

Making Group Work Work

Many of us have bad memories of small group learning or what is now called team-based, collaborative, or cooperative learning. We regarded it as a waste of time. We were convinced that a few team members did all the work, while others received equal credit.

But done properly, collaborative learning is a highly effective way to actively involve students in their own learning. It's a useful way to get shy or withdrawn students to participate and for more knowledgeable students to help others.

The 7 Rules of Successful Group Work

Rule 1: Group work can't be busy work

Group work needs to be meaningful. It must help the students' master content, hone skills, and be directly connected to your course's learning objectives. Make sure that your students understand your rationale for a particular small group activity and whether and how it will be graded.

Rule 2: The task must be clear

Structure group work around a problem to solve, an argument to devise, or a project to complete.

a. Make sure the task is specific: "Decide," "List," "Prioritize," "Solve," "Choose," "Defend" ("Discuss" is too ambiguous).

b. Make sure the groups know the outcome you expect: This might involve reporting their conclusions or making an argument or generating a list of questions

c. Set a time limit: Too little is better than too much.

Rule 3: Students must feel a stake in the activity

If the object of the small group is to solve a problem or devise an argument, ask the students to write down their ideas BEFORE the group meets.

Rule 4: Groups need to be small

Groups should consist of no more than five or six students.

Rule 5: Group members' roles need to be clearly defined

Consider designating roles in advance, such as:

- The problem poser
- The analyst
- The devil's advocate (who challenges the analyst)
- The detective (who searches for unacknowledged biases and unsupported assumptions)
- The umpire



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Rule 6: Debrief each group

Provide closure: Call on students individually to report on the groups' conclusions. Then, weave together all the students' comments and ideas.

Rule 7: Give each student the opportunity to self-evaluate

Consider asking the students to comment in writing on the groups' effectiveness and dynamics.