

Teaching and learning issues

Working with Groups

'In the long history of humankind those who have learned to collaborate and improvise most effectively have prevailed'

Charles Darwin

Most great learning happens in groups. Collaboration is the stuff of growth.

Sir Ken Robinson

The City Lit's purpose is to 'bring people together to enrich lives through learning'. City Lit students say they come to learn with others - not alone.

A group is greater than the individuals in it. A good group takes our learning to a higher level than we might achieve individually. Learning together promotes deep rather than surface learning.

So this issue is to inspire and to share ideas on managing groups and promoting group work.

Good groups don't just happen...

In groups with a good group dynamic, participants work effectively as a team. They support each other, share experiences and ideas, and contribute to the overall learning of the group.

They also aid retention as members know they will be missed if they don't come.

While students may often naturally form such a group, the intervention of the tutor is crucial. Using basic techniques, a tutor can turn a good group to a bonded and effective one much more quickly.

In the box in the next column, there are some ways tutors can foster good groups.

Ways to develop an effective group



- Use icebreakers in the first session.
- If the same group is continuing into a new term, but there are new students, do an ice-breaker again so the group re-forms.
- Make sure all know each others' names where possible.
- Set/agree ground rules, or a group contract
- Mix small groups regularly to avoid cliques
- Unless the class is too large, arrange students in a U or circle, or 'café style' round tables, so they can see each other.
- Use regular small group or pair activities.
- Facilitate the group—ensure all contribute
- Be clear on boundaries and intervene eg to challenge stereotypes, manage conflict.
- Praise the *group* as well as individuals

Icebreakers

Icebreakers are used at the beginning of a course to 'break the ice' between people who are new to each other. They are extremely effective at getting a group of people to feel safe and connected, and can have a big impact on the rest of the course. There are lots of icebreakers available (just use google!). Ideally they should relate to your subject area in

some way. They may simply involve asking students to explain to each other in pairs who they are and why they have come, and to share this with the group. On some courses there are natural icebreaking opportunities. In languages, for example, teachers use 'minglers' where students circulate and ask, for example, 'Hello', 'My name is', 'What's your name?' in another language.

Below are some other activities commonly used...

Bingo

Find someone who

Has learned another language	Has a pet cat <i>Sharon</i>	Can name the currency of India
Came here on a bike	Etc.	Etc.

We use Bingo on teacher training courses. Create a chart like the one above. In each box, write a statement that you are fairly sure will fit at least one person in the group. Make the chart size appropriate to the size of the group. The students circulate and find someone who fits each box. (They are only allowed to use each person once). The first person who fills in every box with a name shouts 'BINGO'.

4 corners game

Label four corners of the room with an appropriate

Stages of Group Development

According to Tuckman (1965), groups always follow the same stages of development:

Forming

The group starts to get to know each other. People are on their best behaviour (love affair stage).

Storming

As the group settles in, members may begin to test the boundaries and limitations of the group. They may, for example, query what they are being asked to do, or the content of the course, or query each other

Norming and Performing

The group settles down and establishes norms and ways

of working together. Once done, it works well and smoothly, achieving tasks

theme for your group. Ask people to choose their favourite corner and go there. They then introduce themselves and discuss why they chose that particular theme. Examples could be

Rock	Classical	Folk	Jazz
Van Gogh	Da Vinci	Magritte	Turner

Speed Dating

Give everyone questions to ask each other and then arrange them in an inner and outer circle so they are opposite a partner. They have 5 minutes to find information about their partner. They then change partner by the outer circle moving on one. Do this 5 or 6 times.

Stand in a line

Ask students to arrange themselves in a line according to anything eg birthdays, distance from London where they were born, or how confident they are using the subjunctive. Label each end of the room to show the scale: 10 (Very confident) and 1 (not at all confident) etc. Students arrange themselves along the scale with much discussion in the process!

Dynamic starts to sessions

Dynamic starts to sessions get students involved and active immediately. They may revise a previous topic or introduce another one. Often it takes the form of a challenging question. For example, Helen Cox put the following on the board in her creative writing class:

'Omission is a form of creation' Do you agree or disagree and why?

of working together. Once done, it works well and smoothly, achieving tasks

Mourning

When the group separates, like in any relationship, there is a period of 'mourning' for what has been lost.

While the group is forming, teachers can use icebreakers to help people feel safe more quickly. The group can be helped through 'storming' by establishing ground rules/a group contract and by the teacher being open to questions about the course content and activities. Mark the end of the course by giving the group a chance to celebrate their achievements and say goodbye

Students are asked to debate this question in small groups. Any challenging question, statement or picture that gets students talking is great for a dynamic start. The aim is for students to get people engaged immediately in the subject and with each other.

Giving everyone a voice

Studies have shown that in a group of over 8 people, only a few will ever speak. The teacher can offset this by, for example, using directed questioning, but the most effective way to ensure everyone participates is to use small group and pair work.

Tips for small group work.

- The key is to **plan** well— set challenging, well thought out tasks with a purpose and clear outcome.
- **Plan the groups.** They may be random, or you may want to mix confident and less confident students or use some other criteria. **Vary groups** during the same session. **Plan HOW** you are going to set up groups, or move pairs so it's efficient and comfortable eg allocate everyone a letter and ask them to join everyone with the same letter, or have a pre-planned list.
- **Brief** clearly— write instructions on the board. Ask for questions before starting
- Give a **TIME** when the group work will finish
- **Monitor** the groups discreetly to check they are on task, answer questions or help
- End on time. **Take feedback** economically eg one point from each group.
- **Summarise** the learning at the end of the exercise.

Variations on group tasks

There are lots of commonly used group work activities you will probably know - problem solving tasks, discussion groups, case studies, role play, simulations. Some useful ones that are less often described are:

Hands up those who..... A simple way of getting all to participate by asking people to show their preferences, or views, by a show of hands.

Carousel— set out an activity on each table in the room. Students move round the tables in sequence completing each activity.

Treasure Hunt: Students in small groups have a series of questions. The answers are spread around the walls. Students have to get up and look for one answer each then return and share their findings with their group.

If your students don't like group work, try giving them very brief focussed activities in pairs. For example, 'What are 3 possible answers to this problem?' or 'What 2 things does this picture say about x?'

Managing workshops/practicals.

If students are engaged in practical tasks for much of a session and the tutor is circulating giving 1-1 support, time management can be difficult. Below are some tips

Set up clearly. Allow students time to ask questions before they get going. Set a time when they will be back as a group and able to ask questions.

If appropriate, put up a sheet of paper on the wall with 10 minute time slots. Students fill in their names next to a slot. To help stick to the 10 minutes, perhaps use the timer on your phone, with an alarm if necessary. Warn the student with 'Any last questions?'

Alternatively if students are completing exercises and can get stuck, agree a signal they can use to show they need help without shouting out. Where appropriate, encourage them to use their peers for help too.

Visit less confident students early, whilst not obviously making a beeline for them.

If a student asks for help with something useful to all, open it to the whole group: 'Can you pause and listen to/watch this as I've realised this will be useful to everyone'. Expect to explain it again even so as students focussed on their work may not take it in.

For students working on personal projects, ask them to think of the most important question they want clarified in their 1-1 so you can be as focussed as possible. Limit your feedback to 2/3 goals for the next stage.

Ask students to clarify what they are doing next before you leave to check they have understood.

Use brief group tasks during and at the end of the session such as students sharing work with a peer. Establish groundrules for feedback - constructive and positive suggestions that form useful critique, not faint praise or offhand advice. eg 'Give one thing you like, and one idea for the future' .

Managing Difficult Situations



Even adults can be difficult! Below are some tips:

One or two students dominate the group

Use techniques such as 'Thank you, x, perhaps we can hear from other people on this', or 'x,

what do you think?', nominating another quieter student.

Use 'wait time' and 'no shout out': 'I'm giving you a minute to think about this', or 'Think about the answer to this question in pairs'. You then nominate who answers.

Limit whole group time by using pair and small group work. This will give everyone a chance to talk. You can also allocate roles in groups, such as a 'chair' to ensure everyone makes contributions, and a 'summariser' to feed back.

Persistent questioner

Throw their questions to the whole group if relevant. If the question is not relevant, suggest they discuss it with their peers, or that you will address the question later in the course (if you can), or refer them to appropriate reading.

One student continually interrupts

Don't engage. Just thank them or smile, and move on.

Student has unrealistic expectations of the course

Individual students sometimes are very demanding. They may, for example, demand immediate attention if they are late, or want you to cover material not on the course outline. If you have set a relevant ground rule, you can remind the group of this. Otherwise still address the issue with the whole group: 'Just to remind you that if you are late, I cannot catch you up immediately', or 'Let's remind ourselves again of the outcomes for this course.'

Students talk to each other when you are trying to talk

With adults, try simply stopping talking and looking at the offenders. This will usually bring adults back to the whole group. Avoid talking over students talking! If you have trouble stopping group work, agree how you will bring it to an end eg you will raise your hand/ring a bell.

One student continually challenges you

Stay calm and professional. Don't engage. Offer to

Setting ground rules or a group contract



It's important to set ground rules at the beginning of any course, even a one day session. They promote a safe learning environment, and help people understand boundaries for working together.

Ground rules are a list of rules set by the tutor, or partially negotiated with students. A **group contract** is negotiated and agreed formally by students and is appropriate for longer courses which require a high level of group participation, trust and interaction.

Non negotiable ground rules are generally policy of the college. Eg 'Glasses must be worn when using the acid bath'; 'Mobiles must be turned off, or put on silent', 'No racist, sexist or homophobic comments.'

Ground rules relating to group working can be negotiated. Examples are, 'Be on time for class unless you are unavoidably delayed - then come in quietly.' 'Make sure everyone has a chance to speak.'

You might list your ground rules and ask the group if they agree, or give some and ask the group for those they would add.

discuss the issue with them later (in the break, or after class). Move the group on.

Students are offensive, or use derogatory language

The key thing here is to clarify what you will and won't accept. Again, refer to any ground rules you have established. Otherwise say to the whole group, without identifying an individual, that you won't accept offensive or derogatory comments about other students in class.

If basic techniques fail...

Talk to the student one to one to explain their impact on the group and negotiate a change in behaviour.

Do seek help from your line manager. You do not have to deal with difficult situations alone.

City Lit has a student code of conduct. Find it on www.citylit.ac.uk →Help and Support →Get in Touch and Get Involved→Complaints

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