

Great Ideas For Teaching

Setting up Student Groups for Success

Team projects and discussion groups offer college students unique opportunities for learning from their peers. They also give students the opportunity to develop collaborative skills that many will use for the rest of their lives. Unfortunately, they can also present challenges when students mistreat each other or fail to put in their fair share of work.

The way instructors form student groups can increase the likelihood that good collaboration takes place and minimize the likelihood that problems arise.

Moderate Group Size – Groups with 3-4 members are less likely to have problems with members slacking off than larger groups. An exception may be projects for which there will be 5 or more distinct roles.

Assigning Students to Groups – Although many students may prefer to choose their own groups, that approach can have some undesirable consequences. The group formation process may communicate to some students that they are unwanted. White, domestic students may feel most comfortable with other White, domestic students and avoid international students or students of color. A group of three close friends and one newcomer may leave the newcomer out of conversations and group meetings.

Groups Based on Interests – Another option is to have students sign up for different projects based on their interests. This strategy makes use of students' intrinsic motivation to learn about certain topics to increase the effort they put forth in their groups. The Moodle [Choice](#) activity is one way to allow students to choose a topic and can include limits on how many students can select each option (e.g., to divide a 30-person class into 10 groups with 3 students each).

Student Schedules – When students must meet outside of class, work schedules, music ensembles, sports practices, and other commitments can make such meetings difficult. Instructors can reduce this problem by grouping students based on their availability.

Try to Avoid Minoritizing Students – Student personalities vary widely, but research has shown that White students and male-identifying students often feel most comfortable sharing their ideas and advocating for the decisions they prefer. This dynamic is most likely to cause problems in groups with only one female-identifying student or only one student of color. When possible, it may help to ensure that female or non-binary students have at least one other female group partner and that students of color are joined by at least one other student of color. Of course, class rosters do not always make an ideal combination possible.

This is all a lot to consider, but there are some tools to help professors with the team formation process. [CATME](#) (requires a subscription) and [Gruepr](#) (free) allow instructors to survey students and automate the team formation process. Such tools are particularly helpful in larger classes.

There is no perfect way to form student groups, but these practices can help you give your students their best chance to learn and grow!

Written by Austin Williamson and last updated November 19, 2024.