you believe your responsibilities are to your group.
2. List your group's responsibilities to each member.
3. Describe the advantages of working in a group or as a team.
4. Describe the disadvantages of working in a group or as a team.

Working in Groups—Your Team's Viewpoint

1. We believe an individual member of our group has the following responsibilities to the group.
2. We believe our group has the following responsibilities to each individual member.

Names of Group members: _____

In filling out this form, many groups will establish norms such as “We will respect one another’s opinions”; “We will all contribute our fair share”; “We will come to class prepared and willing to participate”; “We will contact one another if we must be absent”; “We will help one another succeed”; “We will criticize ideas, not people”; “We will all listen attentively.” Having individually thought through and then collectively agreed upon such norms (in writing!) helps set the stage for what happens in groups throughout the semester.

Student Behaviors Required in Effective Learning Groups

The above discussion of norms already suggests some of the skills/behaviors students need to exhibit in effective learning groups: Asking for others’ opinions – Listening – Reflecting on what has been said – Being concise – Giving reasons for ideas – Allowing everyone to contribute – Pulling ideas together – Finding out if group is ready to make decision (Cohen, 1986). Students must be given opportunities to practice and reflect on these behaviors. Epstein (1972) provides a four-step approach for such practice and reflection. At the same time, these four steps illustrate the key components for effective group discussions: Conciseness, Listening, Reflecting, Contributing.

Epstein has students observe and reflect on their own behavior. Students are placed into five-person groups and given an interesting topic to discuss for five minutes at a time. Throughout the four practice activities, group members take turns being the timekeeper for the task at hand.

Step 1, Conciseness: “Getting quickly to the point and not beating around the bush”

During the five-minute discussion, the timekeeper makes sure that each person talks for only fifteen seconds at a time.

Step 2, Listening: “Paying attention to what is being said”

During the second five-minute discussion, each person must wait three seconds after the previous person has spoken before he or she may speak.

Step 3, Reflecting: “Repeating out loud to the group something of what the person before you has said”

Another five-minute discussion session during which each person talks for only fifteen seconds at a time and waits three seconds after the previous person has spoken. In addition, everyone who speaks must begin by repeating to the group something that was said by the person who spoke immediately before (“reflecting”). The previous person needs to indicate agreement (by head nod) with the summary before the new person can continue.

Step 4, Everyone Contributes: “All the people in the group have to speak”

All previous rules apply, as well as a new one: No one may speak a second time until everyone in the group has spoken.

After each step, the timekeeper reports on how well the group did on the skill being practiced. The timekeeper may have other observations to make about how difficult it was and what happened. The exercise is partially symbolic—no real group discussion consists of only 15 second contributions with 3 second wait-times in between. But the experience is important for allowing students to reflect on the key skills it takes for an effective group discussion.

Discuss with the whole class why each skill is important and how common it is that group activities fail because these behaviors are not followed. Of course this procedure will not guarantee that students will continue to exhibit these behaviors throughout the semester. But having had the experience will make it easier to remind students later of the essential skills and allow for occasional self/group-assessments throughout the semester. Having this framework can also positively influence other group behaviors that often impede effective group work, such as coming unprepared, clowning around to disrupt the work of the group, aggressive behavior, blocking or nit-picking, or blaming others for poor group performance.

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