



Group work: ensuring that all students collaborate in educationally effective group work

‘Group work: ensuring that all students collaborate in educationally effective group work’ offers a short overview of how to teach ‘Thinking Together’.

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Adapted from the [Thinking Together](#) resources (Dawes, 2008)

We can teach students how and why they can have a good discussion; every one of them can learn to contribute, reason, elaborate and generally think aloud with others.

Collaborative working is not created by seating arrangements, but by teaching students why and how they should talk to one another during class activities. It is crucial to give students the understanding and skills they need to defer social talk without creating conflict. They must know how to agree and disagree by showing that it is the idea or opinion they wish to challenge, not the speaker.

Teaching 'Thinking Together'

To take part in group discussion, students need to:

- Understand the link between speaking, listening and learning;
- Have created, and agreed, whole-class ground rules for exploratory talk;
- Know some speaking and listening strategies for discussion.

Notes on teaching Thinking Together

It is essential to establish a shared set of ground rules for exploratory talk

- Learning intentions for speaking and listening should be shared with the students and discussed in the closing plenary.
- Practice a 'Please stop talking' signal before group work. During group work you can visit groups or send a student round to tell everyone to expect the stop signal soon.
- Ensure that you feel confident to have learners talking in situations where other classes are quiet. This means being able to explain your rationale in terms of speaking and listening for thinking and learning.

Do we really need another set of classroom rules?

Yes – each student has their own deep understanding of 'rules' that they have learned to govern their talk with others. This range of contradictory and often unhelpful rules can create problems (e.g. dominance, lack of reasoning). A class must create its own ground rules for talk that everyone has agreed to use.

Should we really be teaching students ways to talk to one another?

Yes – although well equipped with their own spoken language, students benefit from being taught other ways to talk.

About grouping

- Groups of three, including both boys and girls, helps to ensure a range of opinions.
- Mixed ability groups ensure that each group has a reader if needed.

- Friendship groups are not helpful because friends may agree too readily to generate discussion (and can also be good at distracting one another).
- Each student should know that they have been allocated to a particular group for a positive reason (e.g. they are: co-operative; creative; a good listener; a good reader; good at thinking up questions; friendly and supportive of others; good at asking probing questions).
- Groups should remain together for several activities if possible. Problems should be discussed by the whole class and suggestions offered.
- Learners with extreme behaviour problems can, if it helps them, work with a different group for each session. As a 'guest' they benefit from the opportunity to listen to a range of models of good discussion.
- Seating arrangements make a surprising difference; make sure the learners know that.
- If the students are sharing any type of resource (e.g. paper, computer mouse), then how it is shared should be discussed in advance to avoid ownership and distracting disputes.
- Ensure that all students are asked to take a turn reporting on their group's discussion.
- Move around the groups, listening, re-focusing suggesting and questioning. As students develop their understanding of how to think together, you can withdraw this support, informing the students why you are able to let them carry on alone.

Exploratory talk

Thinking Together activities encourage learners to use 'exploratory talk'. This is talk in which everyone is invited to give their ideas. Students know how to challenge one another respectfully, share information, and give and ask for reasons. There is active listening and interest in different points of view. Group discussion proceeds as everyone seeks to reach an agreement.





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