LEARNING IN GROUPS

PURPOSE
Learning in groups allows students to share insights and gifts with one another, “that all may be profited thereby” (D&C 88:122; D&C 46:12). Learning in groups can teach important interpersonal skills and if organized properly, can enhance student engagement and learning. Learning to be effective in a team environment encompasses some of the most critical skills needed in the world today. (David A. Bednar, Faculty Meeting August 21, 2001)

DESCRIPTION
A group is comprised of three or more students and can be a helpful learning technique in or out of class, for short or long periods of time. Several variations of groups can be used throughout a course. Depending upon the course, some instructors may not see the need for groups, while other instructors may use groups extensively. It may be helpful to distinguish between various types of groups:

- **Break-out Group.** A group of students asked to get together (usually) during class to discuss a certain topic. The group may or may not have worked together before. The group size varies—depending upon the task and size of the class.

- **Project Group.** Three or more students given a specific task/project usually to be completed within a certain period of time.

- **Study Group.** Usually comprised of three or more students who have chosen on their own to get together outside of class to help one another understand course content. This type of group is typical in complex technical courses. Faculty may or may not be aware of such groups.

- **Learning Group.** Usually comprised of 5-7 students selected by faculty to work together on an ongoing basis over the semester. These groups become a fundamental tool of the course as it relates to helping each student gain understanding of the course material. Another term for this is “Team Based Learning.” In addition to group projects, these groups may be asked to discuss materials before class, during class for break-out sessions, and after class to apply concepts.

Principles to Consider:

1. **Individual and Team Accountability.** Individual quizzes before group meetings and peer evaluations at the end of a project are two ways to increase accountability. Having groups select a leader each week or for a group activity is also helpful. This role can be rotated from week to week. Requiring a regular email to you giving a report of the team’s activity can also increase accountability.

2. **Group Member Selection:** Members in a group should be selected on the basis of what each member can add to the group. Therefore, letting students select their groups can be problematic. They often form groups based on similar interests and personalities. An instructor with background information on each student is usually in a better position to select group members. Consider a short survey. Be aware of what skills are needed to be successful in the assigned project/task.

3. **Group Size:** Group diversity, group dynamics, and the nature of the task should be considered when determining the size of a group. If a group is too large, individual engagement can be dampened. Groups should be large enough that team member diversity enhances the learning.

4. **Nature of the Task:** Does the task or assignment lend itself to group learning? Students need to see the need for being in a group. They should see the task(s) as relevant and meaningful—i.e. real issues and problems they will face. The task needs to be designed in such a way to warrant forming groups. The following matrix can help you think through the type of tasks and what tools are best suited to enhance learning. As tasks move up and to the right of the matrix the value of groups increase.
EXAMPLE

A group of six students in an upper division economics course are assigned to develop a preliminary plan for Madison County as it relates to future economic development. Sister Jones, the instructor, selects group members based upon their past experience, abilities, and interests. The final product includes a written document and presentation to the county commissioners.

The group meets outside of class to review the scope of the project -- group expectations, including a time table, are written down and agreed upon.

Sister Jones then asks students to return the following week with a preliminary outline of the project and the division of responsibilities to team members. She stresses the importance of roles and goals in successful group projects.

After this initial organization, Sister Jones reviews how the projects will be evaluated. The group grade will be determined by her using feedback from the county. However, this grade is not necessarily the final grade for each team member. There will be both self and peer evaluations at the end of the project which will focus on three areas:

1. **Quality** of the group member’s contribution — i.e. written work did not need to be re-done.
2. **Quantity** of the group member’s contribution — i.e. member did fair share of the work.
3. **Effectiveness** as a group member — i.e. able to work through conflict with others.

Students are told that a hypothetical sum of money is to be divided among group members. If a group has six members, $5000 will be allocated per person — for a total of $30,000. This amount is to be distributed based upon each member’s contribution (including themselves). The average amount each member earns will be multiplied by the final project score to determine each member’s score.

**TIPS**

- **Use multiple forms of accountability.** Both individual and group accountability are critical for successful group dynamics and fair assessments.
- **Provide training.** Teach effective group processes.

**PITFALLS**

- **Alignment.** Don’t give groups the tasks better suited to individuals. For example, a group shouldn’t write a research paper.
- **Lack of class time for groups.** If groups are to be effective they need time, including some in class.
- **Wrong size.** Too many or not enough students

**KEY ARTICLES**


**OTHER RESOURCES**

3 Keys to Effective Group Work

http://www.byui.edu/learning-and-teaching/instructional-tools