

Why Group Work?

One of the foundations of VWE II is creating situations for students to practice real-life world of work skills. With rare exception, much of the work that we do involves working successfully with others in teams or groups. Even as teachers we spend a lot of our working time with our subject area teams, grade-level teams, etc. For our students to become effective team members they need to practice good team behaviors as often as possible.

Small groups allow our learners to discuss and develop ideas together, practice breaking up tasks into component parts, accounting for one another's strengths and weaknesses, and to exercise professional interpersonal communication skills. Unfortunately, group work often works better in theory than reality. However, like most things in teaching, good planning and consistent practice of classroom procedures and norms can lead to positive outcomes for your students and foster a student-centered classroom environment.

Setting your classroom up for success

A key component to fostering a student-centered classroom is creating efficient and consistent classroom procedures.

Some important questions to consider when working with groups are:

- What types of groups are you creating?
- What is the group size?
- How do students group? Self-selecting or teacher-selected?
- How is classroom furniture arranged for group work?
- How are students assigned responsibilities in their groups?
- When a group is stuck how do they ask for help from a teacher or other peers?
- What cues do students have to account for time?
- How do students turn in or present their work products from group work?

It's crucial to plan for these considerations and to create and practice procedures and routines from first days of this course onward.

ASSIGNING OR SELECTING GROUPS

Until you know your students' strengths and weaknesses well, you may want to start out assigning groups yourself.

For some shorter group assignments you may want to allow students to self-select their group members. Initially students are likely to select their friends which can lead to disruptions and incomplete work. Including a short reflection component as a closing activity to early group exercises often leads students to the realization that it's not always in their best interest to pair up with their best friends, but instead to seek out those who might be complement their own strengths and weaknesses. Your results may vary, but providing students a sense of autonomy and including self-reflection on those autonomous choices has been shown to lead to increased student engagement and intrinsic motivation in pursuing classroom success.

Set strict time limits for each component of in-class group work (with appropriate accommodations for students with IEP/IAPs, etc). This forces students to stay on task and reinforces your expectations for them and their work. Time requirements may require some adjustments based on the specific activity, but avoid continuing to extend time if students are

not all on task. A student's failure to manage their time well in a specific opportunity followed by reflection may change that behavior in future activities.

One of the biggest time-sucks and opportunities for students to lose focus is in transitions to different work areas or between different tasks in a class period. Efficient procedures that are consistent and practiced by students are essential to minimize transition time and disruption. For small group work one of the transitions that is often most problematic is just the movement of students into groups. Below you'll find some research-based best practices for managing that transition.

1. If students will be working in groups for the whole class period you should pre-arrange furniture for group work and have your student groups listed on your white-board or LMS for when students enter. This keeps there from being any chance of lost time during the transition from individual to group seating.
 - 1.1. Utilize student volunteers at the end of the day prior or before school on the day of to arrange furniture
2. At the beginning of the course establish group work procedures and norms, the first is just moving into groups. To get started we can practice our first class procedure for group work: transitioning from individual work to a group. Start by practice getting into groups of 4.
 - 2.1. If you have an interactive white board or use a projector, give your students a visual guide to how the classroom should look when you're done transitioning. (example below)
 - 2.2. Instruct your students that we'll be practicing a new procedure and may have to try it a few times to get it correct. While it may seem like a waste of time to have students practice this procedure over and over, student mastery of classroom procedures early in the year minimizes transition time and subsequent classroom disruptions, more than paying for itself over the course of the school year.
 - 2.3. Practice the procedure until students are meeting your time goal. If you teach multiple sections you might want to make it a contest between sections or in-class between different groups. Rely on your existing student and class reward system to reward your students for successful mastery of the procedure.
3. When using this procedure in future classes have a student remind the class of the procedure and expectations before moving.

TLDR:

- Have consistent procedures for moving into groups
- Have students practice those procedures until they are able to do it quickly and consistently
- Hold students accountable for knowing and following the procedures
- Self-selected groups can be problematic at first, but provide students with individual reflection on how their group choices worked and teacher feedback. They will start to make better choices.
- Mix it up! Have self-selected groups, teacher selected groups, encourage working with new people

FURTHER REFERENCES:

- Jones, C, and G Healing. "Net Generation Students: Agency and Choice and the New Technologies." *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, no. 26, 2 June 2010, pp. 344–356., doi:10.1111/j.1365-2729.2010.00370.x.
- ROMANIUK, Cathryn, et al. "The Influence Of Activity Choice On Problem Behaviors Maintained By Escape Versus Attention." *Journal Of Applied Behavior Analysis*, vol. 35, no. 4, 2002, pp. 349–362.

Example Seating Transition

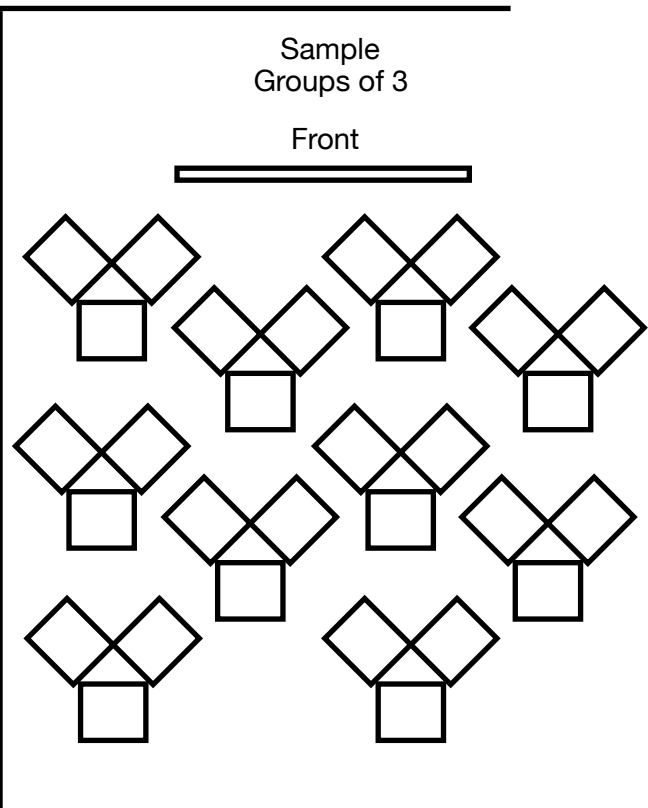
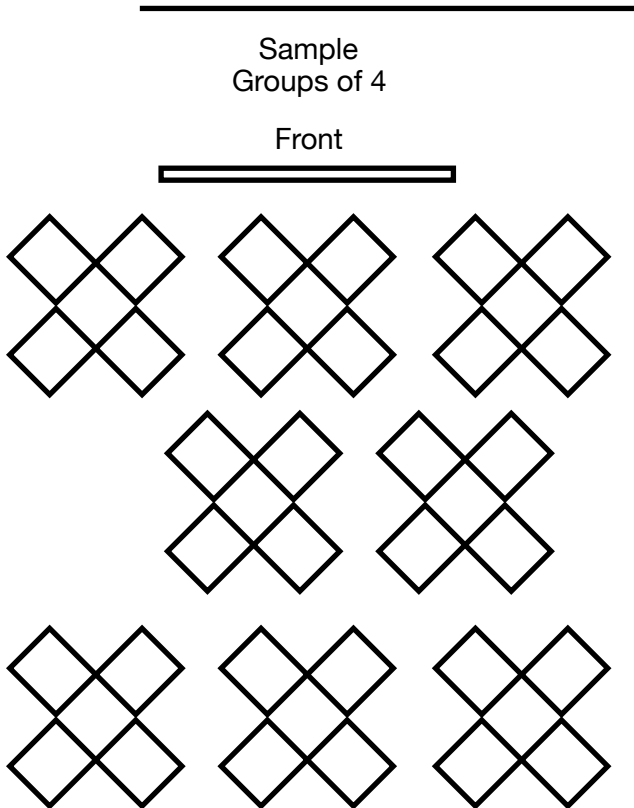
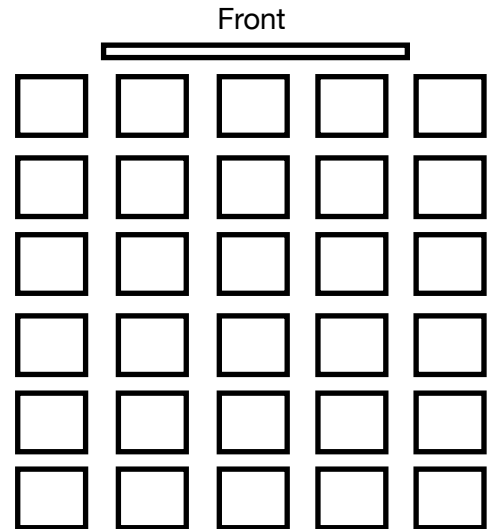
Begin with a visual of your regular classroom layout. It could be a drawing like the one on the right, or it could just be a picture of your classroom from the front or rear of the class.

Explain to your students that you'll be practicing moving from individual to group layout (or whatever you want to call them, Layout A, B, C, etc). You may also want to create posters that stay up in the classroom for a visual reference throughout the year.

Display the visual for the new layout and make up a cue to give your students on when to start moving their desk, raising your fist, a buzzer, a change in the classroom lighting, something you'll be consistent with. The first time they practice this transition you'll want to time them (www.online-stopwatch.com is great). You may want to have a student repeat back the directions to be sure everyone is clear.

Use your cue, time the students, and then practice moving back to the original layout. Have a transition time goal (ideally 90 seconds or less), and practice a few more times until students meet the goal.

You may find it useful to always use the timer in the future for these transitions to help remind students of the expectation.



Types of Groups for VWE II

These different small group descriptions are taken and modified from The Centre for Teaching Excellence at the University of Waterloo. You should find that there is a way to incorporate group work or just group discussion into almost every class topic.

Group Work in the Classroom: Types of Small Groups | Centre for Teaching Excellence. Centre for Teaching Excellence, 28 June 2017, uwaterloo.ca/centre-for-teaching-excellence/teaching-resources/teaching-tips/developing-assignments/group-work/group-work-classroom-types-small-groups.

BUZZ GROUPS

Class size: any

Time frame: 3-10 minutes

Setting: no limitations

Purpose: generate ideas/answers, re-stimulate student interest, gauge student understanding

Description: These groups involve students engaging in short, informal discussions, often in response to a particular sentence starter or question. At a transitional moment in the class, have students turn to 1-3 neighbors to discuss any difficulties in understanding, answer a prepared question, or define or give examples of key concepts, or speculate on what will happen next in the class. The best discussions are those in which students make judgments regarding the relative merits, relevance, or usefulness of an aspect of the lecture (Brookfield & Preskill, 1999). These are a great way to generate discussion after a live Nepris session or a visit from a guest speaker. Sample questions include, “What’s the most interesting statement you’ve heard so from the speaker today?” or “What’s the thing you want to learn more about now?” Reconvene as a class and have a general discussion in which students share ideas or questions that arose within their subgroups.

Comments: This method is very flexible: it is easy to implement in any size of class and in most classrooms, even the most formally arranged classroom. Consider how to regain the attention of a large group: turning the lights off and on is one simple yet effective method or utilizing a timer on the board with a short, defined time limit.

THINK-PAIR-SHARE

Class size: any

Time frame: 5-10 minutes

Setting: no limitations

Purpose: generate ideas, increase students’ confidence in their answers, encourage broad participation in plenary session

Description: This strategy has three steps. First, students think individually about a particular question or scenario. Then they pair up to discuss and compare their ideas. Finally, they are given the chance to share their ideas in a large class discussion. This strategy is very effective when working on lessons developing with soft-skills and interpersonal communication skills.

Comments: Think-pair-sharing forces all students to attempt an initial response to the question, which they can then clarify and expand as they collaborate. It also gives them a chance to validate their ideas in a small group before mentioning them to the large group, which may help shy students feel more confident participating.

CIRCLE OF VOICES

Class size: any

Time frame: 10-20 minutes

Setting: moveable chairs preferable

Purpose: generate ideas, develop listening skills, have all students participate, equalize learning environment

Description: This method involves students taking turns to speak. Students form circles of four or five. Give students a topic, and allow them a few minutes to organize their thoughts about it. Then the discussion begins, with each student having up to one minute (or choose a different length) of uninterrupted time to speak. During this time, no one else is allowed to say anything. After everyone has spoken once, open the floor within the subgroup for general discussion. Specify that students should only build on what someone else has said, not on their own ideas; also, at this point, they should not introduce new ideas (Brookfield & Preskill, 1999). This strategy is a good complement to TED Talk Fridays where students can voice their thoughts on the actual topic of the presentation instead of just the mechanics.

Comments: Some shy students might feel uncomfortable having to speak. Lessen their fear by making the topic specific and relevant or by giving each person a relevant quote to speak about. A variation to this method, which encourages students to listen more carefully to each other, involves requiring each person to begin by paraphrasing the comments of the previous student or by showing how his or her remarks relate to those of the previous student. For this variation, students will need less preparation time before the “circle” begins, but they may need more time between speakers.

JIGSAW

Class size: 10-30

Time frame: 20 or more minutes

Setting: moveable seating required, a lot of space preferable

Purpose: learn concepts in-depth, develop teamwork, have students teaching students

Description: This strategy involves students becoming “experts” on one aspect of a topic, then sharing their expertise with others. Divide a topic into a few constitutive parts (“puzzle pieces”). Form subgroups of 3-4 and assign each subgroup a different “piece” of the topic (or, if the class is large, assign two or more subgroups to each subtopic). Each group’s task is to develop expertise on its particular subtopic by brainstorming, developing ideas, and if time permits, researching. Once students have become experts on a particular subtopic, shuffle the groups so that the members of each new group have a different area of expertise. Students then take turns sharing their expertise with the other group members, thereby creating a completed “puzzle” of knowledge about the main topic (see Silberman, 1996). A convenient way to assign different areas of expertise is to distribute handouts of different colors. For the first stage of the group work, groups are composed of students with the same color of handout; for the second stage, each member of the newly formed groups must have a different color of handout. This strategy is useful when students are being introduced to a new career cluster or similarly large topic.

Comments: The jigsaw helps to avoid tiresome teacher-centered sessions, because most of the information is shared in small groups. This method can be expanded by having students develop expertise about their subtopics first through independent research outside of class. Then, when they meet with those who have the same subtopic, they can clarify and expand on their expertise before moving to a new group. One potential drawback is that students hear only one group’s expertise on a particular topic and don’t benefit as much from the insight of the whole class; to address this issue, you could collect a written record of each group’s work and create a master document—a truly complete puzzle—on the topic.

FISHBOWL

Class size: 10-30

Time frame: 15 or more minutes

Setting: moveable seating and a lot of space preferable; if necessary, have inner group stand/sit at front of lecture hall and the outer group sit in regular lecture hall seats

Purpose: observe group interaction, provide real illustrations for concepts, provide opportunity for analysis

Description: This method involves one group observing another group. The first group forms a circle and either discusses an issue or topic, does a role play, or performs a brief drama. The second group forms a circle around the inner group. Depending on the inner group's task and the context of your course, the outer group can look for themes, patterns, soundness of argument, etc., in the inner group's discussion, analyze the inner group's functioning as a group, or simply watch and comment on the role play. Debrief with both groups at the end in a whole-group to capture their experiences. This is a great complement to any practice of proper workplace behavior (for instance any of the conflict management lessons).

Comments: Be aware that the outer group members can become bored if their task is not challenging enough. You could have groups switch places and roles to help with this. Also note that the inner group could feel inhibited by the observers; mitigate this concern by asking for volunteers to participate in the inner circle or by specifying that each student will have a chance to be both inner and outer group members. Although this method is easiest to implement in small classes, you could also expand it so that multiple "fishbowls" are occurring at once.

FLASH PRESENTATIONS

Class size: any

Time frame: 1-2 class periods

Setting: moveable seating and 1-to-1 technology access preferred

Purpose: break large concepts into smaller pieces that can be reported back to whole class, practice effective role assignment, communication, and self-management.

Description: This small group exercise breaks students into groups of 3 or 4 and tasks them with researching and creating short presentations on a piece of a new topic. For instance students working on a new career sector's job overview assignment may be broken into flash presentation groups and assigned 2 or 3 specific jobs to research and create a presentation on. Collaborative word processing and presentation creation software such as Google Slides or Office365 PowerPoint allow students to work on a presentation simultaneously. Students must assign specific group tasks, but each should be responsible for basic research and contributing to the presentation. For instance, in a career ladder group piece each student would be responsible for a single career ladder to be included in the presentation. One student may be responsible to be the time keeper, another the spokesperson, etc.

Comments: This is great way to cover a lot of material with students in a one or two class periods. It is important to have all students practice good audience skills and to be accountable for taking notes on the other groups' reporting. Close supervision is needed until students master their own intra-group accountability skills.

REFERENCES

- Brookfield, S.D., & Preskill, S. (1999). Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Habeshaw, S., Habeshaw, T., & Gibbs, G. (1984). 53 Interesting Things to Do in Your Seminars & Tutorials. Bristol: Technical and Educational Services Ltd.
- Jaques, D. (2000). Learning in Groups: A Handbook for Improving Group Work, 3rd ed. London: Kogan Page.
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Setting Group Norms

Another important component in successful group work is agreeing on group work and behavior norms and holding students accountable to them. Norm setting is an important opportunity for students to exercise their own voices and behavior expectations, but should be done with some teacher guidance in mind. Rules that are handed down from on high are generally only monitored by the person who set them (the teacher) and not by students. Cooperatively setting these norms leads to self-monitoring and higher levels of student compliance.

Before having a norm-setting session spend some time thinking about which norms and behaviors YOU want to see in your classroom. While you may not explicitly present these to your students it will give you a list of things you may want to steer your students towards.

For instance:

- Respect each other's ideas
- Respect the other group members
- Don't interrupt each other
- Everyone's opinion should count
- Be honest with each other
- Everyone should share the responsibility of the tasks
- Don't take over and don't let others take over
- Help each other to understand all concepts
- Be willing to cooperate with others on their ideas
- Keep an open mind
- Vote on disagreements
- Make sure everyone is able to be vocal about their ideas and problems
- Give ideas no matter how "off" you may think they are
- Listen effectively
- Don't be critical
- Set an appropriate noise level

Of course your wish list of norms may be vastly different, but ideally your students' norms should include the basics of respecting other members and their ideas and how group dynamics should operate.

With your wishlist in hand, incorporate a group work norm discussion and setting into one of your first class sessions. Use the "Successful Group Work Handout" (04-31) to begin student brainstorming on their past experiences with group work and what they think makes for successful groups. This will then lead to a whole-class share out and discussion where ideas for group norms are solicited. If you find that no one is bringing up any of your wishlist items, you might nudge them in that direction with a "...what do y'all think about how you'll deal with disagreements in the group?", etc. Have a student serve as scribe and record all of the student-submitted ideas, preferably on white/chalk board.

Once students have exhausted their norm ideas, have the class consolidate similar ideas and come up with a final list of norms that the class is willing to agree to. Record this list on a poster board or equivalent that will be posted in the classroom to be a reminder. It is important to underscore that since the students' created these norms that they will be responsible for holding themselves and their other group members accountable for following these norms.

Phipps, Maurice L., and Cynthia A. Phipps. "Group Norm Setting: A Critical Skill for Effective Classroom Groups." *Mountain Rise: The International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2003, p. 1-8, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1234/mr.v1i1.37>.