

# Great Groups, Terrific Teams



*Most effective PBL experiences involve student teams or groups. While there are many different ways to create and manage student groups, the teacher-tested suggestions below will help you to make thoughtful grouping decisions and to set up effective project teams.*

## CREATING GROUPS

### Questions to Consider

Creating project groups is an art, not a science. However, teachers need to be thoughtful about creating groups and should be able to support their choices with instructionally sound arguments. When creating groups, be sure to consider the following questions:

#### Number of groups:

- ▶ Are there sufficient resources and materials to supply all groups?
- ▶ Will there be enough time to have all groups exhibit or present their work?
- ▶ Should the number of groups be adjusted in order to produce a desired group size?

#### Size of groups:

- ▶ Is there enough work to keep all group members occupied? Is there too much work?

#### Membership of groups:

- ▶ Is it desirable to create heterogeneous groups?
- ▶ Do language issues have an impact on student groupings?
- ▶ Should students with specific skills be grouped together or separated?
- ▶ Do any groups contain volatile combinations of student personalities?
- ▶ Are students asked to work with different students throughout the year?
- ▶ Are there occasions when advanced students should be grouped together?

### Pros and Cons of Primary Grouping Methods

Most teachers create groups using one of the three methods below. Each has its limits:

GROUPING METHOD	PROS	CONS
Students select their own groups	Students generally get along with their group members	Students aren't challenged to work with different people, unbalanced size likely
Students select groups based on interest in topics	Topic of interest likely to result in greater degree of student engagement	Unbalanced size likely, some students may make selections based on their friends rather than topics
Teacher selects groups	Teacher can create heterogeneous, balanced groups	Student buy-in is compromised due to lack of input

### Two Effective Grouping Strategies

The two grouping strategies below attempt to combine a student choice element with ultimate teacher discretion.

Students first submit the name of 1-2 people who they really want to work with, and then the teacher assembles pairs or trios into larger teams, taking into consideration all appropriate grouping factors.

This strategy works well when teams will be focusing on different topics:

- 1) Teacher creates a "ballot" that lists all possible project topics.
- 2) Students rank the options based on their preferences on the "ballot."
- 3) Teacher sorts the ballots into piles based on students' first choice.
- 4) Teacher moves students to different piles to balance group size, gender, skills, etc.
- 5) As much as possible, students are moved to their next highest choice.

## **MANAGING GROUPS: BALANCING THE WORKLOAD**

Teachers (and some students) often complain that project teams result in an unbalanced division of labor where the top students wind up doing the majority of the work and the “slackers” ride their coattails. While there is no way to completely eliminate this problem, groups can improve time on task and move closer to a healthy workload balance through the strategies below:

### **Increase the Engagement**

Some students remain unmotivated in group settings because they are not interested in the group’s task. The power of PBL is that a well-crafted project that incorporates the Six A’s of PBL design can result in higher student engagement, and thus a more balanced group workload. If some students “check out” of your group project, reexamine the project design and pay special attention to the authenticity, active learning, and adult relationship dimensions.

### **Build Community**

Groups and teams function more effectively when there is at least a trace of affinity between the members. Many teachers begin group project experiences by investing in the group’s interpersonal relationships through fun (and often project-related) community-building activities. Scavenger hunts, trust walks, and friendly group competitions can pay big dividends over the course of a long-term project.

### **Teach Group Skills**

Many students, particularly at the upper grades, can learn to help include and motivate their peers if taught to do so. Consider explicit instruction on topics such as group dynamics and active listening. In one academy program, students in new group experiences are required to share their strengths, weaknesses, AND are asked to share with the group one strategy to help get them back on track when they exhibit their weakness. It sounds like this: “I’m a good writer, but I have trouble with procrastination. If you see me procrastinating during this project, remind me verbally and help me come up with a deadline for my work.”

### **Assign Group Roles**

While experienced PBL students can be expected to manage their own workload and create any necessary group roles, students new to the approach should be provided with more structure in this area. As suggested by much of the formal cooperative learning training, groups can be assigned specific roles (facilitator, liaison, recorder, etc.) to ensure that each member makes a significant contribution. If you use this approach, be sure to provide adequate training and explanation for each role, and make sure students rotate through different roles from one project to another.

### **Include Individual Accountability Checks**

If carrots don’t work, try some sticks. Many veteran PBL practitioners incorporate both group and individual responsibilities in their project work. For example, while groups are working to create web sites about native plant species, each student is required to research and write a paper about a related topic. When properly sequenced, this individual work can be incorporated into the overall group product.

### Conduct Frequent Check-Ins

Countless group project disasters have been averted through the timely interventions of savvy teachers! When students are given class time to work in their groups, teachers often sit in on group discussions to gauge group progress, coach students towards solutions, and determine which students need prodding. Written check-ins are also an effective way to gather reconnaissance on group efforts.

### Use Real-World Strategies

In the business world, workers who are poor team players often have difficulty advancing within their organizations. While students should not be "fired" from project work, some teachers have found success by developing elaborate rewards and accountability systems. One project-based program asks students to complete written evaluations of their group members at the end of each project. The evaluations then are filed in a "resume" folder that follows each student to their next group. This accountability measure motivates students to improve performance.

### Use a Balanced Grading System

Students who are motivated by a desire to pass your class may be inspired by the inclusion of an individual participation grade in project work. Some teachers give students a significant voice in determining individual grades. One method uses a "zero-sum" system whereby student projects are given a lump sum of points that students within groups then haggle over and distribute to individuals. Other approaches ask older students to provide feedback on the efforts of their group members. A simple "brag sheet" format (as seen below) can be used to collect valuable information about individual participation.

#### GROUP PARTICIPATION "BRAG SHEET"

**Directions:** Write the names of each group member in appropriate box and comment on their contributions to the group. On the back, describe IN DETAIL your own contributions to the project.

LEVEL	DESCRIPTION	NAMES
<b>Excellent</b>	Worked extremely hard, provided essential contributions to group, served as a leader and model for all, completely responsible	Chris - was a leader, helped others do their best
<b>Good</b>	Worked hard, provided important contribution to group, a "team player", responsible	Pat - always on task and organized
<b>Satisfactory</b>	Usually worked well, helped group complete tasks	Jo - OK, did what was asked
<b>Unsatisfactory</b>	Frequently off task, absent, and/or disinterested, made the group efforts more difficult	Terry - Missing in action