



Collaborative Learning in Small Groups: Insights from the PLTL Discourse Study



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Why do we teach with group work?



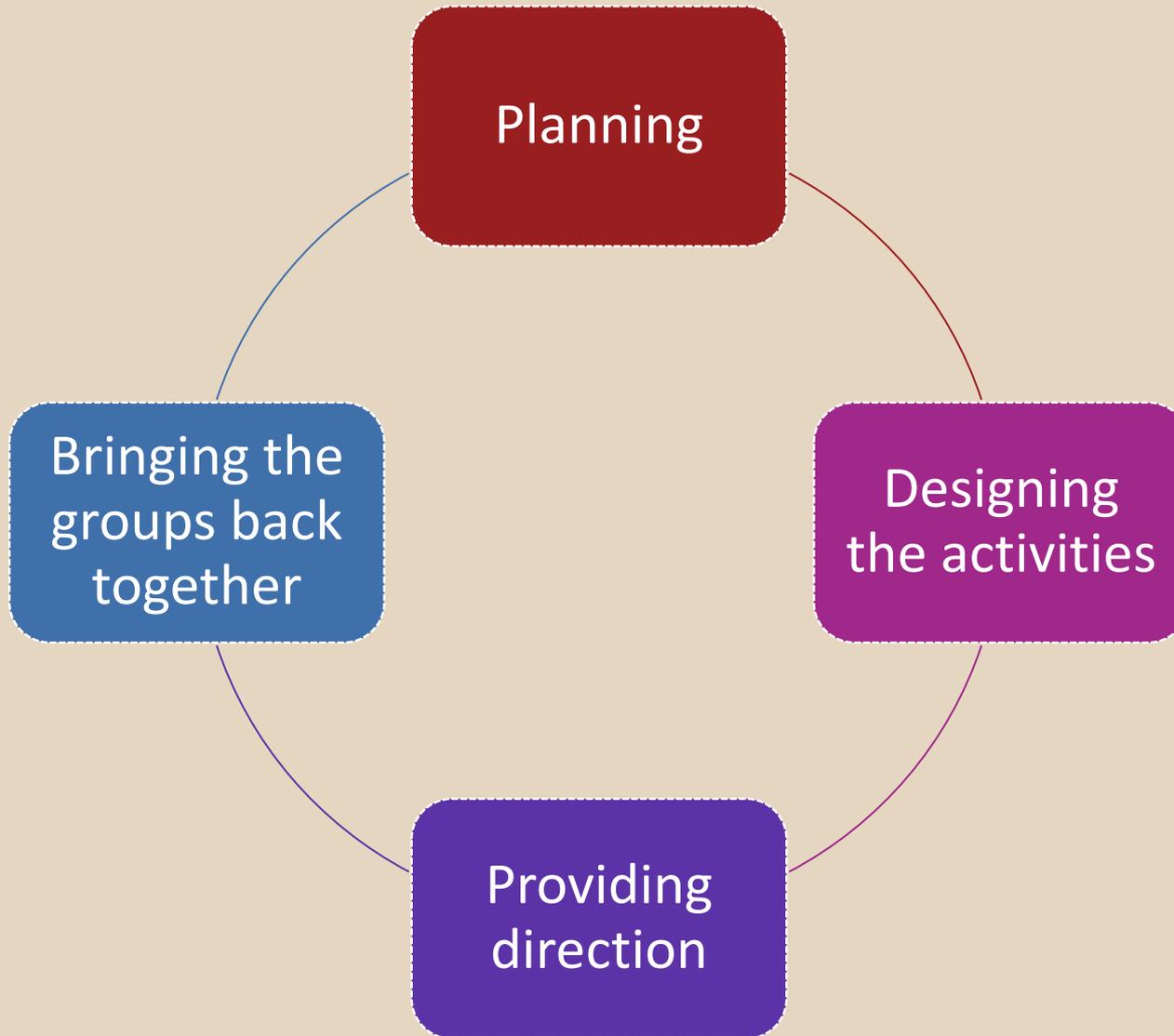
- Helps develop an understanding of concepts and facts
- Increases skill development
- Promotes critical thinking
- Increases interest in content areas
- Changes attitudes/values
- Improves relationships between individuals from diverse backgrounds
- Prepares students for future professional work

What are the drawbacks of small group work?



- Students do not have the skills to work in groups
- Worried about covering content
- Not enough time
- Grade inflation
- Student resistance
 - Inability to resolve conflict with group members
 - Unfair grading
 - “Social loafing”

Effective in class group work



Planning



- Let students know group work is part of the course
 - Explain what you see as valuable about participation
- Set ground rules for cooperative, “safe” environments
 - Explain mechanisms for dealing with disagreements or conflicts
- Organize appropriate seating arrangements (face-to-face)
- Provide necessary materials (e.g., poster paper to collect ideas)

Designing the Activity



- Activities need to fit the students' current level of skills and abilities
- Activities should generate discussion among students
 - For example, students can work in groups to...
 - ✦ Synthesize ideas from readings, assignments, or lectures
 - ✦ Draw conclusions about tables, graphs, or data
 - ✦ Solve multi-step or complex problems

Providing direction



Before group work

- Form groups based on the activity and a purpose
 - Self-selected versus instructor formed
 - ✦ Self Selected
 - People tend to select “people like themselves”
 - ✦ Instructor Formed
 - Create groups that will “push and pull” each other
- Small Group Roles (see next slide)

Small group roles



Role	Description
Manager	Keeps the group focused on the activity and assures that all members participate and understand.
Recorder/ Scribe	Keeps notes of what the group has done in consultation with the others.
Spokesperson (or presenter)	Presents reports and discussion to the class.

Note. Small group roles should change

Providing direction



During group work

- Check Students
 - Ask students about what their “role” is in the group
- Be an “active listener”
 - Listen for “peaks” and “valleys” in the discussion
- Be a facilitator
 - Let students know how much time they have to work in small groups
 - Give a 1-minute warning
 - Provide additional activities for groups that finish early
- Constant monitoring without interfering

Bringing the groups back together



- Provide structure
 - e.g., 1 group provides 1 idea or piece of information
 - Possibly write ideas on board
- Ask the group to explain their reasoning
 - “Why does your group think that?”
- Promote participation and elaboration on ideas
 - “Would someone like to add on?”
- Use wait time
 - Let students have 3-5 seconds to think before they answer

How can we improve the discourse with students after small group work?



Peer-Led Team Learning

- Formalized study groups containing 6-8 students
- Meet for approximately 2 hours each weekend to solve problems
- Facilitated by a trained student (peer) leader who has previously taken the course

***Peer leaders play an important role in whole group discussions by promoting student-to-student conversations**

Summary of Findings



- Peer leaders use a range of facilitative and instructional discourse practices
 - Instructional: Asking closed and open questions about the content, providing students with explanations
 - Facilitative: Providing managerial structure support, refocusing student comments to the whole group
- Use of a high percentage of facilitative discourse was related to increased chains of student-to-student interactions, higher student participation, and more equal student participation

Tips for conducting in class group work



- Have a clear purpose
- Fit the activity to students' current level of skills and abilities
- Create groups and establish roles
- Facilitate groups during activity
- Promote student-to-student interaction and participation when bringing the groups back together

Questions?



Resources



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