

RE-THINKING GROUP WORK/DISCUSSION

A best practice guide from AUP's Mellon Seminar

More than twenty faculty members contributed to this workshop. Notes taken from the workshop are distilled here to be of use to all, including concrete ideas and techniques.

WHY WE DO GROUP WORK

What can we do in a group that we can't get on our own?

- There is safety in numbers
- Can act as a social icebreaker
- Engagement creates active learning
- Creates energy in the classroom, builds group morale
- Creates a collective memory of the class
- Makes one's thought process visible and audible
- Generates and underscores diverse perspectives
- Makes visible multiplicity and increases tolerance in the classroom.
- Creates a public model of how one learns from others
- Challenges the capacity to listen and to speak (and more chances to speak English)
- Increases the space for peer mentoring
- Creates a space for emergence and unpredictability
- Can get more done by partitioning groups to work on different aspects of a question
- Changes the power dynamic / creates new power dynamics
- Competitive dynamic among the students can be productive
- Gives us an opportunity to observe the students
- Engagement creates active learning

Challenges to be alert to in creating group practices

- Unfairness, not all students pull equal weight
- Can feel messy and inefficient
- Students interpret it as dead time
- Students want to hear from the professors
- Dominant students don't let others contribute
- Difficulties of scheduling of group work outside of class
- Differing levels of English/linguistic abilities
- Impatience can amplify stereotypes
- Group creation can be popularity contest
- What can you do to help shy people?

Finding discipline specific opportunities for group work

Modeling that aspect of your field that is already based on group behavior.

STRATEGIES

Needs

Clear instructions, scope, time limits and objectives

Get people to move around, combat lethargy, maintain energy levels

Sensitivity to the type of outcome you want, outcome based discussions vs. open-ended

Strategy should respond to different levels of students

Creating groups

Randomness, number generation

Balanced group skills by choosing the groups for them

Take a post card and cut it into 4 pieces and let people find their puzzle

Bring candies and match them

Animals -- all the donkeys have to find the other donkeys

Generating productive questions

Write questions at the beginning of the class: "What is the value of studying ____?"

Ask for student assumptions.

Process-oriented questions: Why do you use shampoo?

Ask: "Is ____ productive?" Ex: 'Is inequality productive?' (greed, jealousy, etc.)

Who cares? Why should I care about ____? So what?

What questions can be asked? How many can we create?

Is 'it' different now?

Why would somebody say that?

What is not being said here?

Counter-factual questions – "What if so and so wasn't true? Hadn't happened?"

Put yourself in the shoes of X person, "what would you do?"

Go against the glorious history model, focus and place themselves in the time period.

Sizes and forms of group work

Fishbowl – relatively small group of people sit in the middle of class.

The rest of the class listens and writes a reaction.

Games – Competitive games to deepen knowledge

Shelving games, Dewey Decimal Activities

Have rewards for the games / Bingo game / keywords.

Models 'play' in the classroom as a kind of inquiry

Small discussion leading to large discussion.

Breaking into small groups to report to a large group later

Pairs – 'Dialogic Notebook' Notebook exchange writing in response to certain passages or ideas to generate new understanding that can be shared with the larger group. (details in the workshop breakdown at the end of this doc)

Modeling multiplicity

Group work is an important chance to model multiplicity. For example, each student bring in a newspaper from all over the world, reading in their own language or a language they know, and sharing it with the group.

Accountability

- Preparedness: give them a strong, graded individual assignment that they bring as the starting point for the group work.
- Positive contribution model: ask for reports on what everyone contributed.
- Quantitative: set conditions for participation evaluation and ask them to assess.
- Can create a group contract, agreeing to certain obligations and measures at the outset.

Process writing

Useful to allow time at the end of the group exercise to process what was learned.

Gives students a chance to measure what they have learned and can lead to self-reflection in some aspect of the knowledge they would like to pursue.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Additional resources from the AUP library (thanks Sally!):

Millis, Barbara, ed. *New Pedagogies and Practices for Teaching in Higher Education: Cooperative Learning in Higher Education : Across the Disciplines, Across the Academy*. Sterling, VA, USA: Stylus Publishing, 2010. ProQuest ebrary. Web. 12 February 2015. <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/auparis/reader.action?ppg=1&docID=10545778&tm=1423755464442>

Classroom Assessment Techniques: a handbook for college teachers. By Thomas A. Angelo and K. Patricia Cross, Oversize 378.125 A584c

THIS WORKSHOP'S SCRIPT

The group workshop that generated the above followed the following script

What can we do in a group that we can't get on our own? [8]

1. Write to this question a little longer than you expect to see what ideas arise.
2. Let's hear some of these (we'll put them on the board).
3. Of these, which do we feel are most significant (rank them, vote?).

Illustrates how writing before talking is useful and balances group dynamic.

Personal goals defined [5]

1. Writing: what part of my subject requires the most synthesis?
2. Writing: Is there an aspect of my subject that is group-based?

Group work /discussion are an opportunity to think in response to something.

Challenges – open discussion [5]

Negatives are easy. We just want to keep these in mind when creating solutions.

1. Biggest complaints heard, obstacles
2. Share

Strategies

DIALOGIC NOTEBOOK: [15]

Using quotes about group interaction.

1. Describe what you think so and so means by _____.
2. What might be a counterargument to #1?
3. How can you connect an experience in your classroom to the above?
4. Swap notebooks and respond to each other in the second column.
5. Share a few of the best exchanges from this in the large group.

Result: Dialogic partner work to unpack complex ideas.

SMALL TO BIG SYNTHESIS : [20 – 10 min work, 10 min share]

Sometimes we don't think about the strength of small groups in building to a larger discussion. Here, individual, small group and larger group experience create different ways of processing and digesting ideas and of experiencing the generative power of discussion.

1. Start by writing down your top three strategies for group discussion.
2. In small group, discuss, and choose the two most powerful.
3. Come up with a good example of how you might use each.
4. Report back to the group (have a scribe, and timekeeper).

Group Work – Adding Accountability [6]

- Giving them a strong, graded preliminary assignment that they bring as the starting point for the group work.
- Positive contribution model: Ask for reports on what everyone contributed, makes reflect on what was done.
- Quantitative: Set conditions for evaluation of participation and allocates assessment to them.

Ending - Integration [10]

Integration: Come back to your list of the discipline-specific areas – and write down two ideas for an effective discussion period with whatever it requires: sample discussion period with a build of pre-assignment and questions, etc.

Process writing: What do you understand now that you didn't before? Focused writing: what did we learn from this as a group process that we couldn't have learned otherwise?

Finally, can we send out this thing? [And here we are sending it out!]