

## Working in groups – an introduction for *abilityvsability*

### Getting groups right

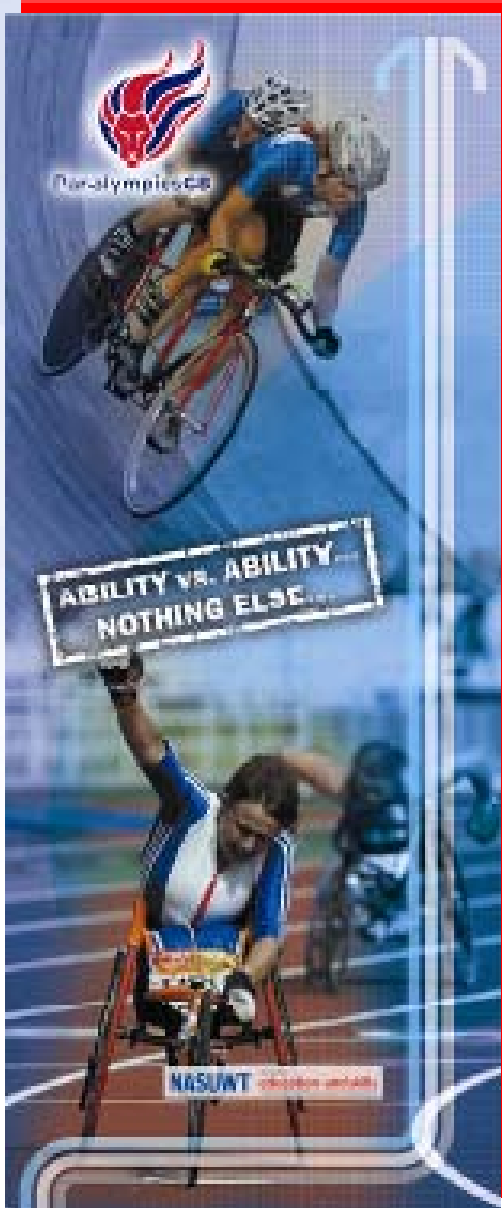
As all good teachers know, all students gain from working in groups or in pairs. Sharing ideas, developing thinking and writing together can all be ways of sharing, deepening and retaining new knowledge. The best group work is linked to the asking of good questions - both by the teacher of the groups and then within the groups by the students themselves. This gives group work purpose - it's rarely good practice to simply ask a new group to start open-ended discussion. Good talk is characterised by students asking questions that require other students to offer opinions, make hypotheses, give reasons and reflect on their thinking. This higher order group talk can result in a real shared understanding among all students.

To do this requires a range of strategies that teachers can deploy to help get his process started. The result are likely to be more focused work in groups, better levels of participation from all students, more questions asked, and less off task behaviour.

So what should teachers do to make these improvements? Research indicates that student response improves when teachers

- ask authentic learning questions, positioning themselves as learners too
- stand back and don't dominate student group discussions
- define the parameters for students - what the group is for, what the outcomes should be, how long is available and so on.

There are a number of reports and surveys which can provide detail here. The best include the Learning to Learn research website - <http://www.learntolearn.ac.uk/> - and the wide range of ideas provided on the Government's Standards site - <http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/>



### What does group work do?

---

In any classroom, learning is going on in three main ways. Students might be interacting with the teacher, usually in situations led by the teacher. They might be working alone on their own activities. But they might also be working with each other in groups. Real group work involves students working together as a team. True group work involves pupils working together as a team - this is necessary because a defining characteristic of group work is that the balance of ownership and control of the work shifts toward the students. As Peter Blatchford notes in [http://www.tlrp.org/documents/personalised\\_learning.pdf](http://www.tlrp.org/documents/personalised_learning.pdf)

Group work involves children as co-learners, not just one student helping another.

Group work can enhance conceptual development and reasoning. It is probably best suited to learning which involves transcending a learner's current level of understanding to reach a new perspective, rather than the acquisition of new skills or strategies, which is better suited to learning from more skilful partners.

It can also improve children's school attainments and therefore school performance.

Group work can enhance motivation and attitudes to work. It helps pupils believe that success in school can come through their own efforts, rather than from something fixed such as ability, or from teaching.

Group work can also aid social and communication skills, personal and social awareness and citizenship, and it can enhance relations between pupils. Opportunities to debate and recognise alternative points of view, and to be held responsible for one's own behaviour, can develop thoughtful attitudes to others.

Group work can result in the kinds of skills employers say are important but which are not always acquired in schools - for example, speaking with confidence in front of others, engaging in a constructive way with others' points of view and team work.

### Different kinds of group work

---

So how can you best structure group work in the classroom? No list of ideas will be exhaustive but here are just a few that should be useful.

### Pair talk

Students work together in pairs – possibly friendship, possibly boy-girl. Each pair then joins up with another pair to explain and compare ideas.

### Listening Triad

Students work in groups of three. Each student takes on the role of talker, questioner or recorder. The talker explains something, or comments on an issue, or expresses an opinion. The questioner prompts and seeks clarification. The recorder makes notes and gives a report at the end of the conversation. Next time, roles are changed.

### Envoys

Once groups have carried out a task, one person from each group is selected as an 'envoy' and moves to a new group to explain and summarise, and to find out what the new group thought, decided or achieved. The envoy then returns to the original group and feeds back. This is an effective way of avoiding tedious and repetitive 'reporting back' sessions. It also requires the envoy to listen and explain well focusing on their envoy's use of language. It's good in supporting the development of active listeners.

### Jigsawing

The advantage of a 'jigsaw' is that it offers a structure for group work, and promotes a range of speaking and listening.

- The teacher divides the whole class into small groups (commonly four students per group). These are teacher-initiated in order to make each group reflect the balance of the whole class - gender, ability and attitude.
- Each *home group* is given a common task. Handouts are employed in order to set the task. Reading material is kept to a manageable length and complexity. If the home groups are of four, then there are four questions or tasks within the main task - one for each member of the group. Questions or tasks are allocated within each group, through negotiation between the students.
- All the students who have selected a particular question or task regroup into *expert groups* and work together on what is now a common problem and outcome. By the time this stage of the session is completed, each has become an expert on this matter, through discussion and collaboration with the other 'experts'.
-

- The original groups reform and dissemination begins. The home groups are set a final task. This could be a group outcome, or an individual task. The crucial element is to ensure that students have to draw on the combined 'wisdom' of the home group in order to complete it successfully.

### **Snowballing**

Pairs of students discuss an issue, or brainstorm some initial ideas, then double up to fours and continue the process. They then get into groups of eight in order to compare ideas and sort out the best or to agree on a course of action. Finally, the whole class is drawn together and spokespersons for each group of eight feed back ideas. A useful strategy to promote more public discussion and debate.

### **Rainbow Groups**

This works well as a way of ensuring that students are regrouped and learn to work with a range of others. After small groups have discussed together, pupils are given a number or colour. Students with the same number or colour join up, making groups comprising representatives of each original group. In their new group, students take turns to report back on their group's work.

### **Value Continuum**

In this format students or groups of students have to respond to a thought provoking statement by saying to what degree they agree with it. There are a number of ways this can be used - for example, the students could be asked to come and stand at the point on a line that represents their individual opinion. Alternatively, they could first be asked to discuss a statement in groups and then for one of the group to come up to the front and place their group's card/token somewhere along the line, explaining the position their group have taken as they do so. This is an excellent format for comparing responses to different questions and finding out contradictions in individual student and group thinking.

### **Circle or Rounds**

With all students sitting in a circle, the teacher invites all students to respond with their thoughts and feeling about a specific focus. This works best as a starter or - with more development - a plenary session in which students can compare how they thought at the end of a process as compared to the beginning.

### Hot Seating

Here one student is placed at the front of the classroom and is asked to express their opinion and respond to student questions on a specific focus. Often this is enhanced when students take on a particular viewpoint or persona to make this less personal. The same questions can then be asked of different 'characters' to gauge the range of response.

### Goldfish Bowl

Similar to hot seating, but here a small group comes to the front to express their position and be questioned by the class.

### Freeze Frame

A drama strategy, where students select a key moment, and create a frozen moment in time or tableau to illustrate it. The tableaux can be activated to encourage children to 'come to life' briefly, or allow individuals in a tableau to be encouraged to speak their thoughts. This could be a way of encouraging students to see situations from different perspectives. Teachers can support by asking higher order questions of the characters in the tableau and encouraging students to do the same.

### Six Thinking Hats

In order to structure groups, and provide a role for all students in a large group, teachers could use this decision-making method derived from the work of Edward de Bono. Each student adopts a certain 'thinking approach', which is symbolised by a coloured hat (real or imaginary). This is a good group work approach for exploring tricky ethical questions. The approaches commonly given for each hat are shown below.

- **White Hat:** With this thinking hat you focus on the data available. Look at the information you have, and see what you can learn from it, including parallels and past experience. Look for gaps in your knowledge.
- **Red Hat:** 'Wearing' the red hat, you look at problems using intuition, gut reaction, and emotion. Also try to think how other people will react emotionally. Try to understand the responses of people who do not fully know your reasoning.

- **Black Hat:** Using black hat thinking, look at all the bad points of the decision. Look at it cautiously and defensively. Try to see why it might not work.
- **Yellow Hat:** The yellow hat helps you to think positively. It is the optimistic viewpoint that helps you to see all the benefits of the decision.
- **Green Hat:** The Green Hat stands for creativity. Try to come at the central question in an imaginative way, are there any alternatives - different ways of doing things.
- **Blue Hat:** The Blue Hat stands for process control. This is the hat worn by people chairing meetings. They can act as a facilitator pulling together the groups thinking.

This system can be used in a number of ways with the hats standing for different members of society, or people with a vested interest in the debate. However, it is best used with de Bono's original premise because it is excellent at encouraging students to think of the perspectives of others.

### TV Shows

Using well known formats can be one way of engaging students in focused discussion and debate because the structure is known and understood. The TV chat show format is just one example but others might include a game show or one of the daytime soul-baring relationships shows. These formats are obviously good for discussion of issues where there are different perspectives and special interest groups.

For example, in a panel show format with the question *Should Paralympic athletes compete against able-bodied athletes in a single Olympic Games?* A class might be split up into two groups who each represent different interested parties, who must then assess the information given to them on the topic and decide what position the group they represent would take on this issue. One member of each group is nominated to act as

a representative. At the beginning of the 'show' each representative comes to sit at the front with the host and introduces his or her group's position. Questions are then invited from the audience. Of course, audience members would be free to answer or question each other too.

## The Debate

Teachers can usefully link two related structures here - the formal debate and the public forum. A formal debate is - as the name suggests - formal and tightly structured. It might be preceded by a public forum in which issues are raised.

Teachers can be flexible about the details but in general students will respond well to being carefully - but not restrictively - organised. Some key guidelines are provided below:

### *The public forum*

This approach is like a public enquiry and can precede a more formal debate. It requires the classroom to be set up as a public meeting room with distinct areas for special interest groups who will be represented.

Each group should sit in their own area and in front of a display they have created in a previous activity. Students could be in character if appropriate. Each group then makes a ten minute presentation to the rest of the group using PowerPoint or any other appropriate ICT support. Ideally, all students should address the class.

### *The formal debate - sequence of events*

The usual pattern for debates involves four speakers and a chairperson. The chairperson introduces the topic and the speakers. Two of the speakers (A and C) speak *for* the case being debated, while the other two speakers (B and D) speak *against* it.

1. the **CHAIR** introduces the topic for debate, (presented as a formal question). He or she then introduces the speakers for and against (in that order)
2. **SPEAKER A**: introduces the argument **FOR** the debate
3. **SPEAKER B**: introduces the argument **AGAINST** the debate
4. **SPEAKER C**: concludes the argument **FOR** the debate
5. **SPEAKER D**: concludes the argument **AGAINST** the debate
6. the **CHAIR**: thanks the speakers for their contribution, and invites the audience to respond to what has been said.

At the end of the debate, the chair puts the topic to the audience for a vote.

*The formal debate - organising a debate*

1 Choose four people who will be the speakers and one person who will be the chairperson.

Professional speakers are able to argue for either side of a debate whether or not they personally agree with that viewpoint. This means that it shouldn't really matter whether students are speaking against something they would usually be in favour of - if anything, it will be a better test of their speaking skills!

To help choose who will speak for and who will speak against, the teacher could draw names at random.

2 Before holding the debate, it is important to research information so that the speakers will be able to support their statements with facts.

Remember that the best debates allow 'points of information' - comments from speakers and spectators - so that they are proper debates and not a series of over-formal stuffy speeches.

3 Now hold the debate. You should allow one minute for the chairperson to introduce the speakers and topics, and about five minutes each for speakers to make their point.

4. Having a classroom vote at the end is a good idea.

*The formal debate - follow up*

*With a lot of time and organisation involved in this classroom event it makes sense to follow the outcomes. Teachers can do this in a number of ways but at least include the following questions:*

- What was the outcome of your debate?
- Did the outcome of your debate surprise you?
- Why?

In addition, it might be worth promoting the debate and displaying the outcome around the school or presenting the outcome in an assembly. Students might also produce a piece of extended writing summarising the views presented in the meeting and concluding with their own views on the subject. This can be a useful coursework assignment.

---