

*What, why and how of*

## Classroom Grouping for Effective Learning

WOULD you like to temper Joe's aggressive enthusiasm with a growing sensitivity to others? Do you want to guide Ruth out of her shell? Have you some classroom routines that might well be entrusted to adolescents? Are you eager to meet more effectively the differences found in any class of students, whether grouped at random or by specific criteria? Are you concerned with the scope of information, understandings, attitudes and appreciations that must somehow be dealt with in a school year of less than 200 days? If your reply to these questions is in the affirmative, then grouping within your classroom can provide one way of accomplishing each of your goals.

The question of grouping is a pervasive, continuing and insistent one. It covers a multitude of practices and points of view. The issues involved must be explored whenever school people have to make decisions regarding the grouping of students into classes, the grouping of courses into various track-curricula, the grouping of young people

into small schools within a large school unit. Throughout educational practice, students are being grouped and regrouped, classified and reclassified, categorized and recategorized.

Similarly, within effective classrooms students are assembled and reassembled, sometimes as a total group of 30 or 35, sometimes into smaller groups of varying size, sometimes into teams of two or three. The particular focus of this article is on this flexible classroom grouping that makes for sound learning. It will deal with specific questions of the what, why, and how of small group work.

### What Are Groups?

Whether we plan for it or not, we have grouping within our classrooms. There are the social groups—the cliques that develop their own mysterious cement of togetherness; the homework-sharing groups, with profit and benefit to members of the brotherhood; the interest groups that range from the statisticians of the baseball season to the squealing idolaters of the current Fabian, Darin, or Nelson of the popular musical world.

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Our adolescents turn to each other for purposes of their own—for social warmth, practical help, identification, assurance and reassurance in their world of change and growth. Youngsters group naturally and we should use this propensity to group living, no matter how ephemeral and vacillating it may seem at times. When we utilize this need of human beings to be drawn to other human beings, when we channel this need in worthwhile educational directions, we are capitalizing on one more of our reservoir of sound resources in an effort to improve the learning situation.

What are these educational groups we can form and should form? There is the "buzz" group—of short duration and immediate purpose. With these quickly formed groups of five or six, we can provide opportunities for rapid sharing of homework assignments, for exchange of ideas and experiences, for formulation of problems and questions, for discussion of controversy and differences.

Then there are the "job" groups, of short or long term duration. Some students can constitute a materials committee, whose function is to locate and arrange for the use of appropriate recordings, films, tapes, filmstrips, and other instructional materials pertinent to a particular unit of study. Or there might be a bulletin board committee, charged with the responsibility of maintaining attractive and informative displays of pictures, articles, original material, relevant to any subject of study or interest to a given class. Current events committees are another source of study and information for many classes in the social studies, science, and language arts fields.

A third type of grouping is represented by "work-study" committees, organized to facilitate deeper and broader

exploration of various aspects of a problem or unit. These committees become involved with all the processes of sound research—planning, investigating, organizing, sharing, solving, and summarizing. A science class may have several committees researching the many peace-time uses of nuclear energy. Such a class will have a broader grasp of the role of nuclear energy in our daily lives and deeper insights into issues and implications than will a class that, with one eye and one voice, skims the surface of the brief account found in the standard text.

Buzz groups, job groups, study-work committees—these are only a few of the kinds and varieties of classroom grouping. They can all play an important part in facilitating learning and should be utilized at appropriate times and for appropriate purposes.

### Why Should We Group?

The reasons for small group work within our classes are obvious and valid, but they cannot be reiterated often enough in this age of conformity.

First of all, we group in order to provide for the vast differences that exist among any aggregation of individuals. The great varieties of interests and purposes, the wide range of talents and skills, the important differences in ability and potential, in speed, depth and nature of comprehension—all these distinctions necessitate the use of many varied materials and resources as well as classroom procedures that provide opportunities for each student to move as rapidly as possible in reaching his own potential. And these great differences exist, regardless of any effort to implement ability grouping. For while students can be assigned to classes on

the basis of similar I.Q. scores and reading levels, all the other kinds of differences cited here are present and defeat any effort at "homogeneous" teaching, and rightly so.

We can no longer afford the luxury of such homogeneous teaching, wherein 30 students read the same book, answer the same questions, listen to the same words as continuing standard fare during the school year. In fact, the results of such standardized teaching lead us to a second reason for using groups within our classrooms—that of promoting more effective learning. We have much evidence to support the thesis that small group work, when appropriate, can result in better learning. For example, we know that people tend to learn better that which has meaning and purpose for them; that learning is more effective when the learner is actively involved in the learning process; that the total "power" in a group is often greater than the sum of power found in the individuals involved. Were we to keep only these three guiding principles in mind, we would see how a judicious use of committee and small group work can improve the quality and quantity of learning.

A third reason for grouping within our classrooms can be stated simply—to vary our teaching-learning procedures. Variety in the learning situation is essential if we are to match method with purpose, procedure with content, approach with maturity level and student needs. The whole concept of method is based upon the appropriateness of any given procedure, technique, approach to the relevant factors involved—nature of the learners, nature of any given content, nature of purposes and goals, to name the major considerations. Therefore, any sound theory of

methodology involves the use of varied teaching procedures, which in turn include the use of small group work.

Another reason for variety in the learning situation lies in the nature of adolescents, who in their early development have relatively short attention span and need frequent and relevant change of pace. In addition, they need opportunities for productive release of energy, opportunities that can be found in their own involvement in as many aspects of the learning process as possible. The stereotype of the traditional classroom—teacher in front of the room directing a recitation with expected conformity of behavior, response and attention from class members during the entire period—offers little opportunity for release of pent-up energy and necessary muscular and mental activity so typical of the adolescent age.

Perhaps the most significant reason of all for using small group work is that by so doing we are helping to achieve one of the most important goals of education—the development of an individual capable of living and working within the society of men. One of the most insistent needs of modern times is the need of men to learn to live together in some semblance of peace and order. Mankind has not yet acquired the know-how for such global existence, although efforts have been made since the dawn of time. It would be fantastic and tragic to believe that individuals are born with the talent to live with others. Rather this is a learned skill, an acquired art; and it is time that the school must recognize its responsibility in teaching the fundamentals of good human relationships.

In many instances we group in the classroom in terms of commonality—of interests, skills, talents, ability. At other times grouping should be based

upon differences, involving varied backgrounds, viewpoints, personalities. These two kinds of grouping play an important role in achieving the aims of the educative process.

### How Can We Group?

A usual form of small group work based on commonality among students is that of small interest groups. Regardless of the nature of the group—work-study, buzz, or job committee—there are many times when students can be grouped on the basis of a common interest. The interest might take the form of decorating for a class party, exploring the relationship of mathematics to architecture, investigating statistics concerning mental illness in urban communities, preparing a bulletin board on Presidential inaugurations. Whatever the problem, topic or task, it is a common interest in it that ties the students in that particular committee or group together. Together they can plan, investigate, share, solve, accomplish in the pursuit of the specific goals or tasks facing them.

Similarly, a skill or talent brings some students together for working purposes. In an English class study of newspapers and their role in contemporary society, students might decide to prepare a newspaper of their own; or a history class might want to develop a newspaper as it might have appeared in the time of the Revolutionary War. In either case there will be some students who can type who will assume the responsibility for that aspect of production; there will be other talented youngsters who will take charge of the art work; while still others, based upon interest, will work on feature articles, editorials, advertisements, and the like. Not

only is this a practical demonstration of essential division of labor but also a working model of the variety of talents and skills and interests needed in producing an essential feature of our everyday life.

In a different way, grouping on the basis of commonality can be utilized in an English class to help with reading skills or in a mathematics class to guide comprehension of various processes. There are many times when teachers of these subjects should meet with small groups of students who have similar problems in increasing their reading rate or understanding a certain grammatical principle or penetrating the mysteries of prime factoring. How wasteful of pupil man-hours is the teacher who "spends" the time of an entire class to drill and review a process, skill or concept that is understood by a large number, even a majority of the class.

We must not, though, overlook the many occasions when we should be permitting students to group on behalf of differences rather than similarities. For example, where exchange of opinion is desirable, we can provide for buzz group sessions. During these sessions, adolescents share with each other reactions to books they have been reading or the themes, essays, or compositions that are a part of every writing program. Not only should students have the benefit of the resulting wider acquaintance with literature and their own creative writing, but this procedure also has the merit of saving time. Thirty book reports, given singly, may not only promote boredom but may take precious class time that can otherwise be put to more effective use.

Similarly, when critical and controversial issues are under discussion and study, the therapy involved in letting

students exchange ideas, beliefs, opinions and even prejudices in quick buzz groups may be recommended. Young people must have opportunities to discover how other people—their own classmates—think and feel about many matters, varying from “going steady” to “advantages and disadvantages of foreign aid proposals.” In addition, they are gaining valuable experience in a much-needed art—that of communication for understanding.

### Guides for Effective Grouping

For those who would engage in classroom grouping practices there are some guidelines that are important if maximum values are to be gained. Only a few can be mentioned here.

First of all, it is essential to remember that grouping procedures should be used only when they are appropriate to the task at hand, the goals to be achieved, the nature of the content involved. Also they must be handled in ways appropriate to the maturity level of the students and to their experience with such procedures. Certainly a class that has never experienced small group work should not be plunged into difficult committee study without careful guidance and realistic expectations.

Related to this caution is another guideline: a constant recognition that group living and group processes are learned skills. As such they are subject to the same helpful guidance and practice and evaluation that are involved in all learning, whether it be ideas, information, attitudes, skills or appreciations. Patience and imagination on the part of the teacher, along with firm understanding of human behavior, individual and social, are essential for effective teaching of group processes.

In this regard it is wise to bear in mind the maxim, make haste slowly. The teacher must be sure that students understand what it is that they are to do and that they have clear-cut procedures for moving ahead. When false starts are made, teacher and class must re-examine their plans, modify procedures where necessary, try again—and again—and again.

In the final analysis the role of the teacher is, of course, crucial. The teacher who assumes that, once a class is organized into groups or committees, students should automatically make progress without delays, difficulties or differences, is unrealistic and naive, if not incompetent.

On the other hand, the teacher who sees the skills of group living and working as similar to skills in communicating and computing and critical thinking will devote the same patience and understanding and planning normally given to these latter learnings. He will meet with each work committee as often and as long as necessary for its effective functioning. He will see that appropriate and sufficient resource and research materials are available. He will move rapidly from buzz group to buzz group, catching the essence of each in both content and process as he roams. He will develop with his students ways of recording and reporting progress, individual and group. He will note personality clashes and individual problems and provide suitable guidance. He will expect of his students the best of which they are capable, knowing that few persons ever match grasp with reach.

In short, the teacher who uses groups and committees to further the education of his charges is placing the responsibility for learning where it primarily belongs—in the hands of the students.

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