

The trouble with GROUP WORK

Students often enjoy working in groups, but as Colin Foster explains, a class doing things together isn't necessarily learning together...

Group work is often trumpeted as reflecting the natural order of human society. In everyday life, people are rarely required to operate in isolation. Human beings naturally form families and collaborative communities, thus making any school environment that forces students to work and be assessed individually a highly artificial one.

In the real world, we need each other. One of the most important things we might hope our students learn in school is how to collaborate and communicate effectively with others, since it's an absolute necessity for a well-functioning society. We also know that employers are actively looking for recruits possessing the kind of soft skills that enable them to do this – hence, lessons will often involve students learning in groups.

'Learned helplessness'

But does that argument actually make sense? There are many aspects of 'real life' that aren't just less relevant in a learning context, but sometimes the exact opposite of what's needed.

For instance, in the real world we tend to 'play to people's strengths'. When young children are baking a cake together, you might hear something like, '*You're good at cracking eggs – you do that. I'm good at weighing – I'll weigh out the flour.*'

This is good on many levels. It encourages a

positive, can-do attitude and gives the children a means of celebrating their skills. Having been made aware of their different strengths, they can work together as a team to get the job done more efficiently. Any employer would be pleased with that!

But from a learning point of view, how will Child 2 ever get good at cracking eggs if Child 1 always does it? How will Child 1 ever get good at weighing if they always rely on Child 2 to do it for them?

This kind of 'learned helplessness' can be insidious. There's no deliberate effort to deskill anyone, but that's what

they know anything beyond what it needs them to do. Specialisation equals efficiency.

Thinking differently

In education, however, it's all about the *individuals*. In education, work is simply a means to an end. The motivation at play isn't that there are pages of exercises that need to be completed, or essays that need to be written – those will all end up in the bin eventually. The point is *what's learned in the process*.

When our priority is learning, we need to think very differently. The group work that enables tasks to be completed more efficiently often isn't all

“The group work that enables tasks to be completed more efficiently often isn't all that helpful”

ultimately happens. Children get classed as 'good egg crackers' or 'good weighers', and become increasingly dependent on others to perform certain tasks.

In a work context, an employer may well not care about the individuals assigned to a task. As long as they're productive cogs in the machine, they're just a means to an end. If an employer is unlikely to ever redeploy its staff to different roles, it might not be bothered about whether

that helpful. For learning to occur, things need to be slowed down and everyone needs to get their chance.

Simply playing to each person's existing strengths serves to imprison learners in small pockets of capability, and prevent them from developing important skills they might lack. It misdirects practice to where it's least needed, placing the need to 'learn things' firmly at odds with the desire to 'get things done more efficiently'.

Prioritising learning

The main challenge of having students collaborate in the classroom is to avoid the left-hand column of the diagram labelled *fig. 1* and promote the one on the right. And that's hard.

To learn, we have to focus on our weaknesses. Doing this can be difficult and slow, and may well frustrate other members of the group if they have a 'doing', rather than a 'learning' focus.

During a pair work activity, I once heard a learner say, "It will be faster if you just do it and I just watch." Any teacher would be alarmed by this, but in a sense, that learner may actually have been right. If the faster child stopped to explain what they were doing, this would have slowed them down.

If the 'job' is to complete the task, and if that's what the teacher is rewarding ('*Well done! Group A is finished already!*'), then we shouldn't be surprised when children find ways of doing precisely that which serves to prevent learning. We should remember that in non-learning situations, this may indeed be the perfectly sensible thing to do.

Groups or no groups?

To some people, this is a fatal problem with group work, and one of the reasons why they believe it to be incompatible with learning, but I don't think that's necessarily the case.

Getting things done	Learning
Who's good at X? OK, you do X. Who's good at Y? OK, you do Y.	Who's good at X? OK, you do Y. Who's good at Y? OK, you do X.
Appropriate if we just want to get the job done	Necessary if we want people to learn something

fig. 1

I think that *unplanned* or *poorly-planned* group work is the problem.

Too often, students will begin lessons working individually, and gradually morph into collaboration as they start to approach harder questions. Sometimes, the culture within a classroom can be that it's always okay to 'work together'. If students politely ask

to do so, then surely only the meanest teacher would say no.

The usual concern that arises here is that the students will then waste time 'off task' and fail to complete it, but the concern I have is almost the opposite – that by

working together, the students will be *too successful*. They may get on too well, too quickly, beyond what either of them might do unaided.

This means that even in a best-case scenario for pair work, you'll potentially end up with two partially-skilled, complementary people who may 'work well together', but are unable to perform well individually – and that's in neither learner's best interests.

Mind the gaps

With groups larger than two, teachers will tend to complain even more vocally about group work, chiefly in terms of freeloading and timewasting.

Giving each group member a role (which might rotate over time) and making them individually accountable for the entire product of the group can be helpful. Even then, you still risk each person learning only part of what you're trying to teach.

Learning to perform effectively as a group can't help but create gaps that go overlooked, if only because someone else will be covering them. Like it or not, even outwardly 'successful' group work that sees students successfully completing their tasks will ultimately lull students into a false sense of security.



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