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| **[Choosing the Best Approach for Small Group Work](http://ww1.facultyfocus.com/out/?ET=facultyfocus:e384:166954a:&st=email&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.facultyfocus.com%2Farticles%2Feffective-teaching-strategies%2Fchoosing-the-best-approach-for-small-group-work%2F)** |
| By Claire Howell Major, PhD  Enter the term “group work” into a Google search, and you’ll find yourself bombarded with dozens of hits clustered around definitions of group work, benefits of group work, and educational theories underpinning group work. If you dig a little deeper into the search results, however, you’ll find that not all of the pages displayed under the moniker of “group work” describe the same thing. Instead, dozens of varieties of group learning appear. They all share the common feature of having students work together, but they have different philosophies, features, and approaches to the group task.  Does it matter what we call it? Maryellen Weimer asked this important question in her 2014 Teaching Professor article of the same title, with the implicit idea that one approach might be better suited for a given task than another. She believes that the answer to the question is yes. And she’s right. As the adage goes, it is important to choose the right tool for the job at hand. A hammer is not the best tool for drilling a hole, and a drill is not the best tool for driving a nail. Both are good tools, when used for the appropriate job. So it is with group work. If you don’t choose the best possible approach, then you will be less likely to accomplish the goals and objectives of the assignment.  While there are several different forms of group work, there are a few that are more often used than others and have a body of research that supports their effectiveness. Three of these are cooperative learning, collaborative learning, and reciprocal peer teaching.  **Cooperative learning:** In this form of group learning, students work together in a small group so that everyone participates on a collective task that has been clearly assigned (Cohen, 1994, p. 3). A classic example of this approach is Think-Pair-Share (Barkley et al, 2014), in which the teacher assigns a question and then students think for a minute independently, form a pair to discuss their answers, and share their answers with a larger group. The goal is that all students achieve similar outcomes. Each student considers the same teacher-assigned question, and they all work on performing the same tasks: thinking, pairing, and sharing.  **Collaborative learning:** In this form of group learning, students and faculty work together to create knowledge. The process should enrich and enlarge them (Matthews, 1996, p. 101). An example of this form of group work is a collaborative paper (Barkley et al, 2014). In a collaborative group, students work together to create a product that is greater than any individual might achieve alone. They do not all necessarily do the same task, however, but rather may divide the work among themselves according to their interests and skills. The goal is not for the same learning to occur, but rather that meaningful learning occurs.  **Reciprocal peer teaching:** In this form of group learning, one student teaches others, who then reciprocate in kind (Major et al, 2015). Arguably, this approach is a variation of either cooperative learning or collaborative learning, depending on the task. An example that leans more toward cooperative learning is the jigsaw, in which base groups study together to become experts (Barkley et al, 2014). The base groups then split, and new groups are formed with a member of each base group serving as an expert in a particular area. An example that leans more toward collaborative learning is microteaching, in which individual students take turns teaching the full class (Major et al, 2015).  These three approaches are all tried-and-true group-learning varieties. They all have been shown to benefit students on a number of outcomes, from the acquisition of content knowledge to the development of higher-order thinking skills (Davidson & Major, 2015). How is it possible, then, to choose the right pedagogical tool for the learning task?  **Pedagogical considerations:** In choosing any approach to group learning, it is essential to start with the learning goal. What should students be able to do after the completion of the activity? If the goal is for them all to gain the same information, cooperative learning may be the best approach. If the goal is for them to create new knowledge, then collaborative learning may be the best approach. If it is to share knowledge, reciprocal peer teaching may be a good approach.  **Learner considerations:** When making any pedagogical consideration, it is essential to consider the students. Their level of expertise is important, for example, and if they are new to a subject and need foundational knowledge, then cooperative learning may be the best approach. If they are advanced students, then collaborative learning or reciprocal peer teaching may be more engaging for them.  **Contextual considerations:** While contextual considerations are not always the most glamorous, they certainly play a part in our ability to carry out group work. For example, if the class is a large one, a short collaborative activity such as a Think-Pair-Share may simply be more manageable than a long-term collaborative activity; likewise, reciprocal microteaching may be a great approach in an online class but would not be as feasible in a large lecture scenario. A collaborative paper might be a great way to introduce graduate seminar students who work as research assistants at a flagship university to the process of co-authoring, but the same approach might not work as well for first-year students at a community college.  The intent here is not to prescribe a specific approach based on a checklist of considerations. Rather, it is to say that, as teachers, we need to know what the instructional options are and to take into account the goals, the learners, and the learning context when making pedagogical decisions. Ultimately, we are in the best place to know what will work best in our unique situations, and it is thus our responsibility to choose well when deciding to use group work in the college classroom.  References: Barkley, E.F., Major, C.H., & Cross, K.P. (2014). Collaborative learning techniques: A handbook for college faculty. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.  Cohen, E. G. (1994). 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