

QUICK TIP: Making Group Work Work

Many of us have bad memories of small group learning or what is now called team-based, collaborative, or cooperative learning. We regarded it as a waste of time. We were convinced that a few team members did all the work, while others received equal credit.

But done properly, collaborative learning is a highly effective way to actively involve students in their own learning. It's a useful way to get shy or withdrawn students to participate and for more knowledgeable students to help others.

The 7 Rules of Successful Group Work

Rule 1: Group work can't be busy work

Group work needs to be meaningful. It must help the students' master content, hone skills, and be directly connected to your course's learning objectives. Make sure that your students understand your rationale for a particular small group activity and whether and how it will be graded.

Rule 2: The task must be clear

Structure group work around a problem to solve, an argument to devise, or a project to complete.

- a. Make sure the task is specific: "Decide," "List," "Prioritize," "Solve," "Choose," "Defend" ("Discuss" is too ambiguous).
- b. Make sure the groups know the outcome you expect: This might involve reporting their conclusions or making an argument or generating a list of questions
- c. Set a time limit: Too little is better than too much.

Rule 3: Students must feel a stake in the activity

If the object of the small group is to solve a problem or devise an argument, ask the students to write down their ideas BEFORE the group meets.

Rule 4: Groups need to be small

Groups should consist of no more than five or six students.

Rule 5: Group members' roles need to be clearly defined

Consider designating roles in advance, such as:

- The problem poser
- The analyst
- The devil's advocate (who challenges the analyst)
- The detective (who searches for unacknowledged biases and unsupported assumptions)
- The umpire

Rule 6: Debrief each group

Provide closure: Call on students individually to report on the groups' conclusions. Then, weave together all the students' comments and ideas.

Rule 7: Give each student the opportunity to self-evaluate

Consider asking the students to comment in writing on the groups' effectiveness and dynamics.

QUICK TIP: Teaching Your Students the Secrets of Effective Reading

Secret 1. With works of non-fiction, read from the outside in.

1. Start with the title. What does it suggest about the book's argument?
2. Look at the table of contents. How is the book organized?
3. Read the introduction and conclusion. What is the book's thesis and its place in a disciplinary debate?
4. Read chapters' first and last paragraphs, and then the topic sentences. What are the chapters' major themes and arguments?

Secret 2. Ask What? Why? Where?

1. What is the book's controlling argument?
2. Why is the author making this argument? To challenge a rival interpretation? To advance a political agenda?
3. Where is the argument weak or unconvincing?

Secret 3. With works of literature, read the text from multiple perspectives:

- a. The aesthetic:** How does the author use language, style, tone, and characterization to engage and manipulate the reader?
- b. Read between the lines:** What subtexts, deeper meanings, allusions, and symbolism do you see?
- c. The "human condition":** What does the text tell us about the human condition: about human nature or love or families or growing up?
- d. The "politics of literature":** What political or ideological beliefs, values, and ideas underlie the text?
- e. Cultural criticism:** What assumptions does the text make about femininity or masculinity, whiteness or blackness, civilization or nature, race or class? Does the text support the dominant views of its time or subvert them?
- f. Reader response:** How might different readers—male, female, African American, Latino, working-class, gay or lesbian—read and experience the text?
- g. The ethical:** What are the moral implications of the ideas advanced in the texts.

TEACHING TIP: Answering Teaching Related Questions in a Job Interview

Most of the teaching questions you receive in an academic job interview are predictable. How would you teach the introductory course? How about an upper division undergraduate course? If you could teach any course you'd like, what would it be? What books would you assign?

Here are some thoughts about other questions you might be asked.

1. At Columbia, you have taught well-prepared traditional students in a residential college setting. How would you adjust to teaching non-traditional students?

Non-traditional students often bring real-world skills, knowledge, and experience to the classroom. Think about how you might capitalize on that.

Non-traditional students need to know why something is important to know. They are in the classroom because they want to be there. But they lead busy lives and have many competing demands on their time. You'll need to explain why a topic is significant.

Non-traditional students tend to be more self directed than traditional students. They are sometimes more sensitive to perceived slights, and hate being condescended to.

2. How do you integrate writing into your courses?

Many institutions have embraced "writing across the curriculum." You might consider requiring students to keep a journal. Or you might ask them, even in a math class, to explain a concept or topic in writing. Or you might have the students analyze a newspaper or magazine article.

3. How do you use technology into your teaching?

Apart from the most common applications -- such as PowerPoint or discussion boards -- consider other innovative ways to use technology, for example, having your students create a virtual museum or an electronic encyclopedia or asking them to annotate a play or a text. You might also have students create digital stories (mini movies).

4. What is your teaching philosophy?

One way to answer this question is to identify your overarching objectives as a teacher. Some are obvious: to make sure your students learn concepts and skills basic to your discipline or to encourage them to cultivate an interest in biology or French or history.

But you might have other objectives: to overturn certain widely held misconceptions; to instill your discipline's habits of thought; or to get them to think clearly and logically about certain questions.

Then think about how you motivate your students to meet these goals. Do you bring "real world" examples into your classroom? Or make use of audio-visual materials or simulations? How about role playing exercises or debates or small group activities?

And finally, consider the benchmarks you use to assess whether students are fulfilling your expectations. Are there special "capstone" projects that you ask your students to undertake?

QUICK TIP: Ensuring Students Come to Class Well Prepared

Consider requiring a think piece to be submitted prior to class. Examples include:

1. A reading abstract: A succinct summary of a required reading.
2. A reading annotation: A brief evaluation of an articles' strengths and weaknesses
3. A response paper: A reaction to specific elements in a reading: the effectiveness of the argument, the quality of the data, and the validity of the research design
4. A position paper: A student's point of view on an issue
5. A discussion starter: A key issue or questions raised by the readings
6. A reading evaluation: An assessment of a newspaper or journal article's accuracy, use of evidence, and conclusions.

Each of these papers will ensure that students have read and thought critically about the course material.

Warning: Be explicit about what you want the students to do. Provide the students with a sample. Identify the issues that they need to cover.

How To Respond to a Think Piece

1. Say something positive.
 - Has the student identified a key issue raised by the reading?
 - Has the student accurately summarized a particular reading's argument?
 - Does the student demonstrate understanding of a particular concept or theory?
2. Say how it might be strengthened.
 - How might the analysis be made clearer?
 - Is there a relevant issue that wasn't addressed?
 - Is there an ambiguity or contradiction in the student's argument?
 - Has the student failed to take a position on the argument?

QUICK TIP: The 7 Secrets of a Successful First Class

1. Use an icebreaker to get to know your students
 - Divide the students into pairs and have them introduce one another.
 - Have students write down two adjectives describing themselves.
 - Ask students to describe something they alone have done.
 - Ask students why they are taking the class.
2. Explain why your subject -- and your section -- is important.
3. Provide essential course details.
4. Get students to describe their prior knowledge and expectations.
5. Learn the students' names ASAP.
 - Nothing is more important in establishing rapport and a sense of community.
6. Establish your identity and expectations.
 - You need to establish your credibility in the first class session.
7. Jump in head first.
 - Make sure your first class is substantive.

QUICK TIP: Fair and Efficient Grading

Many students complain that grading is arbitrary, inconsistent, and unfair. Having clear criteria not only saves you time when grading, but it also helps to make the grading process more consistent, enables you to explain very clearly to students both what you expect from them and what they can expect from you, and helps students to understand why you have given them a certain grade and how their work might be improved.

Rubrics clearly spell out the criteria used for grading. Here is a sample set of criteria used in grading essays and classroom participation.

Clarity, Strength, and Development of the Essay's Argument

- Is the argument clearly and compellingly stated?
- Is the analysis original and sophisticated?
- Is the argument well substantiated?
- Is the argument well developed?

Use and Interpretation of Evidence

- How accurate and thorough is the student's research?
- Is the evidence sufficient to support the essay's argument and is it accurately interpreted?

Application of Course Lectures and Readings

- Does the essay demonstrate a solid command of the course's themes and readings?
- Does the essay accurately define and use key course concepts?
- Does the essay situate its argument within a broader disciplinary context?

Quality of the Writing

- Clarity of expression: is the expression of ideas clear?
- Persuasiveness of the argumentation: How persuasive is the argument?
- Whether the essay's structure is clear and logical: Is the essay's structure clear and logical?

Organization and Mechanics

- Clear organization: introduction, transition sentences to connect major ideas, and conclusion
- Proper grammar and punctuation, accurate word choice, and correct spelling
- Use and integration of quotations
- Proper citation of scholarly ideas

Grading Class Participation

Establish clear criteria and let the students know what they are. For example:

0 Absent.

1 Present, not disruptive.

- Tries to respond when called on but does not offer much.
- Demonstrates very infrequent involvement in discussion.
- Often unprepared

2 Demonstrates adequate preparation: knows basic reading and lecture materials, but does not show evidence of trying to interpret or analyze them.

- Offers straightforward information (e.g., straight from the lecture or reading), without elaboration or very infrequently (perhaps once a class).
- Does not offer to contribute to discussion, but contributes to a moderate degree when called on.
- Demonstrates sporadic involvement.

3 Demonstrates good preparation: knows the reading or lecture material well, has thought through implications of them.

- Offers interpretations and analysis of case material (more than just facts) to class.

- Contributes well to discussion in an ongoing way: responds to other students' points, thinks through own points, questions others in a constructive way, offers and supports suggestions that may be counter to the majority opinion.
- Demonstrates consistent ongoing involvement.

4 Demonstrates excellent preparation: has analyzed the topic exceptionally well, relating it to readings and other material (e.g., lectures, readings, course material, discussions, etc.).

- Offers analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of case material, e.g., puts together pieces of the discussion to develop new approaches that take the class further.
- Contributes in a very significant way to ongoing discussion: keeps analysis focused, responds very thoughtfully to other students' comments, contributes to the cooperative argument-building, suggests alternative ways of approaching material and helps class analyze which approaches are appropriate, etc.
- Demonstrates ongoing very active involvement.

QUICK TIP: Ending the Semester on a Positive Note

The end of the semester is a stressful, exhausting, and poignant time. Some suffer from the end of semester blues. It's also a time of some sadness, as the intellectual community that you've constructed comes to an end.

Help Your Students Vanquish Stress

- Consider a “stressbuster” event—such as bringing refreshments to class—and ask your students how they handle end-of-semester stress
- Make sure that your students understand what they need to do to prepare for the end of the semester.

Have a “Capstone” Experience

- For example, consider having present their research.

Reviewing for the Final Exam

Make sure your students are on track. Help struggling student find focus and direction.

- Be learner friendly.

Highlight what students need to know in order to be successful.

- Share your grading criteria.

Show students examples of strong and weak answers.

- Model appropriate test taking strategies.

Discuss such matters as pacing, prioritizing, and time management.

Build Reflection into Your Final Class Sessions

An undervalued process that often gets lost in the end of the semester rush is reflection: The opportunity to think critically about the course, question concepts, draw conclusions, and synthesize. Yet it is during reflection that deep learning occurs.

Return to the syllabus and have the students review the course's learning objectives and consider how well they have achieved them. Here are some questions you might ask:

- Has your approach to ... changed during this course? If yes how?
- . Have your attitudes about changed?
- . How do you feel you performed in this class?
- What would you do differently if you took the class again?
- What suggestions do you have for improving the class?

Saying Goodbye

The end of the semester is a time of transition for both you and your students. You will often feel a sense of loss as your class draws to a close, as if your students' 15 week visit is ending too soon. Your students will too.

- Don't be afraid to offer your students some parting thoughts.
- Make it clear that your connection with the students will persist after the class is over.
- Consider establishing some end of semester rituals

QUICK TIP: Responding to Response Papers

Many of us ask our students to write response papers, reacting critically to an assigned reading, prior to a class discussion.

A response paper is a great way to ensure that your students have thought seriously and creatively about the reading. It also helps them learn how to express their ideas succinctly and analytically. And these papers can help you generate topics to discuss in class.

How, then, can you respond to these papers in a way that is helpful but not burdensome for you? Here's some practical advice.

1. Make sure that the students know what you expect.

Tell them at the outset: A response paper is not a summary. Nor is it simply an expression of students' feelings or emotional response.

Rather it addresses a problem raised by the text or a particular passage within a text. And it presents a reasoned argument supported with specific evidence.

A response paper might assess the strengths and weaknesses of the text's argument and counterarguments that might be advanced. Or it might ask how a particular text's arguments compare or contrast with other related texts. Or it might explore how a writer is able to elicit a particular emotional response.

2. Read like an ordinary reader.

Did the paper provoke you? surprise you? Then ask why.

3. In your comments, enter into a conversation with the student.

-- Start with something positive: E.g., "You identify an important issue..."

-- Rather than simply being corrective (marking all errors in red) or directive (telling students to rewrite a sentence or move a paragraph), be facilitative.

4. Consider phrasing your suggestions as questions, in order to make the student responsible for improving the argument and writing.

QUICK TIP: How to Write Successful Recommendations

It's the time of year when undergrads will ask for letters of recommendation. Here's how to write letters that will make a difference.

1. Specificity matters:

The more information about the student you can provide, the better. Make sure that the student provides you with detailed information about papers, grades, outside activities, relevant experiences, and awards.

2. Be wary of exaggerated praise:

Credibility counts. Readers discount letters that are over the top. Undue praise is regarded as insincere. Speak in terms of specific accomplishments and skills.

3. Don't be excessively brief:

One way that readers evaluate recommendation is by the level of detail.

4. Touch all the bases:

Academic performance is central, but don't ignore the student's initiative, reliability, ability to work with others, and ability to work independently.

The "Formula":

1. Say that it is a pleasure to write on the student's behalf and why.
2. Describe your relationship with the student. How did you meet the student? How long have you known the student? Is your relationship exclusively professional?
3. Say something about the course: how demanding it is, the caliber of the students, the number of assignments, etc.
4. Describe yourself and your qualifications to evaluate the student.
5. In successive paragraphs, describe the student's:
 - a. intellectual characteristics
 - b. command of the subject matter
 - c. ability to communicate orally and in writing
 - d. industry and self-discipline
 - e. maturity (including the ability to accept constructive criticism)
 - f. interpersonal skills
 - g. achievements and extra-curricular activities
 - h. potential

6. Conclude with an overall assessment, one which doesn't simply repeat what you said earlier. Also, state that you draw these conclusions without qualification, and that if there are any questions, you'd be happy to respond.