Three Keys to Using Learning Groups Effectively
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Small group-based instructional methods can produce a wide variety of positive educational outcomes. These outcomes, however, only occur when instructors create conditions which motivate students to prepare for and engage in give-and-take discussions. Fortunately, by applying three fundamental principles, instructors can create these conditions in the vast majority of learning groups. These principles, referred to as “KEYS” in this essay, are: 1) promoting individual and group accountability, 2) using assignments that link and mutually reinforce individual work, group work, and total class discussions, and 3) adopting practices that stimulate give-and-take interaction within and between groups. Further, to obtain the best results from using small groups, instructors must observe these keys in managing each of three opportunities (shown as “3 boxes” in Figure 1) to engage students with course concepts: individual work, small group work, and total class discussion.

![Figure 1](image)

**Figure 1**
Engaging Students with Course Concepts

- Individual Work
- Small Group Discussion
- Total Class Discussion

= Impact on Learning

**KEY #1 – Promoting Ongoing Accountability**

If students fail to prepare for group work, group assignments are likely to force better students to “carry” their less willing and/or less able peers. Further, improperly managed small-group discussions are likely to degenerate into social events in which little if any learning occurs. Both problems can be avoided almost entirely. The key is using assignments and practices that hold individuals and groups accountable for their behavior.

**Individual accountability.** Instructors can use three quite different mechanisms to promote responsible individual behavior. The most basic mechanism is requiring students to complete preparatory individual assignments (especially graded ones) prior to group discussion (e.g., requiring students to turn in written concept summaries at the beginning of class on group assignment days). A second mechanism is using procedures or assignments that cause members to express their point of view during group discussions. For example, some instructors assign one member to make sure that everyone is asked to provide input. The third mechanism is to include peer evaluation in the grading system.

One very effective way to promote individual accountability is the Readiness Assurance Process in Team Based Learning (Michaelsen & Black, 1994). This process requires individuals to complete a test (typically true-false/multiple-choice) over a set of pre-assigned readings and turn in their answers. Next, students are directly accountable because the individual scores count as part of the course grade. Second, during the group test, each member is invariably asked to voice and defend his or her choice on every question. The resulting discussions produce immediate feedback that provides clear evidence of both the degree to which individual members have prepared, in advance, for the group work and the importance of obtaining input from everyone on all-important decisions. Third, members who fail to complete the assigned readings almost invariably receive a low peer evaluation.
Removing barriers to participation. Often, members of new groups are reluctant to speak out. One response to this problem is assigning roles within the group, e.g., recorder, summarizer, devil's advocate, etc. However, a more powerful approach is using permanent groups and assignments, practices, and a grading system that foster the development of group cohesion (Michaelson, Black & Fink, 1996). As groups become more cohesive, trust and support typically build to the point that even naturally quiet members are willing to engage in intense give-and-take interactions with little worry about being offensive or misunderstood (Watson, Michelsen & Sharp, 1991). As group members come to see their own success as tied to the success of their group, they are motivated to invest considerable personal energy into doing group work.

In-class group work. Interaction is also likely to be limited unless groups are allowed to do their work in class. In many cases, the cost of meeting outside of class is so great that students will meet just long enough to divide up the work. They will then complete the assignment individually and learn little from each other. Their output is group product in name only, and any cohesiveness developed during initial meeting is likely to be offset by a concern that other members might fail to do their part.

Creating diverse groups. Another way to expose students to new ideas is making sure that groups are relatively large (5-7 members) and as diverse as possible. Creating diverse groups involves two steps. The first is to identify the dimensions that make a difference in student performance in each specific course, e.g., majors, previous course work, relevant job experience, etc. The other is sorting members into groups so that member assets and liabilities are spread as evenly as possible across groups (Michaelson & Black, 1994).

Summary and Conclusions

By using assignments in each of the "3 Boxes" (see Figure 1) that are completed during class time and are characterized by the "4-S's" (Significant problems, Same problems, Specific choice, and Simultaneously reporting), instructors create conditions needed for effective learning groups. These conditions include: individual and group accountability, the need and opportunity for group interaction, and the motivation to engage in give-and-take discussion. In the vast majority of groups, the net result will be increased learning and high satisfaction for both students and instructors.

References


