

9 Learning in small groups

This can take place for a variety of purposes. Small group discussion was introduced at the end of section 6, but small groups can also be used for learning through activities (e.g. constructing something together, composing and playing music, improvised drama) and enquiry / research (see following sections).

There are many possibilities, but these few below should help teachers extend their repertoire, and help observers consider a broad set of alternatives.

These procedures, easily learned by pupils, contribute to the development of a shared understanding while ensuring that pupils are active in their search for information. The activities in each group then contributes to a shared understanding across the class.

Organising lessons in this way takes more initial preparation, but enables the teacher to relax more and relate to pupils individually during the activity. It can also enable better use of scarce resources, e.g. if there is only one copy of a reference book, photograph or tool.

Two points must be emphasized from the research on working in groups:

- 1) Sitting at the same table but doing separate work isn't enough. Effective use of groups involves either working together on the same task and outcome, or each member of the group making a separate contribution to a shared outcome. (Galton and Williamson 1992 call the first 'collaborative' and the second 'cooperative'.)
- 2) Although grouping by 'ability' is helpful for some learning, mixed groups enable weaker learners to learn from more advanced peers, while the latter can benefit from opportunities to explain to others or show leadership in a task.

Evaluation

Issues for teachers' strengthening their planning and repertoire, and for beginner teachers observing others or planning lessons, include:

- the optimal choice of activity to suit the learning purpose
- encouraging maximum involvement of all pupils
- developing greater initiative and autonomy
- pupils contributing to each other's understanding
- a supportive atmosphere in each group
- a sense of satisfaction and achievement, through solving problems, presentation to an audience, etc.

Learning stations

Instead of all pupils carrying out the same activity at the same time, instructions and resources are placed on different tables around the room. Pupils start at different stations and move on to the next. There may also be optional stations for pupils who cover the basic stations most quickly or who need more practice.

Learning stations are especially useful when new content needs to be learnt but quite independently, requiring individuals to think their own way through a problem ; or they can present a way of practising and consolidating what has already been covered.

This approach can also help pupils see the coherence and complexity of a broad issue, e.g. the importance of clean drinking water for life, energy in the future, the range of styles in modern art, the various consequences of the conquest ('discovery') of America.

Stations can also provide alternative approaches to learning a difficult point of theory, drawing on the theory of 'multiple intelligences'.

Stations can also involve activities which contribute to a collective product, e.g. an exhibition of pictures, an anthology of writing.

The stations can be the middle stage of three in a lesson or sequence of lessons, i.e. preceded by initial stimulus and discussion, and followed by pupil presentations and discussions.

Observers should consider both the suggested pedagogical aims (above) and the organizational issues (below).

Some advantages

- 1 Pupils can work in their own way and at their own pace, within the overall parameters allowed for a theme.
- 2 Pupils could decide in which order to visit the stations, and which optional stations to use, corresponding to their personal interests or capabilities. Station work encourages responsibility and self-awareness.
- 3 It makes differentiation possible in various senses. Teams which have learnt in different ways can also present their findings to the class.
- 4 Teachers have the opportunity to step out of the centre and help individuals as necessary.

Organisational advice

- It is important to make procedures clear.
- It makes preparation simpler if some stations make use of a page of a textbook.
- Explain the aims of the activity.

- Encourage pupils to think up some activities themselves for additional stations.
- Limit numbers at each work station. Make sure there are enough stations.
- Each station should have a name or number. Give each pupil a card to record which one they've visited.
- Provide suitable reference materials such as dictionaries or a computer at a central point.
- Establish an overall time limit.

Connective ways of organizing groups

These are a number of organizational methods by means of which groups share their thinking with the whole class.

Think-pair-share: each student pairs with a partner to share their response to a question. Students are then invited to share their answers with the whole class. In order to make this more efficient, it can start with everyone standing, then when one pair sits down after contributing, others with the same response also sit down.

Numbered heads together: students form groups of four. Within each four, each has a number. The groups debate the answer, then the teacher calls a number 1-4. The students with that number answer for the group.

Jigsaw: pupils belong to a home group, and are redistributed to form research groups. The teacher assigns a part of the problem or enquiry to each research group. When they have finished, each member returns to their home group to share this.

Evaluation:

The issues in these forms will also involve ethos questions such as engagement and collaboration, but also whether the organizational form aids memorization, grasping a theory, etc.

Since most of these forms involve exchange of information, the development of oral competence in clear explanation is an important focus. However, skillful feedback to the whole class can also involve visuals, such as a diagram on a large sheet of card or a transparency.

Project method

An explanation of how groups are used within a whole-class project can be found in section 12.

Suggestions for discussion

- A Consider the different ways of organizing group learning introduced in this section. How might you use each within your subject, and for a particular age?
- B What are the particular functions, and how might they complement whole-class methods?
- C What kind of preparation would learners need?
- D Teachers often worry that group activity can provide opportunities for misbehaviour (forgetting, perhaps, the many opportunities in whole-class situations). Often, when well managed, pupils with a tendency to disrupt become more engaged through participation in group learning. Consider how you might avoid disruptive behaviour and encourage positive engagement.