



# Making Classroom Groups Inclusive

The following information is adapted from *Tools for Teaching* by Barbara Gross Davis, Jossey-Bass, 1993.

## **Why Use Groups in College Classes?**

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Researchers report that students learn best when they are actively involved in the process. Students working in small groups tend to learn more of what is taught and retain it longer than when the same content is presented in other instructional formats. And we know from experience that when students feel connected, engaged, and included, they feel more satisfied with their courses. In addition, group work provides students with more “real world” experience, because most of them will indeed be spending much of their working lives developing projects in groups. Groups also often provide more of a sense of “shared purpose” in a class, which means that students feel a greater sense of dedication to the material. Finally, groups in which students meet with students they might not regularly associate with can provide students with new insights and ways of thinking.

Many courses have the opportunity to engage students in group or pair work. Faculty members should not assume that their material does not lend itself to groups—group work can be successful in almost all courses, regardless of size or content. Performing lab experiments, writing reports, solving mathematical problems, designing projects for presentation, preparing briefings or position papers—these are a few examples of how students can work in pairs or small groups. These groups may complete their work in a single class session or over several weeks. Typically, students work together until the task is finished and their project is graded.

Faculty also have the opportunity to encourage students to form study groups outside of class. Study groups usually exist over the course of a semester, have a stable membership, and are created to provide members with support, encouragement, and assistance in completing course requirements and assignments. In addition, study groups also inform their members about lectures and assignments when someone has missed a session. The larger the class and the more complex the subject matter, the more valuable study groups can be.

There are many issues involved in designing, organizing, and evaluating group work. One critical aspect is how to form the groups. Below are some suggestions, based on the practices of faculty on this and other campuses, on how instructors can form in-class groups or pairs and encourage out-of-class study groups to make sure that all students are included and no one is left out or overlooked.

## ***Organizing Small Groups as Part of a Course***

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One of the challenges in undertaking group work is deciding how the groups will be formed so that all students have equal opportunities to participate and feel included. When students self-select groups, they tend to do so based on affinities: friends, teammates, fraternity or sorority affiliation, ethnicity, gender, and so on. That can mean that some students who don't fit into one of the major groups in a course can find it hard to become a member of a group. The suggestions below are designed to help you pair students or create small learning groups in your class. We have limited the suggestions to those that foster inclusiveness. The alternative to these suggestions is simply to let students form groups with whomever they wish.

**Assign students to groups based on specific criteria.** Some faculty assign students to groups to maximize their heterogeneity: a mix of males and females, verbal and quiet students, the cynical and the optimistic. By assigning students, you can take into account students' prior achievement, levels of preparation, work habits, ethnicity, and gender. For larger classes, this can be handled in sections.

**Assign students to groups randomly.** Some faculty assign students to groups randomly using the first letter of the students' last names or a table of random numbers. By assigning students to groups, even randomly, you avoid the risk that students who select their own groups or partners will socialize too much, self-segregate, or that some students will be excluded or "last chosen."

**Rotate groups throughout the semester.** If you do make assignments, consider rotating groups throughout the semester. One science faculty member makes it known to students that they will be assigned various lab partners during the course.

**Regularly check in with the groups.** If the task spans several weeks, you will want to establish checkpoints with the groups. Ask groups to turn in outlines or drafts or to meet with you periodically.

## ***Forming Ad Hoc Groups During a Class Session***

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This is one of the least-used and most valuable ways to include all students in discussion. There are many different triggers for dividing a class—of any size—into spontaneous groups: ask the groups to summarize the important points so far in lecture; present the groups with a small problem to solve or discuss; after presenting a concept, ask the groups to use the concept to answer a question, and so on.

These kinds of groups provide the same benefits as project-oriented groups, but add another one: students who are shy about speaking up in class may have their ideas heard when the group spokesperson reports back to the class.

**Ask students to form groups with the two or three or four people around them.** For classrooms with fixed furniture, have students turn to the people behind (or in front of) them.

**Ask students to form groups with the two or three or four people who they don't know who are around them.** Have students introduce themselves first before working on the topic. For classrooms with fixed furniture, this may mean changing seats.

**Have the class count off (1, 2, 3, etc.) until you have as many groups as you need, depending on the size of the class.** Then have all the 1s, 2s, etc. gather together to work on the assignment.

## **Encouraging Study Groups Outside of Class**

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Study groups are guided by the notions that students can often do as a group what they cannot do by themselves and that students can benefit from peer teaching—explanations, comments, and instruction from their classmates. The suggestions below are designed to help you encourage students to form study groups.

**Have students sign up for teams scheduled to meet at particular times.** This means that students will form groups based solely on when they can regularly attend a study team meeting. Try to form the groups by sections rather than for the large enrollment class overall. Students in the same section are more likely to know each other and feel a sense of responsibility for their study team.

**Use a portion of class time for arranging study groups.** Announce that study groups will be set up during the third or fourth week of the course. At that time, hand out a description of study teams and students' responsibilities (see *Tools for Teaching* for suggestions), and let students talk among themselves to form groups or to sign up for scheduled time slots. Suggest that all members of the study team exchange phone numbers and email addresses. Encourage the study teams to select one person as the convener who will let all members know where the group is to meet.

**Devote a class session to study groups.** Ask students to meet in their study teams to review course material or prepare for an upcoming exam or assignment. Use the time to check in with the groups to see how well they are operating.

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For more information about group work, the research on which these suggestions are based, and related teaching topics, visit <http://teaching.berkeley.edu> and select the quick link for *Tools for Teaching*. You can also find a quick link for *teach-net*, with instructions on how to subscribe to the campus's electronic forum for discussing teaching issues.