Maximizing the Performance of Informal Groups in Class

We faculty tend to love using informal (*ad hoc*) groups. Students derive most of the learning benefits of group work, and we find them relatively easy to administer — easy compared to long-term formal groups that collaborate on one or more substantial assignments outside of class.

These groups are ideal for clicker-question exchanges and lecture-break activities, and we can set them up of any size on the fly ("Work with the two fellow students sitting next to you."). They are too short-term to provoke student concerns about someone freeloading, sand-bagging, dominating, controlling, ego-tripping, bullying, whining, or engaging in some other collaboro-pathic behavior, so we don't have to play marriage counselor. In addition, students don't have to peer-evaluate, and we don't have to read these evaluations or incorporate them into the final grades.

However, just because we don't have students coming to our office with complaints does not mean these informal groups are functioning well. Circulate among them and listen closely. Some groups wander off task or never get on task. Others lean on one or two of its members to generate ideas, solve the problems, explain correct answers, and so on. After all, students tend to sit in the same place every class period even if they don't have to, and some of them either create problems for others or suffer from these problems.

Here are some strategies to prevent these problems.

Groups Not on Task

Of course, you should circulate around the classroom to let students know you're monitoring their progress. But you can also do the following:

- Make sure every task that you assign to groups is challenging — specifically, that it requires thinking that goes beyond what the students have read or heard you say. The task may assess students' conceptual understanding, ability to apply the material, analytic skills, or evaluative judgment. In any case, it should require synergy for students to perform.
- Give students a tight time limit in advance, and enforce it. Students will see that they have to focus to get the task done.
- If suitable for the task, require that groups submit a written or drawn product that all group members must sign. (You can use these submissions to take attendance or to a give students a point or two for completion.)
- If the task doesn't call for a product, just cold-call on a few groups "randomly" to report out and explain their answers.

Uneven Member Effort

- Routinely cold-call on individual members within the groups "randomly" to report out. Millis (2014) describes how to designate individual members using playing cards.
- Change the composition of informal groups two or more times during the term. You can ask students to rearrange themselves with new neighbors, or you can rearrange them yourself using a seating chart (good for taking attendance quickly and learning student names).

Resources:

Millis, B. J. (2014, January). Using groups both wisely and well. Available at
   http://www.niagara.edu/assets/listpage/UsingGroupsBothWiselyandWellSession.pdf

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