Structured Discussions

This page discusses some alternatives to meeting as a complete group and having open discussions. Help your students recognise which structuring technique might be appropriate to move a group project or particular task forward.

You can hand out these techniques at the beginning of a group task or project, or you can suggest appropriate strategies to students who are experiencing particular problems in their group. These techniques can encourage equal contributions, involve shy students, help deal with dominant members, address time constraints by increasing productivity and provide an opportunity for students to practise their listening skills.

Teacher-supervised activity

"Cross over groups" is an activity that encourages students to mix with students from other groups, and is best conducted as a whole-class activity, with the teacher supervising.

Cross over groups

1. Each member of every group is assigned a number. That is, each group has a member who is number 1, a member who is number 2 etc.
2. Students form groups with students of the same number. This strategy ensures that each student meets at least one member from all the other groups.
3. Within the newly formed groups, members share particular aspects of their original group's progress (e.g. key issues they are addressing, strategies they have used to manage group processes).
4. Students return to their original groups and report back to their group members on what they have learnt.

(For further techniques for structuring small group discussions see Small Group Teaching.)

Student-run activities

Discuss the techniques in the handout below with your students and ask them to talk, in their groups, about how they might use them to structure discussion in different ways.

Student handout 1

Strategies for structuring group discussions
Individual reading and reflection

If you find that your group is being unproductive, or that people have very little to contribute, it may be because you haven’t devoted enough time to thinking about a particular topic, problem or idea as individuals before entering into group discussion.

If this is the case, it is a good idea to have a break from group discussion and spend some time individually reading, thinking, making notes or reflecting.

You might like to allocate a specific time frame for individual work, and to agree on what you would like individual members to come back to the group discussion with (e.g. ideas, a summary, suggestions for the way forward, a list of potential problem).

Working in pairs or sub-groups

Sometimes it can be more efficient to work in pairs or smaller groups than to have the whole group working on a particular task or problem. You might find it useful to divide your group into pairs or sub-groups so that you can work on a number of different tasks in parallel.

Working in pairs or sub-groups is also effective in making sure that everyone in your group is contributing. Some people feel more comfortable discussing ideas in smaller groups, and you may find it easier to contribute ideas to the whole group if you have had an opportunity to bounce ideas off someone in pairs first.

Rounds

Rounds are sessions in which the group sits in a circle and each person speaks in turn. Rounds can be very effective for making sure everyone in your group has an opportunity to contribute. Use rounds at the very beginning of a group task or project to help you get to know members of your group (e.g. you might like to take turns to introduce yourself, share your interests, or comment on your previous experiences of group work).

Use rounds at the beginning and end of group meetings and discussions. For example:

- You could begin a group meeting by taking turns to talk about the work each of you has done or to identify topics that need to be worked on.
- At the end of a group meeting or discussion you might use rounds to review the way the team is working, summarise the outcomes of some work or discussion, or to clarify exactly what jobs need to be done (Gibbs, 1994, p. 35).

Circular interviewing

Circular interviews are similar to rounds. The group sits in a circle, and one member begins by asking a question or set of questions to the person directly opposite, while the rest of the group listens (e.g. "Can you tell us what you think our group is doing really well, and areas that you think we need to improve?").

The role of interviewer then moves to the neighbouring person and the process continues until each person has played the role of both interviewer and interviewee. This technique is very useful for generating material for discussion, and making sure that everyone in the group has an opportunity to contribute.

Encouraging creativity in groups

These structured discussions encourage creativity in groups. They can strengthen collaborative processes and result in group projects of a higher quality. (If you are interested in exploring further creative techniques, this web page on Creative Thinking Techniques may be useful.)

Student handout 2

| Three techniques for thinking creatively in your group |
Brainstorming

Brainstorming is effective in generating ideas. In a short period it generates a large number of ideas from which your group may select several to discuss or analyse further. Brainstorming can encourage your group to take risks in sharing your ideas and opinions. It also allows you to practise building on each other's contributions.

An important feature of brainstorming is that ideas are not discussed or reviewed until after the brainstorming session. The creation of ideas is separate from the evaluation of ideas to allow for free thinking and creativity.

Try using brainstorming exercises at the start of a group exercise, meeting, project stage or problem solving activity.

Brainstorming usually involves the following steps:

1. Decide on a clear theme for your brainstorming session.
2. Appoint a scribe.
3. **Examples** need to be adhered to. The scribe should list the ideas that are called out.
4. Go back through the list identifying what each idea means. Select the promising ones.
5. Discuss the ideas the group thinks are the most promising.

**Project pictures**

You can use this technique at various stages of your group task or project, to help you clarify a project brief, generate new ideas within a project, work out how to analyse information you have collected, or decide how to present your project.

Project pictures are visual representations of your project, or aspects of your project. This exercise involves producing and discussing these visuals.

1. Each group member draws the way they perceive the project on a large piece of paper. For example, you might draw an abstract diagram of the way parts of your project link together, the sequence of steps to be taken or a picture with people engaging in dialogue. This exercise is not about your drawing ability. It's intended to free up your thinking and reveal ideas that might not be explored otherwise.
2. Take turns to explain your pictures (and say what you think other students' pictures mean).
3. As a final step, discuss the insights this has provided into your project, and how it contributes to the way the project might progress and/or be written up.

**Wishful thinking**

Wishful thinking can be used to help students identify the best way to tackle a particular project or task. As with brainstorming, this technique gives you an opportunity to participate in the flow of ideas and build on the contributions of others. For example:

1. Students are asked to imagine that their project has finished and has been highly successful.
2. They are then asked to consider what went well and why it was such a success, and share this with the class or in small groups. For example, a student might say, "I thought it was great when we had an opportunity to practise our presentation—that really helped," or, "I thought it was really helpful when we sat down and discussed our project brief to make sure we understood it clearly."
3. Reserve comments and discussion until after the wishful thinking session has finished.
