

Activity: Managing groups - improving practice

Introduction

Think back to the last time you attended a lecture, or a presentation, or watched a documentary programme on television. How much of what was said do you remember now?

It's a well-researched finding that if you were merely sitting back in your chair and listening, you might have retained as little as 5%.

The same is true for your learners. If they are just listening to you talking, especially for long periods of time, their attention will wander and their learning will be very limited. So what does this mean for the way you plan your sessions? It means that you need to involve them in practical learning activities as much as you possibly can. Learning by doing and using learning immediately are both powerful ways of increasing retention. For example, when a learner learns something new and then explains it to somebody else, the learning is reinforced and committed to long-term memory.

But this has huge implications for you. When you change the style of your teaching, and more actively involve learners, you face a new set of planning and group management issues

If you are to make your sessions productive, you need to be clear about the outcomes you are working towards and use various methods to get the results you want.

When you have completed this task, you will have:

- considered different ways in which learners could work together;
- used a checklist to review the way you currently run group activities;
- used the same checklist to plan how you will run a group activity in a future session;
- discussed your ideas and sought feedback from your colleagues;
- discussed your colleagues' ideas and offered feedback

1. Activity: Self-assessment of current practice

Think back to a recent session in which you involved learners in some form of group work. Then use the checklist on the next page to assess the extent to which you planned and managed it.

In the right-hand column rate what you did, on a scale of 1–3 where:

3 = the statement is true.

2 = the statement is partially true.

1 = the statement is hardly true, or not true at all.

Self-assessment checklist	
Layout of the room	
I arranged the tables and chairs before the learners came into the room.	
All learners in a small group could make eye contact with each other.	
All learners could see clearly the materials they were working with.	
I could easily move round the room, and get to each individual and group.	
Learners could easily turn to see the board and/or flip chart when I needed to write something on them.	
Size and composition of groups	
I thought of different ways in which I could allocate learners to groups and made my choice based on the nature of the activity.	
I put learners into groups of three (with just one group of four), to maximise learners' involvement, and to prevent the group splitting into pairs.	
Selection of the activity	
I considered various possible group activities before making my final choice.	
I thought carefully about how the activity would deliver my intended learning objectives.	
I took into account what I knew about learners' levels of skill.	
Organisation of the task	
I broke the task into small steps so that everyone could achieve something.	
I set clear learning objectives for the activity. I checked that each person had understood my instructions.	
I made sure that each member of a group had something specific to do.	
I made sure that there were extension activities for those who finished their tasks ahead of other groups.	
I split the overall session into several shorter activities with changes of pace to keep everyone involved.	

Self-assessment checklist (contd)	
Management of the activity	
To save time, and for the sake of efficiency, I directed learners to a particular table as they came in.	
I monitored the groups, checking that each learner was involved, and that no-one dominated or became a passenger.	
Management of learning	
I let groups work things out for themselves, and intervened as little as possible.	
I checked that learners were following instructions, and recording their findings.	
At the end, I involved learners in summarising what they had discovered, and in consolidating their learning e.g. by inviting each group to contribute to drawing a spidergram on the whiteboard.	

2. Activity: Planning a future session

Review an existing lesson plan that you have used recently. Revisit the aims and objectives of that session. Then consider what group activities you could include. You might get some inspiration from the list below.

Ideas for group activities

- Card sort.
- Quiz.
- Inter-group competition.
- 'Buzz groups', in which small groups of learners spend a few minutes discussing an idea or a problem amongst themselves.
- 'Ideas blast' or 'Thought shower', where a group generates as many ideas as possible in a limited period of time.
- Different activities set out at different tables; small groups move from one to another.
- Constructing a model.
- Peer-tutoring/checking.
- Each group sets a question for another group.
- Each group produces a handout to convey what they have learned.
- Each group draws a spidergram to summarise their learning.

Now use the checklist on the next page to plan how you will implement the activity.

Layout of the room

How will I need to arrange the tables and chairs?

Will I be able to set up the room before the learners arrive? If not, how will I make sure they get seated where I want them, with the maximum speed and efficiency?

Does my planned layout allow all learners in a small group to make eye contact with each other?

Will learners be able to see clearly the materials they'll be working with?

Have I planned the layout so that I can easily move round the room, and get to each group?

Will learners easily be able to turn to see the board and/or flip chart when I need to write something on them?

Size and composition of groups

How will allocate learners to groups? Will it be on the basis of age, ability, friendships, special needs, mixed ability, peer support, at random?

Groups of three are the most effective. Will this work for my activity?

Selection of the activity

What possible group activities might I consider before making my final choice?

How will my chosen activity(ies) deliver my intended learning objectives?

How have I taken into account what I knew about learners' levels of skill or support needs?

Organisation of the task

How can I break the task into small steps so that everyone can achieve something?

How clear are my objectives for the activity?

How will I check that each person has understood my instructions?

Has each member of a group got something specific to do?

Have I built in extension activities for those who might finish their tasks ahead of other groups?

Management of the activity

Will I be ready to direct learners straight to their tables as they come in?

How will I monitor the groups, checking that each learner is involved, and that no-one dominates or becomes a passenger?

Management of learning

How will I remind myself to stand back, and let groups work things out for themselves?

How will I check that learners are following instructions, and recording their findings?

At the end, how will I get learners to consolidate their learning?