

My Students Don't Like Group Work

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Editor's Note: *Today we're revisiting an old favorite on group work. At the bottom of the article, you'll find links to additional articles on designing effective group work assignments.*

Students don't always like working in groups. Ann Taylor, an associate professor of chemistry at Wabash College, had a class that was particularly vocal in their opposition. She asked for their top 10 reasons why students don't want to work in groups and they offered this list (which I've edited slightly).

1. It's hard to focus during small group exercises.
2. We are always rushed.
3. Group exercises mean we do the work and the teacher doesn't.
4. We're trying to work on material we didn't understand in the reading.
5. If we want to work in groups, we can form them on our own; in class we would rather hear someone who understands the material explain it.
6. We're all confused; getting in a group merely compounds the confusion.
7. I don't like the people in my group.
8. Group members don't show up or don't contribute.
9. We'd get through more material if you lectured.
10. I can't sleep during small group exercises.

A few of these reasons have convinced some faculty that not much learning occurs in groups. Others may be a bit more ambivalent but figure if students are opposed why bother with a questionable strategy and have their resistance to deal with as well.

Taylor responds as do many of us who use group work regularly. “Some of these reasons are exactly why I use small group work in class.” (p. 219) Group work engages students and forces them to work with the material. Of course, it’s easier, and from the student perspective preferable, if the teacher provides all the examples, raises all the questions, proposes and evaluates various solutions, i.e., does all the work. All students have to do is copy or download the teacher’s material.

It’s also true that working in groups is harder than doing it on your own. Groups have to cooperate, communicate, delegate, and depend on each other. But for most tasks, groups can do more and do it better than individuals. In the professional world, there’s hardly a career where some (if not most) of the work is done in groups and not necessarily groups populated with your friends.

To students and some teachers, lecture looks like a “neater” way to learn. It certainly is more efficient, but the question is what kind of learning results from lecture? Too often lecture material is memorized—it hasn’t really been figured out, often it can’t be applied and regularly it’s quickly forgotten. Learning most things is a messy process. Confusion, frustration, even despair regularly occur. If students never experience those feelings, they also never experience the thrill of finally figuring something out, of really understanding and of being changed by what they’ve learned.

Does this mean group work should replace lectures? That teacher explanations are always ruled out? Of course not. It simply means that teachers need a repertoire of instructional strategies and that the decision of which to use when should be guided by a collection of variables that does not include whether students want to work in groups.

Taylor says she uses groups over student objections because they work. “By the end of the semester, there are improvements in their performance, teamwork and ability to solve problems. And this is what education is about: students’ growth and learning. Our role as educators is not as a performer or entertainer, but as a facilitator who guides students through the challenges of the learning process, whether they like it or not.” (p. 219)

What may be most useful here is her head-on strategy for dealing with student objections. If you ask students why they don’t want to work in groups and assemble their list, you can respond to their objections. Students may not like all your answers but at least the conversation introduces them to the educational rationale behind having them work collectively and it isn’t because you’re making them do the work you don’t want to do.

Reference: Taylor, A. (2011). Top 10 reasons students dislike working in groups ... and why I do it anyway. *Biochemistry and Molecular Biology Education*, 39 (2), 219-220.

For more on group work, check out these articles:

- [Choosing the Best Approach for Small Group Work](#)
- [Use Team Charters to Improve Group Assignments](#)
- [Students Riding on Coattails during Group Work? Five Simple Ideas to Try](#)

My Students Don’t Like Group Work was originally published on Feb 22, 2012 and was the fourth most popular article on *Faculty Focus* that year.