

Small-group tasks

Getting students involved early in the course

1: Break the ice or build a team atmosphere

If you want significant student participation during your course, spend time at the beginning of the term helping students to get to know and develop trust in one another. Ask students in subgroups to share something about themselves, such as their names; a personal triumph, trial, or challenge; what is foremost on their minds at the moment; or one reason they are taking the course. Or, if you'd like them to move around and meet many students, have them develop a list of ten things they would take with them to a deserted island and look for others who have similar items on their lists. For more ideas, see Race (2000) and Silberman (1996).

2: Discuss the syllabus

In the first class of the term, before handing out the syllabus, ask subgroups to generate a list of at least eight questions they have about the course (e.g., assignments, topics covered, grading policy). Then hand out the syllabus, and give the groups time to find the answers to their questions. End the activity by answering the questions for which groups found no answer.

3: Develop assessment criteria

Have small groups develop a list of assessment criteria that they think would be appropriate for a specific assignment (e.g., essay) or for a particular component of their course grade (e.g., participation). Conclude the small group activity with a plenary discussion in which the class comes to consensus about which criteria to use. This task could work well with snowball/pyramid groups.

Making course topics come alive

1: Analyze case studies

Provide case studies for groups to read and analyze. You could extend this task by using a jigsaw format: have each subgroup analyze a different case study or a different aspect of the same case, or analyze it from a different perspective and then shuffle the groups so that in each new group, every member shares the information discussed in their original group.

2: Find and share news articles

Ask some of your students to bring an article, editorial, or cartoon related to a concept discussed in class. Begin your class by asking those who completed the assignment to share in small groups their findings with those who were not assigned the exercise. Move into a whole-class discussion by having volunteers share their examples with the entire class. Draw together the examples by identifying common themes and principles, and reinforce the concepts applied throughout the assignment. Rotate this assignment throughout the term so that all students are equally involved.

3: Create and enact role plays

Ask students to create scenarios related to a topic being discussed, which they can then share with other groups. This task can work well in fishbowl or buzz groups.

4: Create an ad

Students create a thirty-second advert that promotes the subject of the class — emphasizing, for example, its value to them (or to the world) and famous people associated with it. Ask them to create a slogan for the advert. When presenting their ideas, groups can either describe the general concept and then outline or act out the advert.

5: Debate a topic

Four-member groups debate a controversial topic. Two students take one side of the issue and two take the other. Then they switch roles and argue the opposite side. Finally, all members drop their

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advocacy and come to a consensus about the topic, or develop a report that synthesizes the best evidence and reasoning on both sides. This can also be done as a fishbowl.

6: Discuss quotations

Provide a “hatful of quotes” taken from the text or person being studied. Students in each subgroup take a quote, reflect on it for a few minutes, then read it aloud and comment on it. This provides reticent students with something concrete to speak about. Use of quotations works particularly well in a circle-of-voices groups.

7: Solve ill-structured problems

Provide examples or vignettes that have both relevant and irrelevant information, unlabelled, and students need to figure out what is relevant and what to do.

Deepening thinking about a topic

1: Generate questions

At the beginning of a lecture, ask groups to make a list of questions based on completed course readings or on the lecture topic. Or, at a later point in the lecture, ask students in pairs to come up with questions about what was discussed. Double the group size and give students an opportunity to discuss and answer each other’s questions before they are posed to you and the whole class. You may also leave the questions unanswered as suggestions for further research.

Another idea is to hand out two index cards to each student at the end of a unit or class. Ask students to complete the following sentences, one on each card: “I still have a question about...” and “I can answer a question about...” Create groups and ask each to select the most pertinent “question to ask” and the most interesting “question to answer” from the cards of their group members. Reconvene as a class and ask the groups to share their questions and answers. For each question raised, ask if another student has an answer before you provide your own.

2: Generate answers

This is the most common task for groups. Give subgroups one or more question(s) to answer about course reading material or lecture content.

3: Create quizzes

Divide your lecture material into short segments (e.g., three ten-minute segments). Divide students into the same number of groups (i.e., one for each segment). Ask the first group to prepare a short quiz on the first segment of your lecture. The quiz should take no more than five minutes to prepare. The other groups can use this time to review their notes. The first team then quizzes the other groups, either as a whole, or in turn, assigning points to a team when a question is answered correctly. Repeat this process with the other groups after your next lecture segment(s).

A variation on this is to divide students into small groups and give a practice “visible” multiple-choice quiz. Groups choose an answer within a short time, then you ask for their answers all at the same time. Groups indicate their answer with index cards, number of fingers, or some other visible item. You can then discuss the answers as a large group.

4: Strategize solutions

Have small groups work together on complex procedural or computational problems. They can either figure out the exact answer or, if the problem is particularly long or complicated, develop the strategy they would use to find the answer.

5: Review lecture or course material

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Ask groups to provide a summary of the class content. Provide questions to guide their work, such as: What were the major topics we have examined? What questions do you still have? Alternately, at the end of the course, invite students to develop a “gallery of learning.” Ask each group to discuss what its members are taking away from the class, such as: new knowledge, new skills, improvement in a certain area, new or renewed interest in a topic, confidence in a particular skill. Have them write these lists on large pieces of paper and post them on the classroom walls. Give students an opportunity to walk around and read the lists. Discuss the results with them, noting the most popular, unusual, and unexpected learning outcomes.

Strengthening skills

1: Develop listening skills

Divide students into four teams and give the teams the following roles: "questioners" (who ask at least two questions about the material covered), "agreers" (who report on which points they agreed with or found helpful and explain why), "nay-sayers" (who comment on which points they disagreed with or found unhelpful and explain why), and "example-givers" (who give specific examples or applications of the material). Present the lecture, then allow the teams a few minutes to complete their assignments. Call on each team to question, to agree, and so on.

2: Respond to student writing

Have pairs of students respond to each other's written drafts. Depending on the time you have available, ask them to provide oral or written feedback, informal comments, or answers to specific questions, such as “What is the thesis? What arguments are most/least successful? What do you still want to know about the topic?”

References

Race, P. (2000). 500 Tips on Group Learning. London: Kogan Page.

Silberman, M. (1996). Active Learning: 101 Strategies to Teach Any Subject. Boston: Allyn and Bacon