Being intentional about the formation of small groups supports how and what individuals and the group learn. Although random assignments can be efficient and effective, it is often helpful to consider group composition and sometimes student input ahead of time. Of course, there is no simple formula. Depending on the nature and structure of the task, time frame, and learning goals for you or your students, different factors will come into play. The checklist given here identifies eight factors to keep in mind when forming groups.

How Group formation is driven by the demands of the task. The first step is to consider whether a task is group worthy. The next is to identify what kinds of skills and roles the task requires. Use the following checklist if you want to consider further the composition of a small group.

Group Formation Checklist

Size As group size expands, the opportunity for each learner to share and negotiate ideas decreases. Groups of three can add a level of complexity that groups of two may lack. Groups of three to four learners are more likely to generate complex interactions and potentially constructive conflict. Group size is determined in part by the capacity of the group to engage in productive work and conversation and to negotiate conflict. Ideally, groups should be small enough for each person to track the ideas and contributions of others.

Stability If contributing to collective knowledge is the goal of group work, then relatively stable small groups will work well (though they can occasionally be mixed up). If your focus is individual learning, group stability over time becomes less important. Jigsaw grouping[2] is a cooperative learning technique in which each student in a home group is responsible for specializing in one aspect of a learning unit. Students meet with members from other groups who are assigned the same aspect and, after mastering the material, they return to the home group to teach the others what they have learned. Jigsaw groups encourage students to take more responsibility for their learning and deepen their own understanding by teaching other students.

Gender and Cultural Background Gender and cultural background have a strong influence on how groups function and learn. Girls tend to prefer smaller groups than boys. Learners from diverse cultural backgrounds bring multiple perspectives that can enrich the conversation and expand students' awareness and understanding of different points of view.

Student Interests and Competencies Students' engagement in the topic influences their commitment to a task. Depending on the topic and the learning goals, consider bringing together learners with shared or complementary interests. Grouping students together with different (but not too different) levels of ability supports the learning of all group members. Depending on the task, you may want to include a range of competencies such as writing, drawing, math, facilitation, and leadership skills. Try putting together more verbal students with students who are more action oriented.

Friendship Sometimes friends work well in a group; sometimes they distract each other. Friendship can provide confidence in the face of novelty. Although friends may be more apt to disagree with each other than students who are not friends, the disagreements are also less likely to disturb the relationship and easier to resolve. Friends can also provide an especially attentive audience for work presented by their peers. Students who have been in multiple classes together are often skilled at drawing on each other's competencies (e.g., they know who is strong in math, art, facilitation, and so on).

Student Input Involving students in the formation of small groups can increase their commitment to the work and the group. There is a difference between asking, "With whom do you want to be?" and "With whom do you learn the best?" You can request student input as one consideration but still make the final decision yourself or with one or more students. Students may surprise you with the thoughtfulness of their suggestions. Feel free to share some or all of these considerations with students.

Variations and Extensions

- Along with students, develop a set of norms for the group (e.g., monitor your airtime; it is OK to disagree; equal participation). Ask pairs of students to serve as norm guardians from time to time to assess how the norms are working.
- Experiment with different kinds of groups as a way to learn more about students and forming more productive groupings. For example, create groups that are single sex or mixed sex, group together quiet children, put students of mixed ability into groups of four or fewer, or put students in a group with at least one other person with whom they work well.
- Facilitate a conversation with your students seeking their thoughts about different aspects of small-group formation such as friends, size, student input, and so on.
- Introduce or develop a rubric with students to assess individual and group work.
- Occasionally ask students to track their participation in small groups and analyze the results.

If You Only Have Five Minutes . . .

- Debrief after small-group work by asking learners to identify one thing that worked well and one thing they need to work on.