

Group Work Pt 1: Strategic Grouping

Below you will find 4 ways to create collaborative student groups, as well as when to use each one, and how to overcome the challenges associated with each.

Random Groups:

Random grouping is best for fast-paced activities that last less than 20 minutes and/or in which students may be switching partners multiple times. Random grouping can help get students out of a self-selected partner-rut and also grow relationships with other peers.



PROBLEM:

Random groups can accidentally lead to difficult personalities being grouped together and/or unbalanced ability groupings.

SOLUTION:

Randomly assign pairs or partners and then strategically put two pairs together to form a group of 4. In this way you retain a small amount of control over the end result and can try to keep the groups more balanced.

TIPS:

- ▶ Pass out playing cards and have students partner up with their card partners (ex: all the 9s together, all the Kings together, etc). You'll want to reduce the deck down to just the right number to fit your class size. Got an odd number? Take out one card from several number groups so that some groups will only have 3 cards and 3 people (ex. Take out the 2 of hearts but leave the 2 of spades, 2 of diamonds, and 2 of clubs).
- ▶ You can also use images to create random groups. Take some picture postcards or laminated headshots of famous people (or of staff!) and cut each one into what looks like 4 puzzle pieces. Hand out the pieces randomly and have students reform their puzzle to create their group. With a little sleight of hand you can ensure that certain students do not end up in the same group as you pass out the pieces.

Strategic Grouping

Self-Chosen Groups:



While some teachers shudder at the thought of letting students choose their own groups, it can be an effective management technique. Allowing students to choose their own groups increases student buy-in and motivation. It also helps students learn responsibility and accountability. If their group receives a less than ideal grade because not everyone in the group pulled their weight, they cannot complain. After all, it was their choice.

<p>PROBLEM #1:</p> <p>Self-selected groups can lead to certain students being left out. This may exacerbate feelings of anxiety and/or low-self worth.</p>	<p>SOLUTION #1:</p> <p>The first time you do self-selected groups, allow certain kids to work by themselves. For example, let's say you have a student, Casey, who either prefers to work alone or generally gets isolated. Let Casey work alone on this first project, but check in with them privately and ask them to tell you the names of 3-4 kids they would be comfortable working with on a future group task. Before the next self-chosen group project is assigned, ask one of the kids that Casey identified to ask Casey to join their group for the next project. After the group work is completed, check in with Casey about how it went, help them problem solve any issues that arose, and ask them if they would like to be in a group or work by themselves for the next project.</p>
<p>PROBLEM #2:</p> <p>Students choose their friends to group with, then spend most of their time socializing and end up getting little done.</p>	<p>SOLUTION #2:</p> <p>If some students choose their friends and get little done, let them know that they will have one more opportunity to self-select their friends, but if they again get little done they will not be allowed to work together in a group anymore. Or, break the project into small steps with explicit deadlines to complete each step. If a group does not successfully complete the first step by the first deadline, let them know that if they miss the next deadline they will be broken up and each one will have to complete a project on their own.</p>

TIPS:

- ▶ Start small when introducing self-chosen groups, using a short-lived activity.
- ▶ Let the class know that you're giving them the opportunity to prove that they're responsible enough to earn a new privilege. Make your expectations clear *before* starting the activity, then debrief afterward, offering both praise and suggestions for improvement.

Strategic Grouping

Heterogenous (Mixed-Ability) Groups:

Heterogeneous grouping is the grouping of students of varying skill levels together. This kind of grouping is championed by most teachers because kids get to learn from each other. High performing students can support their less academic peers. Creative students can support their less artistic peers. Extroverts can support their introverted peers, and vice versa. In addition, students learn to work with various types of people, rather than always working with students like themselves, with similar abilities or personalities.

PROBLEM:

Bringing varied skills to the group can be problematic in that struggling students may feel intimidated by their higher level peers, and high performing students may feel put upon if their group mates rely on them to do all the work.

SOLUTION:

Clearly define roles for each person in the group and have each person be accountable for their own role. In addition, choose rigorous roles for each person and make sure they can all be done simultaneously, rather than roles that allow certain students to disengage for much of the time and/or avoid academic work. For example, the role of “reader” during group work allows a student to read a passage to their group and then disengage for the rest of the time. Likewise, the role of “presenter” allows a student to disengage until all the work is done and then just share the work that others completed. To learn more about “rigorous, simultaneous group roles,” and about “group grading and accountability,” stay tuned for the second and third installments in our group work series!

TIP: Task- or project-based classroom experiences lend themselves well to heterogeneous grouping, as projects tend to benefit from participants with different thinking styles.



Strategic Grouping

Homogeneous (Ability-Alike) Groups:



Homogeneous grouping is the grouping of students with similar skill levels. Educators, especially those teaching middle and high school, sometimes shy away from this kind of grouping because it feels like “tracking,” seems to give an unfair advantage to advanced students, or seems like it sets struggling students up for failure. In fact, none of these are the case when homogeneous grouping is used correctly. In cases of content review or exploration, homogeneous grouping can actually encourage participation and reduce resentment.

ADVANTAGE #1:

High performing students have the opportunity to really thrive. Advanced students appreciate not having to “carry” their lower ability peers, and often push each other to even greater achievement when working together in groups. Teachers often report being “thanked” by their high-ability students when they are allowed to work together occasionally.

ADVANTAGE #2:

Struggling students have the opportunity to deeply engage. Low performing students tend to participate more when grouped with ability-alike peers because they do not feel like they are the “slow” members of their group. Teachers frequently report seeing new leadership skills and creativity from their lower-performing students when grouped with ability peers.

ADVANTAGE #3:

Teachers can more easily differentiate the activity/project. Homogeneous grouping allows teachers to appropriately modify the task for lower ability groups. It also frees teachers up to work in a more focused and concentrated way with their students who need the most support.