

Group Work Structures

Purposefully structured interactions shape the quality of group members' experience and produce individual and collective learning. These thoughtful design choices influence both group development and task success. Satisfying sessions require an exchange of viewpoints in which group members listen to understand others' feelings and opportunities to influence the final results. Well-engineered work sessions produce these outcomes.

The following elements can be inserted into many of the strategies described in this book. These components can be mixed and matched to amplify the effectiveness of a strategy by shaping interaction or explicit thinking processes.

Interaction Structures

In many groups, balancing participation is a challenge. Breaking the group into smaller parts, such as pairs or trios, or providing structures that require a response sequence increases the likelihood that all members will have a voice and a chance to be heard.

Brainstorm and Pass is a structure for balancing participation by having participants brainstorm in sequence. The intention of this structure is to support rapid, nonjudgmental generation of ideas.

Directions: One participant begins by offering an idea related to the topic. Additional items are added using a round-robin pattern (see page 2 of this reproducible): one idea at a time, one participant at a time in sequence. To maintain fluidity, group members can "pass," but are still included in subsequent rounds. Note: The recorder also gets a turn in each rotation.

Pairs Squared is a structure for expanding a partnered conversation to a larger group in order to extend ideas, connections, and perspectives. Depending on the tasks at hand, pairs can be intentionally organized and composed of role-alike or cross-role colleagues (same or different grade levels or content areas), different years of experiences, or even philosophical approaches to teaching. Pairs can also be randomly chosen or based on group-member choice.

Directions: After pairs have been established and completed some aspect of a strategy, invite each pair to join another pair to form quartets. Note: This can be modified to joining three pairs together, Pairs Times Three.

Partner's Report is a structure for listening to and sharing others' ideas. This approach produces respectful attention to people's ideas. The structure promotes new voices sharing examples, builds the collective knowledge base, and creates a fuller community. It's also an opportunity to check for participants' current understanding.

Directions: Individuals generate an idea, recollection, connection, key point, or so on and then share it with a partner. Partners listen to each other and prepare to share their colleague's ideas, not their own. The group leader establishes a sequence or process for sharing with the full group.

Round-Robin is a structure for balancing participation and providing a space for everyone's contribution by establishing a sequence for sharing.

Directions: Designate a group member to begin sharing to the right; remaining group members contribute in sequence. Note: One choice point is whether or not each contribution is intended to stimulate conversation or if ideas are offered with no cross-talk.

Walkabouts provide an opportunity for task groups to view the ideas and work products of others, such as a table or wall-chart display. This interaction pattern widens the knowledge base and provides a shift in cognitive and physical energy.

Directions: Establish a time frame and focus for task groups to rotate or move about viewing the work products of other groups. Encourage group members to look for and collect ideas that will stimulate or enhance their own task-group work.

Thinking Structures

The hectic pace of life in schools travels into the meeting room. For teams to take the time to think often requires specific structuring. The following options are designed to prompt and promote more thoughtful meetings and work sessions.

10–2 is a structure for stimulating attention and retention by providing intermittent breaks for interaction (Rowe, 1986). These brief talk times occur after approximately ten minutes of input.

Directions: Establish partners, and offer a prompt for them to discuss during a pause in a presentation. These might include a brief summary, an application, a key point, or a question.

From the Balcony is a structure for shifting perspective to a macro, or bird's-eye, view of a situation or event. This view can be applied to past, present, or future situations.

Directions: Direct group members to envision or reflect on some situation or action, such as an effective lesson, a productive meeting, or a parent conference. Have them discuss what they might see and hear from an elevated vantage point. Note: You can organize these observations as a T-chart.

Stem Completion is a structure for jumpstarting thoughts and subsequent conversations. This versatile structure can be used before talking with a partner, small group, or full group and after group talk to integrate new thinking.

Directions: Offer a visual prompt on a slide screen, chart, or worksheet. Ask individuals to complete the stem. For example, before sharing, ask group members to complete statements such as, "One thing I'm looking forward to during this meeting is," or "One thing I noticed about my students this week is _____." After shared exploration, ask group members to complete statements such as, "One new idea I will apply is _____," or "One goal for my own learning is _____."