

Teaching Tip 5: Assigning Student to Groups

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This tip focuses on assigning students for student group projects. Integrating student group projects into your class has many advantages. Group projects can provide students with an opportunity to develop and hone their skills of working with others, group projects can make learning more relevant and related to students lives and/or the real world and lastly group projects can reduce grading load. Developing, assigning and managing group projects is not without risks. We all have encountered student projects and groups that were dysfunctional. Many students prefer not to have group work for a variety of reasons including; the problem of “free riders” e.g. group members who do not contribute their fair share, the worry that their grade will be compromised by the work of others, and some students simply prefer to work alone for a variety of reasons. Despite these concerns most students when asked if group work is beneficial and a valued learning experience their reply is yes. Nearly all students see the value of group work when it is well-designed and includes the scaffolding needed to allow students to understand expectations of the group and the instructor.

Assigning Students to Groups

The first question is how big should the group be? The general guidelines are for significant group projects, one that can impact the final course grade, is that size should be at least three and no more than five students. Group sizes of more than five make it difficult for students to find common times to meet, and if the size is less than this runs the risk of not being a viable group if someone drops out or does not contribute.



There are many ways to construct/assign group membership, one can allow students to self-select, one can randomly assign students to groups, or the instructor can assign students to groups. The first two generally result in a higher percentage of dysfunctional groups for a variety of reasons and are not recommended, especially if the project is a significant percent of the final course grade. It is generally best for the instructor to assign students to groups. This serves two purposes; it reduces the probability of dysfunctional groups and helps balance diversity and academic ability among groups. To sign students to groups use the method developed by Robin Wright which is described in [Robin Wright*, ‡ and James Boggs, Cell Biology Education Vol. 1, 145–153, Winter 2002¹](#).

Start by having each student to fill out a 4 x 6 index card with the following information; name, gender, major, year, GPA range (< 2.0, 2.0-3.0, 3.0-3.3, 3.3-3.7, >3.7) and most importantly to

list one or two words their friends would use to describe them. Depending on the nature the project I might also asked for, standard racial information, technology ability, language ability or other characteristic that would help in ensuring equity and diversity within and among the groups. The last question is the most important since it allows me to identify the “Type A” students, e.g. students who are; demanding, ambitious, rigidly organized, status-conscious, sensitive, impatient, anxious, proactive. The key to having functional groups is to have only one type A personality per group, this provides leadership and drive. The other students are then distributed to balance ability and diversity among the groups. In Robin Wright’s paper she provides a list of words that help to identify Type A personalities and other personality traits, see the Guild Table in Wright’s paper.

To assign students to groups first anchor each group with a Type A personality then distribute the remaining students based on GPA, gender, major, year etc.. It is best to start by assigning the high and low achievers, so they are equally distributed among the groups. As much as possible try to avoid groups that are; all one gender, groups that are all the same year, all of the same major etc. Using this approach, one can easily assign 80-100 students into groups of 5 in a few minutes. Then post the group rosters of the class website. Students are not allowed to change groups, however any student who wishes to work alone are allowed to do so. They are reminded that they will have to do the work, and the project was designed to require the time and effort of five people. With this information few if any students opted to do the project alone and inevitably students who opt to work alone regret their decision when they realize the amount of effort and time required.

¹[Robin Wright*, ‡ and James Boggs, Cell Biology Education Vol. 1, 145–153, Winter 2002.](#)



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