



Deciding Whether To Use Group Work

As with every classroom activity, there are pros and cons. When it comes to group work, asking ourselves the following four overarching questions can help us decide whether or not group work is the best option.

1. Rationale

Does it 'make sense' to use group work?

It can be tempting, especially when we have a large class of students, to consider using group work as a way of reducing our instructional load (e.g., fewer assignments to grade).

Unfortunately, if the task itself is not a natural 'fit' for group work, this approach can quickly backfire and land us with MORE and not less to do (e.g., increased student questions or conflict due to resistance to completing a task that might be easier to do alone).



2. Learning Outcomes

Will engaging students in group work facilitate them successfully meeting the learning outcome(s)?

If the best option for task completion IS group work, we then need to make sure that the activity facilitates students meeting the learning outcome on which we are focusing. Keeping learning outcomes front and centre helps us decide on the best way to engage students.

- **Group work is a good option** if we are wanting students to develop skills in collaboration, practice intercultural communication skills and work on solving a complex problem that would benefit from multiple perspectives to meet the learning outcome
- **Group work is not a good option** if we want students to develop more individual skills or solve a simple problem they could do on their own just as easily to meet the learning outcome



3. Complexity of Task

Is the task for the proposed group work sufficiently complex to warrant students needing to work together to complete it?



Simple tasks may not need diverse and / or multiple perspectives for successful completion.

Complex problems benefit from a diversity of perspectives because they lead to greater creativity.

We can also:

- help students get used to working with each other, particularly if it is early on in a course, it can be useful to facilitate shorter less complex group activities, while students get comfortable with both the course content and each other. This also gives us the chance to get to know our students, discover their strengths and interests, and use that information to inform our choice of which students will work together to complete the more complex projects, particularly if they are going to be assessed
- keep in mind that the higher the grade assigned for an activity the more anxious students are likely to be about their grade. An unintended consequence might be group conflict due to student stress regarding how their individual final course grade may be impacted by the work (or sometimes lack of) of their peers in an assessed group activity

4. Collaboration or Cooperation

How are students going to work together?

We need to know whether collaboration or cooperation best suits the activity BEFORE we start, so we can make it clear to students, how we are expecting them to complete the activity.



- **collaboration** – students work together for the entire process of the activity
- **cooperation** - each student completes an individual task, the results of which they bring back to their group, then everyone works together to create a final product or to achieve a final goal

To get the most out of group work, students need to understand the ‘process’ as well as the ‘end product’ of the activity. Both collaboration and cooperation have their benefits, depending on the task, and can be leveraged to create a meaningful learning experience that facilitates students meeting the learning outcomes.

For more resources on facilitating effective group work, check out the [Teach Anywhere Site](#)

References & Resources

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