

Managing Collaborative Groups: A Scaffold for Decision Making

There is no magic for making collaborative student groups operate successfully. This important aspect of teaching requires as much thoughtfulness as any other aspect of classroom planning. Successful student groups result from guided experiences that manage a set of important variables. Novice groups and group members need clear guidelines for how to be successful as they balance the emotional, social, and cognitive demands of working closely with others on challenging tasks. As with other aspects of teaching and learning, it is best to proceed with care and clarity when the learners with whom you are working are inexperienced with collaborative tasks.

Here is a simple template for guiding planning in this area. This framework applies to any learning situation, for both student groups and adult colleagues.

Managing Decisions

Size of Group: A large number of interactions is difficult for even skillful group members to manage. Keep in mind that pairing learning partners to form a group of two offers the benefits of co-learning, sharing ideas and perspectives, without the complexity of larger numbers.

Degree of Structure: The degree of student choice, explicitness of directions, sequence of a task, identification of specific social skills, and the distribution of materials are all elements of structuring. These parameters are an important developmental variable in orchestrating productive group work.

Length of time: Tight time frames focus students' task attention and social energy, increasing the success of collaborative work. Again, thoughtfully using time as a developmental variable is an important planning consideration.

A good guideline is that for beginning or difficult to manage groups, reduce the size, tighten the structure, and decrease the length of task time. Then, as students become increasingly skillful, adjust these variables accordingly.