**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