

Working Effectively with Small Groups

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The following packet will provide you with suggestions for effective small group work:

- how to form groups
- how to facilitate groups
- examples of group roles
- an example of a group contract
- some suggestions for observing group dynamics

GROUP FACILITATION SKILLS: COMMON ISSUES & POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Keeping the Students "On Task"

A common challenge when having students work in small groups is to keep them focused on the task at hand. Here are some strategies:

- *Announce a time limit.* Give the students a realistic amount of time to complete all or a segment of an assignment, but short enough to keep them focused. For example, give them 3 minutes to brainstorm a list of ideas. Give them a warning when they have one minute left. Tell them that they must produce a certain number of items: a minimum of 5 ideas; 7 suggestions; 2 solutions; 1 "what" or "how" question, etc.
- *Require the groups to present something to the whole class.* For example, tell them that by the end of the announced time limit, the group will have to present their findings verbally and/or in writing to everyone. Give them flipchart paper, huddle boards, or group laptops on which to record their findings.* An alternative if you're in a room with computer stations is to require them to post something to the course Dropbox. (You can set up Dropboxes so that the box "closes" at a given time.)
- *Give them specific tasks to complete.* Tell them to produce something: generate a list; answer specific questions; find 3-5 resources, etc.
- *Monitor progress.* Give each group a piece of carbon paper. Students have to make a carbon copy of whatever the group has worked on that day. You then have a record.
- *Have templates.* For each class, give students a template that requires them to include their names, the date, a space for generating information/ answering questions, and a section describing what their next steps will be.

Helping Without Helping Too Much:

- *Answer questions with another question rather than a statement.* For example, the students might ask you where to find some specific piece of information. Rather than tell them, ask them to first generate a list of possible appropriate resources.
- *Give students a partial list of pre-approved resources.* They still have to find some on their own, but you at least point them in the right direction. Your goal isn't necessarily to teach them to find resources quickly, but rather where to look for potentially useful resources.

- *Model the kinds of "habits of mind" you want them to develop.* Start by giving them some specific questions to address that also reveal the issues you want them to consider. For example, in a case problem, you could start by asking students to first identify the facts of the case and then what the facts suggest (inferences). This models a problem-solving strategy: start with identifiable facts; what inferences can you make? How might you test out your inferences?

Helping Without Stopping the Conversation:

- *Avoiding "the plop."* The "plop" occurs when you interrupt with a comment that then subsequently silences everyone. Rather than make a statement, ask a question. If there's silence, tell everyone to take out a piece of paper and write a quick response. Ask for a few responses, then tell them to return to their groups to explore one or more of the shared comments.
- *Eavesdrop from a distance.* Getting too close to a group might make them self-conscious. Keep your distance and just wander around the room. Note what people are saying, what issues come up, where people are getting stuck. If necessary, stop the group and briefly summarize some of the issues you've heard without necessarily identifying who said what. (You can do this fairly surreptitiously in smaller rooms. Look as though you're doing something else such as looking up something in your notes, but listen.)
- *Tell students that in X-number of minutes you're going to stop them and ask them for a brief update on their progress.* Then tell them you'll give them x-number of minutes to ask you questions, but then they have to return to group work.
- *Have a signal & a procedure.* Agree ahead of time that if a group is having a problem, they have to generate a specific question first, then they can raise their hand for assistance.

*"Huddle boards" are dry erase boards approximately the size of a piece of flipchart paper. They can be purchased at any office supply store, but will need to be housed somewhere in the room to make them accessible without having to cart them around. (The CEI Learning Studio in AIRB 1030 has huddle boards)

GUIDELINES FOR WORKING EFFECTIVELY WITH COLLABORATIVE GROUPS

- 1. Group formation.** Forming groups is not a haphazard process. Care should be taken to establish groups that are heterogeneous with respect to skills and background and sized appropriately for the given task (i.e., don't assign 5 people to do a task that 2 people could easily accomplish). For a sufficiently complex problem, 5-8 members seem to be ideal (Wilkerson, 1996).
- 2. Group problem.** The nature of the problem itself affects collaborative success. Greater collaboration tends to occur when problems are open, ill-defined, and relatively long-term (i.e., looking up fact-based answers in the primary-source textbook does not require anything but nominal collaboration, if that).

Group members that are inter-dependent and must rely on one another to get the task done tend to work better; likewise, inter-dependency among all the groups is help, too. For example, divide up a big topic into enough parts so that each group can work on a single aspect of the problem or issue. They must report their findings to the class so that everyone gets all the information. If they are made responsible for knowing this information (i.e., it will be on a test), they are more likely to work hard and addressing the issues.

- 3. Collaborative training.** It is best not to assume that students know how to work successfully in small groups. Their previous experiences with group work are most likely not adequate preparation for what is required in Problem Based Learning. Students thus require training in collaborative effectiveness and some structure for how to work together.
 - Give everyone in the group a role: content expert, recorder, reporter, critic, etc. This practice encourages group members to participate more equally. Rotate the roles at various group meetings to allow individual members to experience each one.
 - Establish standards or behavioral norms for groups—how you expect the teams to work together—and hold members accountable to these standards via evaluation (e.g., equal participation, workload sharing, communication among all group members about decisions, etc.).
 - Provide sufficient time during class for groups to work together on some aspect of the problem. This allows the instructor and/or tutors to circulate and check groups' progress on the assignment and on successful collaboration.
- 4. Group Facilitation.** The role of the group facilitator is crucial. Tutors/instructors should be knowledgeable about course and problem content, but their role is not to *impart* that knowledge. The facilitator's job is to get students to elaborate their own assertions, to model the kinds of process-reflective questions that students should eventually learn to ask themselves, and to ensure that all members are participating equally. Facilitators should also be encouraging and create a positive atmosphere during meetings or mediated group work sessions. If people other than the instructor will be acting as facilitators, they need training as well.

5. Collaborative assessment. Group assessment/evaluation should focus on collaborative products while building in individual accountability. Some ways to accomplish this goal are:

- All students do self-assessments after problem completion, wherein they rate themselves and other group members on the amount of effort, participation, initiative, content contributions, etc.
- Require each group member to be responsible for a portion of the group's final presentation, project, or paper, with the understanding that the final product is not to be an unconnected accumulation of individual work, but rather a cohesive whole. Individuals' final grades are a combination of the group product score and their score on the part for which they were responsible.
- In addition to the group product, require something from individuals; for example, have students write in class a one-page essay about something they learned from completing the problem. This will reward students who were genuinely engaged and uncover those who "freeloaded" their way through the group work.

The following suggestions were developed for use with Problem-Based Learning (PBL), however they can be adapted to any small group assignments.

SAMPLE GROUP ROLES

One of the best ways to keep group members "on task" is to give them clearly defined roles. There are many different examples available; this list is not meant to be exhaustive. Feel free to create your own group roles, as well.

The others' roles aren't secret—in fact, students should know what to expect from each other in their group, so have the students read through all of the roles even though they personally will only be taking one.

Tip: Have group members rotate roles each time they meet. This will give everyone a chance to take on different responsibilities, and it may help give quiet students a role to hide behind so they are more likely to participate; it might also silence the dominant student. In addition, monitor the role switching. Each group should have a matrix with the roles listed in the left-hand column and the students' names across the top (or vice versa). At the beginning of group work, the facilitator assigns or has everyone select their roles for that day and indicates the day the students took their particular roles. They can refer back to the list each time they met so they know who has and hasn't taken a particular role. It is recommended that the instructor keep the lists and distribute them when needed. This way students know that you are monitoring the role switching.

EVERYONE IS ALSO A DISCUSSANT, NO MATTER WHAT THEIR ASSIGNED ROLE!

Facilitator: The group facilitator's job is to get the discussion going and to keep it going. This means you should draw out quieter group members and make sure no one talks too much. The best way to initiate a discussion and to keep one going is to ask questions of the group.

Timekeeper: In addition to being a discussant, your job is to make sure that the group stays on task, and moves along so they can complete all of the assignment. If necessary, break in and remind the group of how much time they have left. (One way to ease the discomfort you might feel at cutting people off is to have your group agree on a signal that the timekeeper can give when someone has talked too long. For example, they can make a sign that they hold up that reads, "Time to move on to someone else"; or, simply making the "T" sign with your hands to indicate "Time" is subtle and requires no paperwork!)

Recorder/Reporter: In addition to being a discussant, your job is to record the group's findings or other notes that the group needs. This may mean that you'll have to make copies for everyone later. If so, you will be responsible for getting the copies to the group in a timely manner. If necessary, you may also be asked to report findings from your group. [N.B. The recorder/reporter functions can also be split between two people.]

Friendly Critic/Devil's Advocate: As a discussant, your job is to serve a special role in the discussion. It's your job to challenge any assumptions the group seems to be making (e.g., is PBL the same as using case studies?). Additionally, you might be the one to say "Yeah, but what if...?" Your goal is to get the group to really analyze what they're doing from as many angles as possible.

Participant Observer: In addition to being a discussant (that's the participant part), your job is to observe the group's dynamics. This means asking yourself questions such as "Who dominates?" "Who's not participating?" "How does the group plan how to address the questions and problems raised in the discussion?" "Who clashes?" "Who gets along?" Later, you might be asked to meet with the instructor to share your observations. It's also a good idea to share your observations with the group. This last activity is a good way for everyone to reflect on how they do or do not get work done in a group and why.

SAMPLE GROUP CONTRACT

Below is a sample of one way to form collaborative work groups. In this example, group members are given both some guidelines by the instructor *and* permitted to write some of their own. A group contract can be written solely by the instructor, by the group members, or both. You may choose to have everyone use the same contract, let individual groups design their own, or let individual groups design their own but with a core set of expectations by which all groups must abide.

GROUP & GROUP MEMBER RESPONSIBILITIES

The success of the group will depend on the cooperation and professionalism of its members. Employers will expect you to know how to work effectively in groups: how to determine what needs to be done; how to find information; how to assess information; how to share the workload; and how to resolve interpersonal conflicts that might arise. Effective collaboration includes, but is not limited to:

- Participating fully (in spirit and actuality)
- Participating professionally (i.e., civil discourse; abiding by the rules of academic honesty)
- Meeting responsibilities (i.e., completing assigned tasks on time and to the best of your ability)
- Taking the consequences of not abiding by the group's rules.
- Giving group members appropriate credit where due
- Not giving credit where it isn't due

After reading through this document, each member needs to initial each item and then sign the document at the end. Return it to the instructor who will make copies for your group. If you disagree with these rules, then as a group amend them. They must be approved by the instructor, however.

1. Each group member agrees to show up to class and to outside group meetings on time.
Initials:
2. In the event that a group member is less than five minutes late, s/he may *quietly* join the group without disrupting it to ask what s/he missed. It is optional for the group members to fill in the late-comer.
Initials:
3. Group members who are avoidably late must: [write out a consequence for being late.]
Initials:
4. A group member who is absent more than _____times will be dismissed from the group.
Initials:

5. If a member submits plagiarized material and/or cheats, the group agrees to bring this to the instructor's attention immediately.

Initials:

6. Each member agrees to familiarize him- or her- self with and abide by UCI's rules for Academic Honesty (available in the *Schedule of Classes*).

Initials:

7. Members agree to treat one another with respect. Respect includes no name-calling. If you don't like an idea, address the idea, not the person (for example, "I don't think that idea will work because..." not "That's stupid"). In the event that a group member treats someone inappropriately, s/he will [write a consequence]:

Initials:

8. No "cross talking" is allowed. This means not interrupting when someone else is talking.

Initials:

9. In the event that a group member or members are dominating the group, it's the time keeper's job to politely interrupt them (this is when you *can* interrupt) and ask that someone else speak.

Initials:

10. Other rules that the group would like to add:

Each member print name & then sign: Date:

Variety is the spice of life....

Different Ways to Form a Group



■ **Ways of grouping:**

- counting off
- students work with partner of their choice
- students work with someone sitting near them
- by similarities (eye color, hair color, month birthday, school)
- draw names (always have small envelope with all students' names and with numbers (1- # of enrollment) with you)
- students work with someone they have not worked with before
- instructor randomly assigns partner
- groups formed as students walk into class
- different color handouts, group according to colors (same or different; vary!)

■ Cut up greeting cards or postcards into 2, 3 or 4 pieces (according to group size). Make sure there is one piece for each student in class. Mix up the cards and have students pick a piece out of a hat. Students find their partners or groups by finding matching pieces: Each student who has a piece of the puzzle is a member of that group.

■ Have students work with someone sitting on the other side of the room / students in the back of the class work with someone in the front of the class on the opposite side of the class.

■ Arrange the desks so that they are in two straight lines or semi-circles with always two chairs/desks facing each other. Students sit down, pick up the card describing their spontaneous speaking activity and speak with the person across from them. After a certain time (e.g. 1 min, you can use a bell or a kitchen clock), students sitting in one line move x chairs to the left and students sitting in the other line move x chairs to the right.

■ A variation of the above activity is to have students form two circles (one circle inside another where one student from the outside circle faces a student from the inside circle). Each student has cards practicing grammar, vocabulary, etc. Students work with their partner using their cards in whatever way you directed them. When you call time, students switch cards with their partner and the inside circle moves three people to the left (the outside circle does not move). Now they have new partners and one new set of cards.

■ Matching cards (cards mixed up – distributed)

- Adjectives on one card / its opposite on the other
- questions on one card / appropriate answer on the other
- written equation / solution
- incomplete sentence / missing element (e.g. verb form)
- infinitive / past participle
- picture of item or person/ German vocabulary word or name of person
- description of activity / activity
- name of holiday / month of this holiday
- author / piece of work (novel, story, poem)
- inventor / invention

■ When using info-gap activities (e.g. the one in textbook), to pair students, make handout of activity (16 students = 8 sets). Make one of the alterations listed below. Mix up activities and pass them out randomly. Instruct students to find their partners in the following matter.

- Find the person with the same color (each set of activities is printed in a different color)
- find the person with the same number written in the upper right-hand margin (each set of activities has the same number written on it)
- find the person with the same letter written in the upper right-hand margin (each set of activities has the same letter written on it)
- find the person with the vocabulary word that is opposite in meaning from the one you have on yours
- find the person with the vocabulary word that corresponds to the picture you have drawn on yours
- find the person who has the same sticker on their handout as you

GROUP DYNAMIC OBSERVATION SHEET

While you're observing what's going on in the room among the group members, try to surreptitiously record the following observations:

BEHAVIOR:	WHO'S DOING IT?	HOW OFTEN?	HOW ACCOMPLISHED?	IMPACT ON GROUP?
Group Maintenance:				
Who talks?				
leader				
"harmonizer"				
"gate keeper"				
"encourager"				
"compromiser"				
"standard setter"				
"initiator"				
other				

Task Maintenance:				
BEHAVIOR:	WHO'S DOING IT?	HOW OFTEN?	HOW ACCOMPLISHED?	IMPACT ON GROUP?
Who seeks information/opinions from the group?				
Who provides information and/or facts?				
Who clarifies and/or Elaborates?				
Who summarizers?				
other				

Decision-Making Procedures:				
Who uses "the plop"?				
Who uses the "self-authorized agenda?"				
Who uses the "handclasp"?				
Who suggests voting?				
BEHAVIOR:	WHO'S DOING IT?	HOW OFTEN?	HOW ACCOMPLISHED?	IMPACT ON GROUP?
Who tests for consensus?				
other				

Which groups achieved the assigned task(s)?:

If a group or groups didn't achieve the assigned task, what problems and behaviors arose?

BEHAVIOR:⇒	Dependency:	Counter-Dependency:	Fighting:	Control-ling:	With-drawing:	Pairing Up:
POSSIBLE REASON:↓						
Identity/Group Norms Problem:						
Goals/Needs Problem:						
Power/Influence Problem:						
Intimacy Problem:						
Other:						
Other:						
Other:						