

Teaching with Small Groups

No matter how large or small your class is, strategically breaking students into small groups will almost certainly have both operational and pedagogical benefits. Operationally, small groups can provide more intimate feedback for all students, create opportunities for assignments you wouldn't be able to sustain on an individual level, or allow a variety of tasks to be completed simultaneously. Pedagogically, effective small groups **foster participation** even from quiet students and even in large classes, allow students to work more deeply with content, and **build classroom community** through collaboration.

As you integrate group work into your classroom, bear in mind that small groups can be established for a single activity, one assignment, or the whole semester. Groups that will outlast a single class session will need more guidance and structure to prime them for success. You will need to support them in negotiating the myriad challenges of collaboration while also providing them room to develop their own solutions and stumble on insights.

Some ways to integrate small-group work effectively:

When employing informal small groups:

- Choose your moment carefully. You might start with times when students would benefit from practicing a skill, applying a concept, or discussing a text.
- Prime students for any share-out. If you'll be asking group representatives to share with the class, prepare them for it before their work commences.
- Be clear about group objectives. Unless your goal is truly a free-ranging discussion, explicitly direct students toward a deliverable outcome.
- Move the room to answer questions, check for understanding, and keep groups engaged.

When implementing more formal groups:

- Explicitly state your rationale for collaboration and your criteria for success as a team.
- Students left to create their own groups will do so based on existing affinities. For more diverse, inclusive teams, construct them yourself. Avoid isolating more vulnerable students by ensuring groups do not, for example, feature three men and one woman. Contain groups to no more than five students.
- Assign, or let students select, specific project management roles (group emailer, meeting scheduler, PowerPoint aggregator) to ensure equitable labor distribution.
- **Scaffold** the assignment such that you're regularly checking in with groups' progress (by, for example, establishing milestones, reviewing drafting, or scheduling in-class group time).

References

- Bean, John. C. *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001.
- Bruffee, Kenneth. *Collaborative Learning: Higher Education, Interdependence, and the Authority of Knowledge*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993.
- Stanford University Center for Teaching and Learning. "Students Working in Small Groups." *Speaking of Teaching*, vol. 10, no. 2, 1999.

See also

- Inclusive Pedagogy
- Peer Review
- Scaffolding Student Learning