**Best Practice with Small Groups**

Students usually like small groups, and there are lots of good pedagogical reasons for using them. As we all know, however, they can also lead to problems of accountability and staying on track.

What are key things we need to keep in mind to make small groups efficient and effective? How can we insure that students stay on track, how do we minimize the free rider problem, how do we grade small group work fairly, what is the best practice for small group projects? Bring your questions and ideas and join the conversation with Ken Jones (LES, Common Curriculum, History).

You have three opportunities to join this conversation: February 10 at **4:10 pm\*** in Gorecki 204A, February 11 at 8:10 am in Sexton 200, and February 15 at 1 pm in the TRC Board Room.

Benefits of using small groups

Pass out handout

What are the problems? How do we make sure that small groups are efficient in terms of precious classroom time, and effective in promoting learning?

Open it up –

Get audience to offer solutions

Push our own ideas where necessary

Areas –

Getting started

Providing a task

Faculty role

When/how much

Ending and moving on

Grading

Group projects

**Getting Started**

Size – 4

If not, then 3 rather than 5

First day

Number off

Permanent or rotating

Change with unit

Manipulate groupings after first round

Roles

I don’t assign – just explain value

Everyone has to be ready to explain group conclusion

I can call on anyone to present

**Providing a task**

NOT – “talk about what you read” or “what is x’s thesis”

Key faculty role – creating a question

Two aspects

#1 -- Needs to focus attention on key idea for the day

What you see as central

#2 – needs to be something debatable from readings

Capable of generating conversation – not finding specific answers

Problems to solve, decisions to make

Best if multiple perspectives possible

Could be case study

Group of problems that get at central concept

Jigsaw with different readings

Paper/test question

Provide question during previous class

Focus for reading/thought outside class

**Accountability**

For faculty

MUST use act in way that shows group work matters

If we have them do small group work, and then don’t tie it to class, they will quickly realize there is no point to small group work

For students

MUST have results that matter – a “product” to share

At end of small group time, call on group for answer (quietest person)

Then explain why answer differs from another group

Or have group put conclusion on board with supporting evidence

Or do grammar in FYS

Or do math proof or explain chemical reaction

Or put answer and evidence on transparency

Or drawing and presentation

Or role plays, debates, team competitions

Can also promote individual accountability/preparation by

Pre-discussion paper

In class writing before small group

M-C quiz that raises key points in question for day

Grade individually

Group grade also possible

Another option (Neil Williams, National Teaching and Learning Forum, 2004)

Starts class with quiz on key ideas/concept from last class

Students work in pairs or three to answer quiz

Class begins with review of quiz answers

Each member of small group gets same grade for quiz

Drops three lowest grades; quizzes count for 10-15% of grade

**When/how much**

I use in about 2/3rds – 3/4s of classes

Not every day

Small groups take time, gain understanding but cuts into time for

moving deeper into material

Need to develop ability to speak without small group prep

Illusion of variety

BEFORE we talk about the topic

Make them work first

Go as far as they can in understanding reading, solving problem, etc

Then use what they did to move further

“Before I get involved” usually means at the beginning of class – but not

always

Can start in small group, work on task in large group and then go back

To examine conclusions in light of new evidence

To dig for evidence on point where large group stuck

To reflect on new question

**Faculty engagement**

Do NOT leave room or stand at desk

Move fairly quickly from group to group

2-3 minutes at most

Number of rotations depends on task

LISTEN

Try not to speak – help them keep focus on group conversation

Don’t hover above – get down with group

Don’t talk unless group has “finished” with superficial answer

Bombshell and leave - pick up in large group

Moving quickly and listening helps increase focus on task

**Ending and Moving On**

Small groups important, but only small portion of class time

Depends on task, but typically 10—15 minutes

Less time than they need

Announce one minute left when one or two groups done

Don’t wait for last

Helps focus them on task

No time to waste

Get report/response from every group

If omit one, lowers incentive to get prepared

Can have each report – put answers on board, use for subsequent

discussion

Or call on one or two and then ask others to respond

**Grading**

Have to attach some visible grade to send message small groups matter

Small group as part of participation grade

Actions on given day not significant, but cumulative is

Other parts –

large group contributions

Various small writing assignments

Pre-discussion papers or short in-class writing on question

Determining grade

Observation

Engagement, quality, who has materials out

Record in office after class

Peer evaluation

Pass out form, explain early

Eliminates some bad behavior before it can happen

Other forms much more elaborate

List a number of important small group behaviors and

ask for evaluation on each  
How do you prepare

Do you and others do readings before class

How do you participate

Describe role you play. How would you like to change it

**Grading Group projects**

My experience – primarily for group presentations

Judge each individual’s public portion – role in presentation

Require written assessment of what members did

What the respondent did

And each of the other members of the group

Require bibliography listing what the individual used

And/or individual paper that covers their contribution

Give group grade and individual grade; latter carries more weight

Or individual grade and assign some pre-determined number of bonus points

to group members based on quality of overall work

Diane

What percentage of the group grade do you think you deserve

How many times did group meet

How did you contribute

What did you like about project

How could your group improve project

Scoring rubric for each member

Attitude toward project

Attitude toward group

Verbal participation

Willingness to help

Accepted responsibility

Followed through

Cooperated with others

Mano Singham (Physics)

Group project

Each group decides twice in semester how to allocate group points

Divide set number –

Have to do by consensus

All have to sign sheet

Not a big fan of group paper assignments

Either one person does writing

Or get separate sections stapled together