

ROM Anthology Tasters

Group work

What do effective teachers believe about pupils working with others?

Research evidence

There isn't a single 'right way' of grouping pupils for learning and most teachers use a range of grouping strategies. But there is good evidence that particularly effective teachers believe that group work (when it is structured) is an effective learning strategy. They use this strategy to a larger extent than most and studies have found positive effects on student achievement.

Your evidence

You might like to explore how the combinations of pupils you currently use work using a grid like the one below. You could tape record or video a group discussion, or ask a colleague to observe and report back to you how it worked afterwards.

Group characteristics	Comments
Composition of the group (size, gender, ability, friendship)	
In what ways did the group collaborate?	
Did anyone not participate? (How did the others respond?)	
Did one pupil assume leadership of the group? (Was this challenged?)	
Did the group feel satisfied with the outcome of their discussion?	

What does this tell you about how you think about group work? What activities do you group pupils for? How important do you think it is to retain the same combinations or is there a virtue in getting every pupil familiar with collaborating with every other pupil in the class?

Next steps

Now that you have gathered evidence about how you are currently using groups in the classroom could you experiment with new combinations of pupils (varying the group composition according to size, gender, ability, friendship) for different activities and monitor the effects? Would you find it helpful to work with a colleague and share your findings?

Find out more

RoM Anthology section 1, page 3, What do effective teachers believe about working with others?

RoM 35 Raising achievement through group work:

www.gtce.org.uk/research/romtopics/rom_managementoflearning/groupwork_nov06

How can working with their peers help pupils to learn?

Research evidence

More effective teachers are convinced of the value of pupil discussion. Working with their peers allows pupils to see different ways of tackling the same task and, as a result, extend their own repertoire. Pupils also come to learn new and better strategies through trying to explain the strengths and weaknesses in their own work to others.

One study found that some less effective mathematics teachers believed that the best approach to help pupils learn mathematics was individualised practice and problem-solving. They rarely asked pupils to work in groups. Because the pupils worked individually, they did not become aware of the approaches other pupils used, which narrowed the pupils' sense of possibilities.

Your evidence

You might like to explore the learning that takes place between pairs or small groups of pupils in one of your classes. You could monitor an activity specifically designed to help your pupils learn from each other, such as a mathematical investigation in which pupils are asked how they could share two cakes equally between six children, or work out how many tiles they would need to cover a floor. You could observe a group, listening to and noting down the strategies they suggest. You could also ask your pupils to share the various strategies they explored in their groups with you and the rest of the class during a plenary session.

Next Steps

Having gained an idea of strategies your pupils use, you might like to consider how you might help to enhance them. For example, you could ask your pupils to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of each other's strategies, noting perhaps quick and efficient ways of working. Could you share ideas with a colleague about ways of getting pupils to work effectively with each other?

Find out more

RoM Anthology section 1, page 3, What do effective teachers believe about working with others?

RoM 19 Assessment for learning, putting it into practice:

www.gtce.org.uk/research/romtopics/rom_teachingandlearning/afl_sep04

How can you help pupils to work *together* during group work?

Research evidence

There is strong research evidence that collaborative learning can effectively promote pupil understanding, increase motivation to learn and enhance competence and self-esteem. But you can't just put pupils into groups and expect them to work together productively. When pupils are sitting in a group, but there is no specific requirement for them to work together, they are likely to work individually. So you need to give them a reason to work together.

Your evidence

You might find it helpful to explore what types of tasks encourage your pupils to engage in when working in groups.

You could tape record or video different group work activities in which pupils have been asked to work together, for example to:

- solve a problem
- play a game
- read story
- role-play, or
- reach an agreement.

Make a note of how your pupils do or don't work together to in each of these circumstances. Try to identify whether there are any pupils that find it difficult to work together, or if pupils respond differently to different activities.

Next steps

Now that you have observed how your pupils work together on different tasks could you identify any key features of the tasks that are effective at encouraging them to work collaboratively? Would it be useful to work with your pupils or a colleague to develop some activities that would help them to work together? Which activities do they find easier to complete independently, and which do they find easier to complete as part of a group?

Find out more

RoM Anthology section 2, page 12, Why use collaborative group-work and small group discussion?

RoM 35 Raising achievement through group work:

www.gtce.org.uk/research/romtopics/rom_managementoflearning/groupwork_nov06

How can you make group work effective?

Research evidence

To ensure pupils collaborate, you have to put them in a situation that requires them to interact and co-operate in order to complete the task or solve the problem. In collaborative group work, you will be establishing activities that require pupils to:

- work together as a group
- exchange ideas and resources
- contribute to group discussions
- challenge others' reasons and understandings
- discuss alternatives, and
- accept responsibility for the group's decisions.

Your evidence

You may find it helpful to review how your pupils conduct group work using the questions below as a framework to analyse what happens. Or you might like to ask a trusted colleague to observe a group work activity in one of your lessons and give you feedback about the following items:

- Do pupils take turns or do they frequently talk over each other or interrupt?
- Do they invite contributions from each other?
- Do they listen to each other, and respond and react to each other's contributions?
- Do they invite each other to offer explanations (e.g. by asking 'Why do you think that?')
- Do pupils elaborate their contributions by providing reasons, explanations, and examples?
- Do pupils modify what they say in the light of each other's comments?
- Do they pool ideas before reaching a group decision?

Next steps

Using yours or your colleague's observations, can you identify your pupils' strengths and weaknesses in group working? Could you use your evidence as a focus for a discussion about group work with your pupils? Would it be helpful to work with your pupils to build rules for structuring group discussion and observe the effects of these rules on a subsequent group work activity?

Find out more

RoM Anthology section 2, page 13, How can you help children improve the quality of their collaborative work?

RoM 35 Raising achievement through group work:

www.gtce.org.uk/research/romtopics/rom_managementoflearning/groupwork_nov06

How can you help pupils to get the most from group work?

Research evidence

Pupils need specific training and support from teachers to get the most out of co-operative group learning. You need to support pupils to:

- ask questions
- be active and persistent in seeking help from their peers
- give help that is detailed, and
- check that the help given is understood by the recipient.

Your evidence

You might find it helpful to explore what types of talk your pupils engage in when working in groups.

You could tape record or video a role-play of a group work activity in which pupils have been given secret roles such as 'always agree', 'argue', 'say nothing', 'ask for information', 'ask for clarification', 'take up what somebody else has said' (perhaps you and they can think of others).

Afterwards, you could discuss the role-play with the group, reflecting on both the helpful and unhelpful interactions.

Next steps

Now your pupils know more about ways of talking productively with each other, could you help them to put their knowledge into practice? Could you work individually with groups to train them to ask for clarification, extend each other's ideas, follow up or add to each other's suggestions, use their imagination to make more elaborate suggestions and invite everyone in the group to participate in the discussion?

Find out more

RoM Anthology section 1, page 13, How can you help children improve the quality of their collaborative work?

RoM 35 Raising achievement through group work:

www.gtce.org.uk/research/romtopics/rom_managementoflearning/groupwork_nov06

What group sizes are best for learning?

Research evidence

The small-group discussions needed for effective collaborative work need to last long enough for all pupils to have the opportunity to contribute. The time required will increase with the size of the group and the complexity of the task. You can compose groups from clusters of friends and deliberately include pupils with a range of abilities. Group size can vary from two to eight students. Pairs allow deep discussion, but may not cover a range of views. Larger groups tend to have a greater diversity of opinions, which helps discussion, but they are more likely to be dominated by a few individuals than smaller groups.

Your evidence

You may find it helpful to look back over some of your lesson plans and think about how you decided on the most appropriate type and size of grouping. You could make notes using a matrix like this:

Lesson Activity	Individual work	Whole class work	Group work

Include size and composition (e.g. ability spread, gender) of the group in the fourth column. How much coherence is there between your learning aims and your organisational strategies? Would you find it useful to work with a colleague so that you could compare when and how you both use different group sizes?

Next steps

Could you use your evidence to plan activities for groups of different sizes? For example, would it be helpful to experiment with pupils working in pairs for peer tutoring, and in whole classes for information giving and summarising? Are there ways you could scale activities so that pupils begin an activity in pairs and then double up to complete an activity?

Find out more

RoM Anthology section 2, page 14, What techniques can you use to promote and structure small group discussion?

RoM 15 Social interaction as a means of constructing learning: the impact of Lev Vygotsky's ideas on teaching and learning:

www.gtce.org.uk/research/romtopics/rom_teachingandlearning/vygotsky_dec03