University of Zurich UZH

Center for University Teaching and Learning

A-Z University Teaching & Learning
Group Work

Term

The term "group work" is used very differently both in the relevant literature as well as in university teaching practice. Besides this, various other terms are used synonymously with it (e.g. cooperative learning, group lessons, learning in groups). Most teachers and students understand group work to be a phase of the learning process in which a usually small group of students complete an assignment more or less independently. On the one hand, this sets various cognitive and social processes in motion; on the other hand, there must be an observable and measurable result (product) at the end.

"Group work" is sometimes also used to refer to a category of methods. This includes, for instance the jigsaw technique or a project. Group work tends to play a dominant role in the methods in this category. This is presumably the reason why the term is often used in this sense. However, in the literature there is no such use of the term. Only two meanings are used here: group work as a social form or as a method.

Group work as a social form

The social form defines the communication structure of a particular learning phase. It determines who works together with whom under which conditions. We distinguish between four basic forms: individual work, partner work, group work, and plenary work (often referred to as "chalk-and-talk" or lecture-style teaching). For group work, the class is divided into units of ideally three to six students which complete an assignment together in a limited amount of time. To achieve the desired result, it may be advisable to change the social form temporarily, i.e. do individual or partner work. The social form must be distinguished from the working method.

The working method defines the action patterns within a social form. Thus, different activities can be done during group work: e.g. a round of discussion, instructional discourse, or a presentation.

Group work as a method

As a method, group work refers to a subdomain of group lessons. This consists of at least three phases: assign task and ensure previous knowledge, the actual group work, and an evaluation. The individual steps can be designed very differently, depending on the purpose of the lesson. However, the results of the group work must be made available to all participants and integrated into the rest of the course. Communicating the results to the rest of the students can be done orally or written. A combination of both forms is ideal. An electronic platform like OLAT can be used for this purpose, depending on the situation (see also the next section). An important goal of exchanging group results is to stimulate learning processes. For a large number of groups, it is advisable to choose an alternative to presenting all results consecutively, as this method is tedious and ineffective for the listener. A good option is the partner-group method: two groups each exchange their results and provide feedback. Subsequently, only single aspects are discussed as a class, e.g. questions about content or group-dynamic problems.

Group work and eLearning

Whereas the conventional meaning of "group work" always refers to classroom teaching, eLearning adds an extra dimension: learning supported by electronic media. In this context, the term refers to the social form. Various social forms can be realized with eLearning, whereby basically two scenarios can be distinguished: eLearning as a seminar method (used in a classroom-based course, e.g. group learning using a computer) and purely media-based interaction and communication (e.g. computer-assisted collaborative learning).

What is the purpose of group work?

As a teaching method, group work should always be implemented as a phase of group lessons. Whether its use is appropriate depends on the course's learning objectives. A group lesson - more so than lecture-style teaching

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- is suited for fostering transferable skills such as communication skills, teamwork, conflict management skills, or the ability to learn independently, but also for connecting transferable and subject-specific content. For acquiring expertise, a group lesson is especially suitable when the focus is on the interrelationships and concepts of specialized knowledge. The involvement and interaction of students are significantly higher in group work than in collective teaching methods, such as lecture-style instruction or instructional discourse. There are many practical applications for group work: practicing, applying, and solidifying knowledge, skills, and techniques; generating new approaches to solving a problem; introducing a new group of topics; preparing poster sessions and role plays.

The role of teachers

The teachers' task is to give clear and precise instructions prior to group work and ensure that the students understand. During the group phase, the teachers step back and are available as advisors, but do not intervene of their own accord. Then as moderators they see to it that the results are exchanged and feedback is given to the respective groups; they integrate the results into a wider context and utilize them for students' further learning.

Depending on the situation, it may also be advisable to reflect on the group-dynamic processes with the students in order to derive measures for optimizing future group work.

Notes on using group work

- Intensive methodological and content-related preparation of group work sessions is an essential condition for successful learning processes of students.
- Although group work has great potential for establishing and developing students' transferable skills, the subject matter should always be the focus.
- In particular, groups of students who have little experience with this social form should be given the opportunity to deal explicitly with group-dynamic aspects.

Literature for further study (in German)

Macke, Gerd / Hanke, Ulrike / Viehmann, Pauline (2008). Hochschuldidaktik. Weinheim und Basel: Beltz.

Gudjons, Herbert (Hrsg.) (2003). Handbuch Gruppenunterricht. Weinheim: Beltz.