

Why and How to Teach with Small Group Discussion

Julia Bursten

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1 Overview

Small group activities are a great way to engage students in your course, by providing them with opportunities to practice the skills you would like them to develop and “learn by doing.” Small group activities with learning objectives in mind can prove highly effective for your students’ learning, while activities implemented without targeting them toward specific objectives can be ineffective. This handout provides some recommendations for designing small group activities with learning objectives in mind, while introducing you to a number of possible configurations of small group activities. It also provides recommendations for managing small group activities, including how best to deliver initial instruction, provide real-time feedback, and reintegrate small groups into the larger class.

2 What is Small-Group Work?

- Any activity where students work with each other to solve a problem, analyze a text, construct an argument, etc.
- Groups are best at 4-6 students each
- Students carry out an assignment designed in alignment with course and lesson objectives
- Opportunity for students to take ownership over their own learning experience
- Opportunity to assess students’ understanding of the material
- Opportunity to assess student participation
- Opportunity for students to improve communication skills and practice using course material

3 What Isn't Small-Group Work?

- Time to eat lunch/check Facebook in the classroom
- A way to get students to do your job for you
- A freeform conversation about whatever is on your students' minds

4 What Makes a Successful Small Group Assignment?

- **Prompt design:** A question or set of questions that is open-ended and interesting enough to keep students on topic while giving them room to develop their own reactions and critical thinking skills. Yes-or-no questions are bad; why- and how-questions are good.
- **Group selection:** Over the course of a semester, students will become comfortable and less engaged if they are always in the same groups. Switch it up by changing the way groups are assigned.
- **Instructor participation:** Whether it is by joining one group, listening in on all groups in turn, or some other form of keeping yourself engaged, the small group discussion is a time for the instructor to check in instead of checking out.
- **Time management:** Yours and theirs. Make it clear that students will have to produce something at the end of their discussion, whether it is individual writing assignments, responses in a large group, a solution to a problem, or a list of opinions. This will help to keep them on task. Watch your own clock so the discussion doesn't take up the entire class time, and leave room for . . .
- **Review and reflection:** Tell the class what you heard from their discussions; what was valuable and what other groups were saying to each other. Let them reflect on what they learned by talking to each other.

5 When to use Small Groups

Small group work can be used across a wide variety of course types and levels. Whether or not a group activity is successful has less to do with the content of the course material being used and more to do with how the assignment has been designed.

6 Small-Group Assignments: Basics

6.1 Design

- Identify course content that will serve as the basis of group-work: homework assignment, lecture material, exam review, etc.
- Develop a prompt. How do you want students to engage with the material? Give them a goal to work toward: explain the steps needed to solve this homework problem, decide which historical event had the most influence on contemporary society and explain why, say in your own words what the author meant in this passage, create a reasonable defense of this political view, etc.
- Figure out how to deliver the prompt: Powerpoint, writing on the board, passing out slips of paper—this one is especially good when you want to give different groups different prompts

6.2 Implement

- Make the assignment clear: use essential, active language. Have the prompt written down somewhere (Blackboard, slides, sheets of paper handed to students).
- Make the groups: Tell them to get into groups of 4-5, assign numbers and have them count off, etc. Encourage them to get up out of their seats and move into their groups
- Tell them how long they have: 5 minutes, 15? Give a 1-2 minute warning
- Give them space to figure out how to work together: step back, don't make eye contact for 1-2 minutes until they settle in and engage with each other
- After groups have started working, walk around to different groups and check in on them. Listen. You might not say a word the whole time, or you might offer suggestions. Note good points and bring them up with the whole class later.
- Carry out your plan for transitioning out of group work

6.3 Advanced Discussion Design Ideas

- Assigning groups/switching groups midway through a discussion
- Getting groups to build a problem-solution together by assigning each group to a different solution step
- Group lecturing: Getting groups to explain problem-solutions to the class, with or without board work

- Groupwork over multiple classes/sessions—building projects together
- Complicating group dynamics—getting groups to defend positions against one another

7 Tips for Increasing Participation

- Show interest: Check in, don't check out
 - Make eye contact
 - ACTUALLY GET INTERESTED—if you take nothing else away from this handout, take away this message: the easiest way to convince students that you are interested in what they have to say is to be interested in what they have to say.
 - Get down on their level, physically
 - Repeat what they are saying back to them, to let them know you heard them
 - Write what they are saying on the board
 - Create and hold safe space for them to talk
- Share the burden of participation around the group—refer to initial activity, having someone else read the written story so students aren't reading their own words aloud
- Learn names. Call on them. You can have a roster, you can point to students. When you ask for participation from someone who doesn't normally talk, it's more important than ever to give them a safe space to speak up—ask them questions that don't have wrong answers, make eye contact, make it clear that you really want to know what they have to say.
- Use this sparingly: Be wrong sometimes. Call yourself out on it. Let your students see that you are human, that you don't always have all the answers, that you need their help sometimes—this puts more of the responsibility for the class on them. Example: So when Columbus landed in America in 1508—wait, that's not right. When did Columbus land?
- Shut the F*** up: Silence always feels longer than it is. It is always uncomfortable. With practice, it will be more uncomfortable for your students than for you, and someone will eventually say something to make it end. Try not to let that person be you.