‘Let’s get together’ – ideas on managing group work

In recent years the FE sector has properly come to emphasise active and learner-centred practice over old ‘chalk-and-talk’ methods. Teachers are consequently making greater use of group work. However, the idea that any use of group work makes for a good lesson is over-simplistic. Managing group work is complex and if poorly handled can actually diminish learning. Here are some thoughts on avoiding the pitfalls.

“What are we doing again?” - Setting up group work

A common error with group work is rushing into it. A desire to get the groups working can mean we neglect to make the task and its purpose sufficiently clear. This can lead to confusion, lost time and disruption.

- Explain the intended learning outcomes
Let the learners know why they are being put into groups

- Explain the task clearly
If there is a way to misunderstand the task at least one learner will find it!

Give learners the chance to ask questions and be particularly clear on the outputs you want from the groups and how they are to feed them back.

- Use directed Q&A to check on understanding of the task
Before starting the group work use questions directed to learners from different groups to check they understand the task. For example:

“Paul, remind me - how many key points are your team going to identify?”
“Sajida, how long do the groups have for this task?”
“Hanifat, describe how the groups are to present their findings.”

Moving students – getting into groups

Unless it is carefully planned moving students into their groups can cause disruption that takes minutes to resolve - especially with ‘lively’ classes.

- Plan your room and desk layout
Ideally, if you plan to make substantial use of group work you should try and get access to the classroom a few minutes before the start of the lesson. ‘Islands’ of desks are best suited to most types of group work - they allow ease of access and movement around the room for you and the learners.

- Make sure that students don’t sit in a line during group work
If creating desk islands is not possible and you have a U-shaped desk arrangement - move a few chairs to the centre of the room before you start the lesson. This at least means that learners can move round and use these chairs to face their peers when forming a group. Otherwise those on the ends of the lines will have to strain to get involved. It only takes their next door neighbour to turn their back on them and they are effectively excluded.

- Avoid moving furniture during the lesson
Substantial movement of desks and chairs during the lesson risks generating unnecessary disruption and wastes time. Likewise, if you ask a learner to move make sure they can do so without trampling their peers – if they can’t, leave them where they are.
Consider breaking up a U-shape by removing one desk from the middle before the class starts. This allows those in the centre of the arrangement to move around to face their peers during group work.

It should also make it possible for you to access all the learners and groups with comfort.

**Group composition - selecting groups**

Choosing which learners to place together can have a major influence on the quality of learning generated by group work.

- **Always make an active choice about group composition**

Sometimes it is ok to let learners work with their friends or to simply put those sitting near each other into groups. Nevertheless, you should always have thought about it, and concluded that the exact group composition did not matter because often it will.

- **Mix it up occasionally**

Consider allocating learners to groups randomly. Use this when the precise group composition does not matter, but you want learners to hear the perspective of peers they otherwise rarely work with.

Occasionally learners object to being removed from their friends, but do not be afraid to assert yourself. Group composition affects learning, and you are in charge of managing learning!

- **Peer teaching**

The idea of creating mixed groups where the strongest help the lowest attaining is popular amongst teachers. Peer teaching is undoubtedly one of the major advantages of group work. However, be cautious of overusing this model. Two false assumptions sometimes lie behind its use:

- **That the highest attaining learners are happy to be utilised this way**

The strongest in the group are still learners, not unpaid teaching assistants. They deserve to have their learning needs met as much as their peers. This means being stretched to learn more and not always spending their time helping others catch up with them.

- **That the highest attaining have the skills to assist their peers**

Just because they are the strongest with the subject does not mean they have the qualities to support others effectively. They are just as likely to dominate the group task and intimidate those unable to keep up with them.

- **Streaming**

Conversely, placing the strongest learners together in a group and the lowest attaining in another is a strategy underused by many teachers. It somehow ‘feels’ contrary to our instincts about fairness and equity. Nonetheless, it has important advantages:

- **Differentiation**

This arrangement allows you to differentiate for attainment through task design. Learners can work towards the same learning outcome, but through subtly different tasks. This allows you to support the lowest attaining and stretch the ‘high flyers’ without labelling learners since they need not be aware of your rationale for group and task allocation.

- **It saves time**

If you are likely to need to offer more detailed help to some learners it is best to have all of your potential audience in one group. This means you will only have to do this once instead of several times.

**Managing group work**

Things can still go wrong once you have got learners into their groups. The next phase of the lesson needs careful management.

- **Prepare them - give them some knowledge to work with**

At its worst group work involves learners getting together to share their ignorance. Idea storming,
for example, is a great way of gathering some initial thoughts around a topic, but it is generally best managed through a whole-class activity rather than break-out groups.

Learners will need some knowledge upon which to base their group discussion. This might come via a case study, an article, a data set or simply a list of facts. Preparing them through some brief teacher explanation and/or Q&A about the topic is normally advisable too.

- **Give them a focus**

Tasks which are too vague or too wide-ranging can also lead to unproductive group work. Instructions of the “Get together and talk about…” variety will not work. Instead, structure their discussions:

“List the advantages and disadvantages of…”
“Agree your three key arguments in favour of…”
“Decide the five main reasons for…”

- **Set a time limit and stick to it**

Good group work is often undone by letting it go on too long. It can start to drift with learners going off on a tangent or becoming bored. Give a two-minute warning before the end to create a final burst of productive activity.

- **Break down complex tasks into stages and take feedback after each stage**

Drift often results from an overly difficult task. Break complex tasks up into ‘bite-size’ chunks and take feedback after each stage. This allows you to check that everyone is on track. It also enables learners to integrate the ideas of other groups into their work on the next stage of the task.

It is also a good idea to provide a handout of written instructions for groups to refer to.

- **Check on each group’s progress by circulating around the room**

Make a quick initial observational sweep around each group to check they are on task. Later on use your observations to make tailored interventions – using inductive direct questioning to support learning.

- **Don’t interfere too early**

Unless you need to interfere make sure that the initial sweep is only observational. Have the confidence to step back and let the learners settle in to their task. Our anxiety to ‘help’ often means we interrupt a group before they have even had the chance to decide what they are meant to be doing!

- **Get to their level – don’t hover above them**

When you do intervene - bend or sit down so you can make good eye contact.

- **Prime them for feedback**

As you circulate and see particularly good ideas explicitly brief each group to feedback those ideas – this makes for a more focussed feedback session. It also rewards groups with praise – you will notice the enhanced pride with which they feed back those points for their peers.

**Managing Feedback**

Much of the learning from group work will be lost unless the teacher can effectively gather it together and recap during a summative plenary.

- **Sort feedback on the board as you receive it**

Often learning involves categorisation so try to avoid long unordered lists of ideas. Normally two categories are all that are required – for instance, pros and cons. Consider taking things a step further by asking the class to prioritise the ideas – which are the most and least important. Otherwise learners can ‘lose’ critical ideas in amongst a sea of minor points.

On other occasions you might use several ‘boxes’ for multiple categories. One interesting technique is to leave those boxes unlabelled so that the class are initially unclear what categories you are sorting their ideas into. You can set an open challenge for the class to try and identify the categories based on your sorting. This provokes thought and keeps them focussed during the feedback. Once the categories are revealed the learners making subsequent contributions should be challenged to place them in the correct category.

- **Always make an active choice about what you write on the board – don’t uncritically accept everything**

Your board work is recording the total learning from all the group work – it therefore needs to capture the best ideas. Don’t be afraid to act as a filter. Nonetheless, don’t reject or ignore contributions – instead, use inductive direct questioning to turn the ‘base metal’ of weaker contributions into gold.
Summary

- Explain the task clearly and use direct questioning to check on task understanding.
- Plan the room layout carefully – islands of desks are best, but avoid furniture moving during the class.
- If you use a u-shape arrangement avoid having groups in a line – move a few chairs to the centre and ensure learners can move to them with ease.
- Always actively choose the composition of groups. Consider mixing it up so that learners can collaborate with peers they rarely work with.
- Make use of peer teaching, but do not overuse the strategy of getting the strongest to help the lowest attaining.
- Consider streaming – putting the high flyers together and the lowest attaining together. Then differentiate for attainment by setting subtly different tasks.
- Prepare learners for group work with case studies, articles, data or facts.
- Structure their discussions with focussing questions. Avoid setting tasks which are too vague, wide-ranging or open-ended.
- Set a time limit for the task. Don’t let it drag on too long. Give learners a two-minute warning.
- Break down complex tasks into discrete stages and take feedback after each one.
- Circulate round to check on progress. Make an initial observational sweep, but unless it is essential do not interfere too early – let groups get into the task.
- Get to their eye level and use inductive questioning to make interventions. Praise the best ideas and prime groups to feed those points back.
- Always order the feedback you are collecting on the board. Consider challenging learners to identify the categories you are using to sort their ideas.
- Exercise quality control – don’t write up everything fed back by learners. However, don’t dismiss or ignore weaker contributions either – instead tease out better ones with inductive questioning.

What Ofsted say...

These quotes are taken from a recent report on a FE College in London East:

“In the more successful lessons, learning activities are varied and interesting. For example, in one very good business studies lesson, students engaged in an analysis of tourist destinations in the United Kingdom. They worked effectively in groups and presented their findings to the rest of the class.”

“In the better lessons, students work well in small groups. For example, in a good lesson adult students worked well in small groups drawing on their experience of a range of care settings to identify the importance of recording facts rather than emotions, and justifying their choice.”

“In the better lessons, students demonstrate good group work and problem solving skills, make presentations with confidence and demonstrate effective research skills, including good use of the Internet. For example, an NVQ student presented comprehensive findings relating to risk assessment for the prevention of pressure sores, noting the emotional as well as the physical aspects.”

Let us know what you think

If you wish to give any feedback, make a contribution yourself or have a suggestion for topics of future issues then please contact Kit Jillings, Assistant Director Teacher Training at Kit.Jillings@lewisham.ac.uk or ext. 3271.

In Issue ten...

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