

# GROUP WORK



# Contents

Overview: What is group work?	2
The case for group work	3
Socialisation issues	4
Some basic considerations for successful group work	5
Some research evidence – Nuthall, Wiliam and Slavin	6
Graham Nuthall: The hidden lives of learners	7
Dylan Wiliam: Activating learners as instructional resources for one another	9
Robert Slavin: Making group-work <i>work</i>	10
Objections to group work	11
Metacognition and group interactions	12
Typical sequence of lessons leading up to a group work activity	13
Effective group work: membership, size, roles and responsibilities	16
Summary and conclusions	17
Appendix 1: Checklist for effective group work	18
Links	20

This advice and guidance material provides an overview of the major issues associated with implementing group work in primary and post-primary school settings.

There is also a short summary available which sets out how these advice and guidance materials on group work can be used to run a CPD programme.

# Group Work

## Overview: What is group work?

At some stage during a term or over a series of lessons, most teachers will divide their classes into groups of four or five and give them instructions to complete a task together. Teachers recognise these situations as 'group work' and so do pupils.

Some teachers use a group work format regularly and find that it works well for them and for their pupils. Some teachers find the group work format doesn't suit their classroom style and avoid it, and some pupils don't like it either.

Sometimes the reasons for subdividing a class in this way are to do with the availability of equipment or resources, or when it's useful to have a spare pair of hands to do each part of a job that requires coordination: for example, when one person clicks the stopwatch to start, and another begins the process that is to be timed. Sometimes it's the type of activity can only be carried out by doing something together such as sports, team games, quizzes, drama and performance, music and bands.

Group work is such a common format that it can feel as if it is simply a given aspect of school life and there's no need to pay particular attention to it; however, the group work that occurs so regularly in pupils' school experiences can be underexploited. This can happen when *the pupils are in a group but not necessarily working as a group*.

The material here gathers some of the main arguments and insights from three educationalists whose work has implications for how group work can be made to run successfully: Graham Nuthall, Dylan Wiliam and Robert Slavin. The theory is that, since pupils learn as much from each other as from the teacher, then it's worthwhile considering ways to make peer interactions as efficient as possible to support learning.

Several terms are used in the research around group work. These include:

- co-operative learning;
- collaborative learning; and
- peer learning.

All these apply to group work. For the purposes of this material, all are subsumed by the term *group work*.



# Group Work

## The case for group work

To reap the rewards of group working, teachers will need to specifically plan, design and prepare for it. According to the three educationalists cited, the learning gains from group work will only be realised if the conditions they specify are met:

- Nuthall identifies the pitfalls of peer talk.
- Wiliam advocates for pupils functioning as learning resources for each other.
- Slavin is clear that the tasks given to groups require careful design, particularly in terms of planning for assessment.

Therefore, there needs to be some reason for undertaking what can be a significant amount of work.

Group work is described in educational literature as:

- being motivating for learners: they enjoy group working;
- contributing to pupils' socialisation;
- improving learning outcomes, especially for those who might be struggling;
- capable of optimising peer talk;
- expanding teachers' pedagogical repertoire;
- providing learners with varied classroom experiences; and
- helping learners prepare for future experiences of working in teams.

There is good evidence to suggest that collaborative working can be extremely beneficial for pupils.

The Education Endowment Foundation toolkit says that it is relatively cheap to implement, is backed by secure evidence, and estimates that it can result in up to five months additional progress for pupils who experience it. Their summary says:

*A collaborative (or co-operative) learning approach involve[s] pupils working together on activities or learning tasks in a group small enough for everyone to participate on a collective task that has been clearly assigned. Pupils in the group may work on separate tasks contributing to a common overall outcome, or work together on a shared task.*

*The impact of collaborative approaches on learning is consistently positive. However, the size of impact varies, so it is important to get the detail right. Effective collaborative learning requires much more than just sitting pupils together and asking them to work in a group; structured approaches with well-designed tasks lead to the greatest learning gains. [...] Approaches which promote talk and interaction between learners tend to result in the best gains.*

*Over 40 years a number of systematic reviews and meta-analyses have provided consistent evidence about the benefits of collaborative learning. [...] Collaborative learning appears to work well for all ages if activities are suitably structured for learners' capabilities and positive evidence has been found across the curriculum.<sup>1</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> From the Education Endowment Foundation Teaching and Learning Toolkit, accessed at: [www.toolkitwww.educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk](http://www.toolkitwww.educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk)

# Group Work

## Socialisation issues

Every school has established social norms that reflect the standards, principles, ethos and aspirations of the school. Where teachers can refer to such shared standards within the classroom, they have scope to work towards fostering a true community of learners without having to do so in isolation. Where the expectation that all will work together is the norm, that shared expectation can offset the potential negatives of peer competition, intolerance or poor attitude. If no one accepts non-compliance in group work situations, then it's easier to encourage pupils to engage.

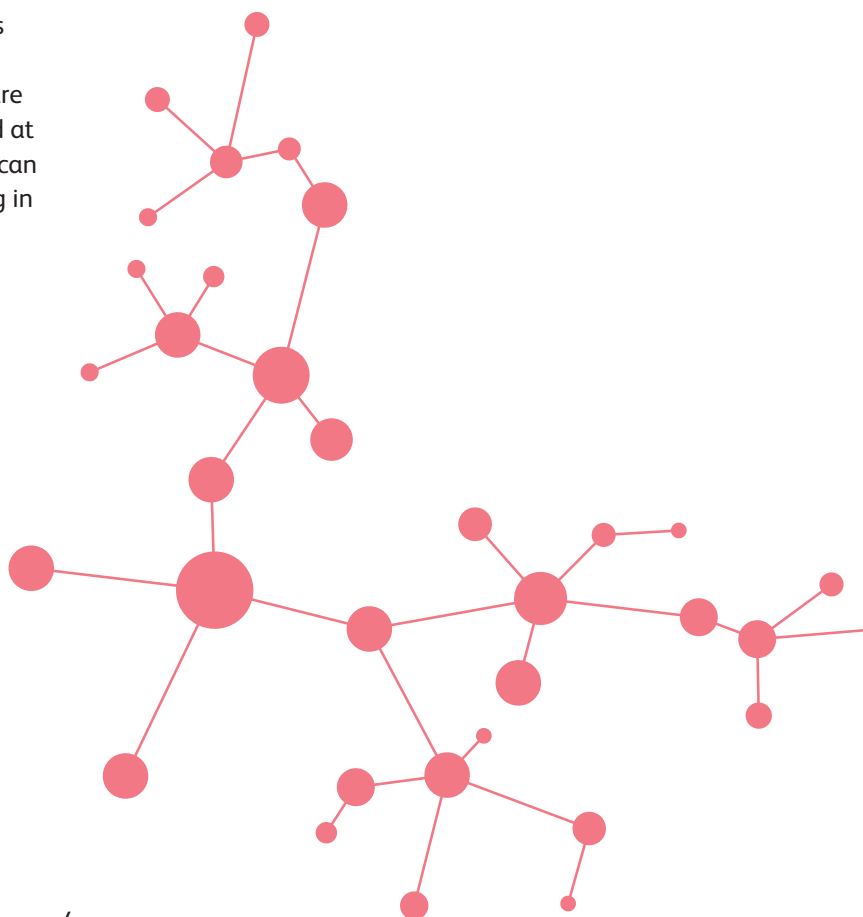
Therefore, in Robert Slavin's phrase, 'making group work *work*' has more chance of success where it endorsed at whole-school level.

The implications of socialisation expand backwards to learners' earliest experiences, and forward to what will be expected of them as they mature. For this reason a whole-school focus on collaborative learning should include consideration of the norms expected and the routines followed in play group, nursery and feeder schools. The more teachers share understanding of the routines pupils have followed at each stage of their school careers, the better they can adapt the amount of attention needed for training in group work procedures.

Group work can be effective when used to develop pupils' personal and interpersonal skills. Pupils will need to become familiar with the routines you want them to follow when doing group work so they learn how to interact skilfully. That will mean getting them used to:

- listening to each other;
- sharing;
- turn-taking;
- adopting particular roles and responsibilities;
- showing fairness and respect; and
- helping others to learn.

If those expectations have been consistent from their earliest experiences of school, pupils will adapt quickly to the kind of purposeful talk that characterises successful group work.



# Group Work

## Some basic considerations for successful group work

Group work is only worth doing if it leads to the kinds of benefits promised by the evidence base.

There can be an assumption that simply by organising classes into groups of four or five they are then 'doing' group work. In fact, it takes a good deal of training to get your pupils ready to work effectively in groups, and groups of four or five are almost certainly too big for early attempts. Therefore, during early experiences teachers need to introduce pupils to the routines, roles and processes of effective group work. These should be repeated frequently over time until pupils are able to work successfully in groups.

Consider the room layout:

- Is the classroom organised in a way that facilitates working in small groups?
- If not, do you need to first train the class in rearranging the furniture so that group interactions can happen smoothly?
- If your classroom is not well adapted to group work, are there alternatives available?

Don't expect early experiences of group work to go smoothly. Keep them short and specific. Hold them several times over a term to concentrate mainly on the mechanics of being in a group, rather than details of the activity the group has been asked to do. Once the routines are bedded in, you can introduce more demanding activities.

Don't underestimate the amount of time it takes to bring this about. Pick the occasions to use a group work format carefully, and assume that you will allocate the members to each group.

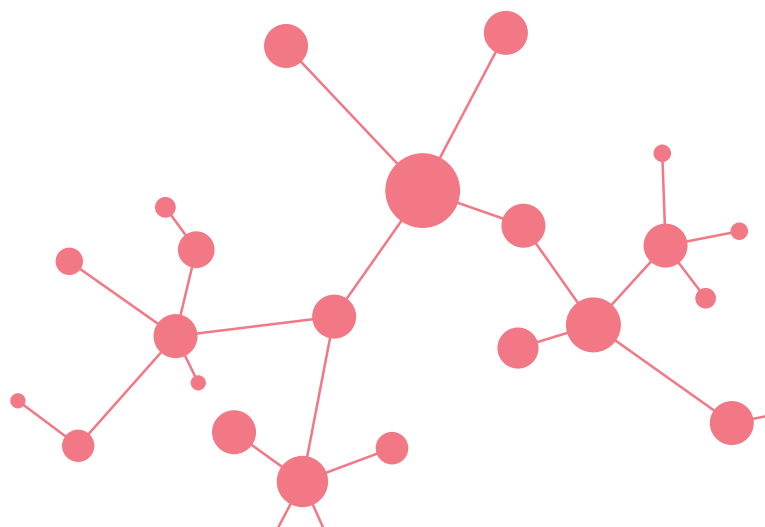
The EEF summary highlights that effective group work is dependent on pupils having the opportunity to talk together. That will often mean that the classroom is noisy during group work activities. That's fine, so long as the focus of the talk is firmly focused on what's being learned:

- questioning the validity of explanations;
- suggesting alternatives;
- discussing possibilities;
- weighing pros and cons; and so on.

Young pupils, in particular, will need to practice using this sort of purposeful talk to achieve the desired outcome. Eventually the goal is to have pupils so familiar with what's expected in group discussions that they do not need to be supervised closely, and the teacher can be free to drop in on group conversations to monitor progress and make suggestions.

The inevitable rise in the conversational volume of classroom activities associated with group work puts some teachers off. Part of the value of investing in early training in purposeful group talk is that groups can monitor their own volume and moderate themselves if they start to get too noisy.

It's worth doing group work well, but it is not a magic wand for successful learning: it's only one approach within the range of techniques that teachers can choose where it matches well with the subject material and learning intentions.



# Group Work

## Some research evidence – Nuthall, Wiliam and Slavin

The research and ideas of three eminent academics working in the field of education have been particularly influential in preparing these materials. These are Graham Nuthall, Dylan Wiliam, and Robert E Slavin.

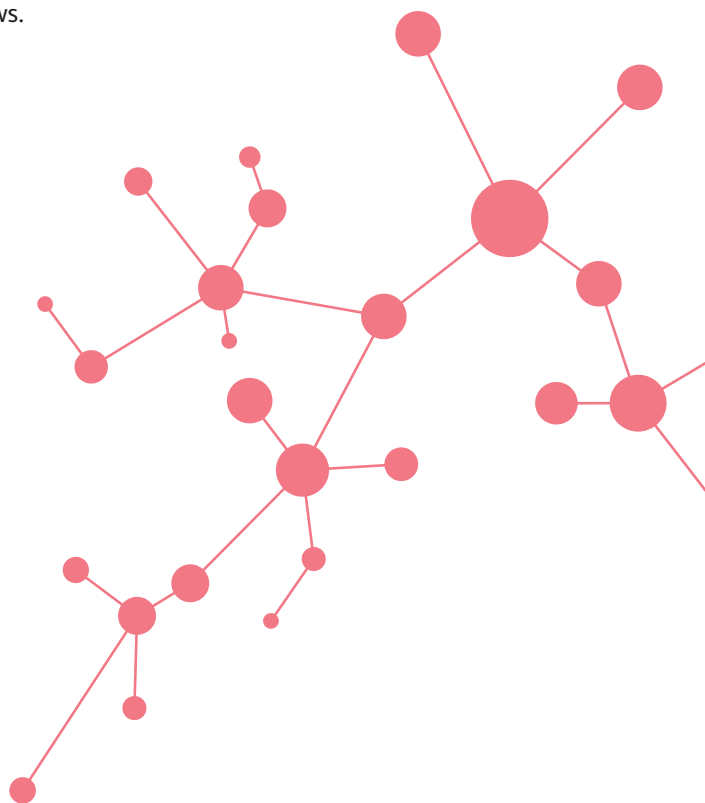
- Nuthall's important summary of his research findings *The Hidden Lives of Learners*<sup>2</sup> reveals how significant the social dimension is to learning, and how learners influence each other all the time: both for good and bad.
- Dylan Wiliam is well known as the co-author with Paul Black of the influential study *Inside the Black Box*.<sup>3</sup> He advocates the use of formative assessment (which he now terms *responsive teaching*) as a key approach to raising standards and improving educational outcomes. He suggests that pupils are learning resources for each other, so teachers should manage the classroom to optimise opportunities for peer learning by designing appropriate learning experiences.
- Robert Slavin has written extensively on the subject of group work. He looks at the conditions necessary for group work activities to function effectively, placing an emphasis on the need for the group work experience to be carefully designed: specifically, that the whole group shares responsibility for the outcome of a task and are motivated to collaborate in ways that bring the performance of all members up to the target standard.

Implementing these various findings is not easy. They need to be interpreted in a learning context specific to:

- the subject; the teacher; and
- the class and their readiness to engage.

There is no universal formula for successful group work. Each instance is unique. The teacher must plan it guided by reference to accurate and relevant information, and structure the group work activity so that there is a lot of opportunity for peer talk. Only some topics will work with this approach. Teachers might need to adapt some existing group work activities if they are to successfully exploit the impact of peer learning.

Information and ideas about how to go about customising your group work activities to make use of these insights is contained in the material which follows.



<sup>2</sup> Nuthall, G. (2007) *The Hidden Lives of Learners*.

<sup>3</sup> *Inside the Black Box: Raising Standards Through Classroom Assessment* (Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam, 1998)

# Group Work

## Graham Nuthall: The hidden lives of learners

The research carried out by Graham Nuttall looked into how individual learners make sense of their classroom experiences. There are several very significant insights into how pupils interact in group work that have emerged from his investigations, including:

### 1. Learning is individual.

- Each pupil will learn or not learn the lesson content according to their readiness to incorporate new information into their existing knowledge. With new material, they will either:
  - securely retain it;
  - retain it temporarily; or
  - not embed it;depending on the individual's readiness to make sense of the new material.

### 2. Prior knowledge is of particular importance to what pupils will learn and won't learn from new material.

- The ability to make sense of new information depends on what the individual learner already has available in their long-term memory. This is because making sense of new material involves comparing it to what they already know. They then modify their developing mental picture accordingly.

### 3. Learners need to meet a concept three times in order to retain it in their long-term memory.

- The process of meeting a new concept, comparing it against prior knowledge, and gradually assimilating the new information needs to occur repeatedly so that learning is slowly embedded and the new information is incorporated into their developing understanding.

### 4. Learners are constantly juggling three worlds during class:

- a. the world of school and the teacher (public)
- b. a semi-private world of their peer group (semi-public)
- c. their private world of individual identity (semi-public)

- This shows the range of cognitive and mental experience the individual learner has circulating in their mind during the school day. The swirl of feelings, emotions, attachments, predilections and enthusiasms will influence how attention is focused or strays from moment to moment. If the teacher is aware of this, they will have additional insight into their understanding why one individual retains the lesson content securely, another grasps only limited aspects, and a third didn't recognise any of the new content.

### 5. Learners absorb as much, if not more, from their peers as they do from the teacher.

- The interpersonal interactions between pupils impacts on their interpretation of lesson content: sometimes for good, and sometimes in ways that are inaccurate, flawed or plain wrong. Knowing this helps the teacher gain insight into the hidden mental lives of their classes.



# Group Work

6. Much of what they hear from peers might be wrong, inaccurate, irrelevant, or misleading.
- If there is a risk that mistaken ideas get perpetuated, then the teacher needs to structure the task to identify and remove errors. There are several ways in which they can do this.
    - I. The teacher must manage the mechanics of talking within a group situation. They need to begin by teaching pupils the routines of turn-taking, not speaking all at once, and so on.<sup>4</sup>
    - II. Once groups are thoroughly familiar with these protocols, the teacher can provide them with the subject content for the activity. For example, if the group task involves learning about the factors that influence the life forms within an ecosystem, individual members take part of the plan to follow up on. Later, they share their findings. It is in this phase that the rest of the group need to check the accuracy and relevance or status of the information that has been collected. Training learners to become more discriminating in their scrutiny of the content they are considering both enhances their subject understanding and guards against inexperienced learners accepting misinformation and perpetuating errors.
    - III. Another way teachers can guard against learners absorbing mistaken ideas and misunderstanding is to provide them with some pre-prepared information. Perhaps the teacher could lead the whole class through

the web of interconnections that characterise a desert ecosystem. The teacher could then provide groups with an information pack about another ecosystem such as a rainforest or prairie. Each group has to understand and learn the information about the ecosystem they are working on, and produce a presentation modelled on the teacher's example of the desert. Depending on the level at which the class is working the packs could contain all that they need, or only part of it (the expectation being that the group has to find the additional material they will need to complete the activity).

The way in which each pupil will respond to new material will differ. However, the way each pupil eventually achieves the change in long-term memory that corresponds to having learned that new material is the same: they compare new experiences with what they already know (prior knowledge) and try to make sense of it by looking for connections.

This is why many educationalists have consistently emphasised prior knowledge as the key constraint on pupils' ability to learn new material.

*'If I had to reduce all of educational psychology to just one principle, I would say this: The most important single factor influencing learning is what the learner already knows. Ascertain this and teach him [or her] accordingly.'*

Ausubel, 1968 p. vi.

<sup>4</sup>There are materials available to assist with running sessions that address the early stages of managing group talk. See the PDFs *How To Talk Together In A Group* and associated *Teacher's Notes: Running group-work activities*.

# Group Work

## Dylan Wiliam: Activating learners as instructional resources for one another

Wiliam's publication *Embedded Formative Assessment*<sup>5</sup> describes ways to achieve the promised benefits from formative assessment. Wiliam's formula for making formative assessment work as a teaching tool to improve learning outcomes is summarised below:

	Where the learner is going	Where the learner is right now	How to get there
Teacher	Clarifying and sharing learning intentions and criteria for success	Engineering effective classroom discussions, activities and tasks that elicit evidence of learning	Providing feedback that moves learning forward
Peer	Understanding and sharing learning intentions and criteria for success	Activating learners as instructional resources for one another	
Learner	Understanding learning intentions and criteria for success	Activating learners as the owners of their own learning	

(From *Embedded Formative Assessment*, p. 46)<sup>6</sup>

The statement: 'activating learners as instructional resources for one another' demonstrates a connection with Nuthall's findings and their implications for group work.

This statement 'engineering effective classroom discussions, activities and tasks that elicit evidence of learning' is particularly relevant when considering the design of group activities and their assessment. In order to achieve the benefits, the teacher needs to plan and facilitate activities that will bring about the desired classroom interactions. Essentially this is a question of lesson design and delivery.

<sup>5</sup> Wiliam, D. (2011), *Embedded Formative Assessment*, Solution Tree Press.

<sup>6</sup> Note that a version of this diagram is also available in a PowerPoint presentation dated 2013 and titled *The bridge between teaching and learning* which you can download from his website, [www.dylanwiliam.org](http://www.dylanwiliam.org). On the **welcome** page Wiliam states *the copyright to the contents of this site is held by me and my various co-authors, and the materials here may be freely used and disseminated provided the source is acknowledged. Formally, this is an Attribution-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States license as specified by the Creative Commons.*

# Group Work

## Robert Slavin: Making group-work *work*

Slavin's eminent academic research has for several decades focused on what it means to 'make group-work *work*'.

Slavin identifies two key conditions for group work if it is to be successful:

1. The individuals making up the group must share the same goal, and that goal must be focused on what they will *learn* rather than what they will *do*.
2. Group members must be individually accountable for the outcome of the learning activity.

In the examples Slavin provides, these conditions can be met by having all group members take an end-of-topic test. The group's success in their collective work is then considered to be an aggregate of individual test scores. This provides the group with a vested interest in working together to make sure that all members are ready to perform well on the test.

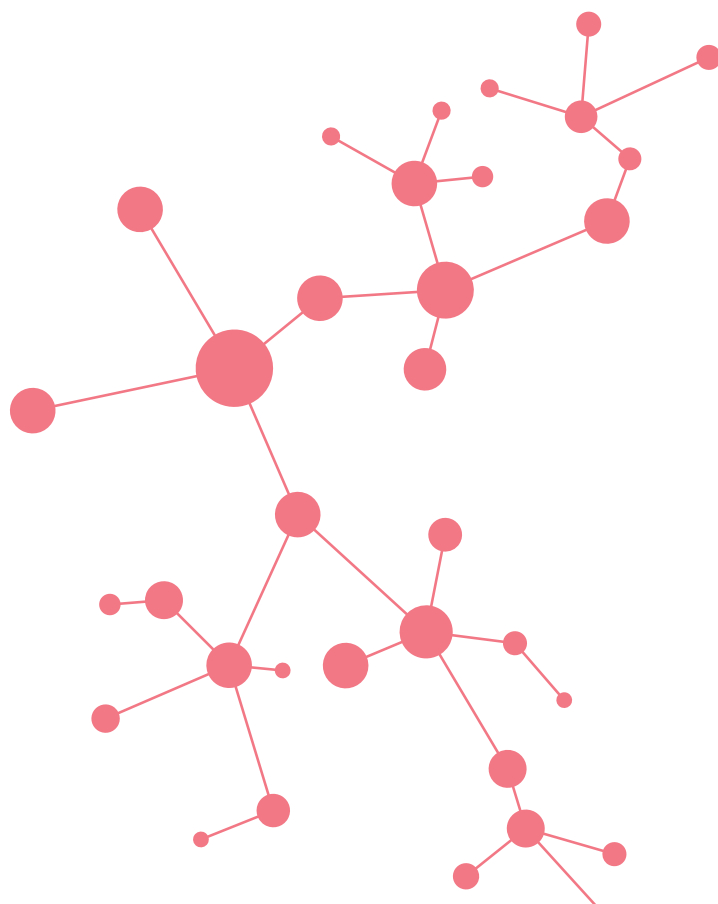
Slavin emphasises the importance of the *design criteria* to plan group work activity. Teachers need to *design the learning experience* within the group work exercise to make group work function effectively, so that pupils engage in the process of collaborative learning.

This will be demanding for any teacher: the main obstacle to tackle is identifying topics and activities that are suitable for group work. It's not always clear at the beginning of planning an activity around a topic whether it will provide a rich opportunity for group working.

The upside is that once you've got a topic structured to promote group working, you can re-use it in subsequent years, and you can adapt it so that other topics you plan to teach can be delivered in a similar way.

Here are some group working strategies:

- Begin by identifying lessons where you already split the class into groups for a particular activity.
- Revisit the learning intentions for the lesson(s).
- Structure is very important, so take care to design the structure of the activity.
- Possibly prepare an end-of-activity test that will require all group members to succeed individually.
  - For example, if the group activity is to investigate and find information on a topic, follow up by giving the whole class a test after the group activity. Then make the final mark for the test an aggregate of the individual scores of group members. Warn the group in advance so that they have a vested interest in everybody doing well on the test.



# Group Work

## Objections to group work

Some educationalists and teachers express misgivings about group work such as:

- their perceived loss of control, as the lesson focus moves away from the teacher;
- the potential for increased off-task behaviour, and hence disruption;
- the potential for social loafing and unequal effort made by group members;
- the belief that pupils can't and don't learn from one another;
- the belief that group work is unjustifiably time consuming;
- the concern that brighter pupils just end up helping less able pupils rather than learning themselves; and
- the belief that assessing the work of pupils operating as a group is problematic.

These are valid concerns and need to be taken seriously. We must consider some of these barriers that could undermine successful group work if not addressed at a whole-school level, such as:

- A lack of training for teachers: there is an assumption that everyone can 'do' group work without special training. This is often not the case.
- Teachers who are underprepared to design and construct meaningful learning activities that facilitate group work. This includes lack of experience in designing assessment activities suitable for group work.
- Too little attention given to:
  - enabling children to function as a group within the classroom through classroom routines, turn-taking, sharing, tolerance and respect for alternative viewpoints;
  - setting up groups to avoid pupils working *in* a group, not *as* a group;
  - training pupils in *how* to work as a group; and
  - training pupils in using processes, methods and techniques such as problem-solving (appropriate to the subject context).

- An overemphasis on what pupils will do rather than what they will learn.

Based on the research in this document, it should be clear that these objections to group work can be overcome when group work is carried out under *the right circumstances*. Arguments teachers might have against group work should be dealt with at a whole-school level. This is particularly true of the various socialisation factors that influence the way pupils interact; if there is a whole-school approach to foster things like turn-taking, respect for others' opinions and so on, then the burden of preparing pupils to undertake group work can be shared.

However, if some staff feel strongly that group work doesn't suit their style, there's little point in pressurising them to change. If their current classroom methods are already working well, it could be a waste of time to insist that they also incorporate group work.

There is a significant component of personal style to making group work function well. If those who are uncomfortable using these approaches feel forced to include group work activities with their classes, then they are unlikely to make a success of it.

It is better to encourage those who want to make 'group work *work*' to persevere with adapting and developing their lesson plans. Sharing the successes of group work activities during staff development sessions may well help persuade those who are resistant, as success breeds success.

# Group Work

## Metacognition and group interactions

In metacognition, the pupil's existing prior knowledge is key to their successfully grasping new information. The learner assimilates the new knowledge into what they already know. They reflect on it, and search for connections to help them understand it.

The process of updating existing understanding involves the following:

- What do I know about this?
- What is this like that I already know about?
- What am I supposed to do with this?
- I don't understand this – what is confusing me?

Metacognition means asking yourself questions in order to try and understand something new.

This requires effort, and it takes time to get to a point where you sufficiently understand the new information, so that it moves into your long-term memory. It supports research which suggests that learners have to meet a concept on three occasions in order to learn it. Each time, as pupils try to make sense of the new material, they will use different thinking approaches, until eventually the new information fits into their existing bank of knowledge.

This can be the case when some of the class have recently made a breakthrough, and learned some new item of content knowledge or a significant concept. These pupils can then remember what it was that prevented them from fully understanding a new concept, and how they got over barriers to understanding. There's a good chance that they'll explain this to their peers better than the teacher can. Dylan Wiliam refers to this process as '*activating learners as instructional resources for one another*'.

The value of the talking together lies in these informal conversations. However, remember that some of these conversations may have incorrect responses, so the teacher needs to monitor progress at various points in the learning process.

If the teacher guides the group through the early stages of questioning, testing and confirming what is being discussed, then there are rich opportunities for group members to build their confidence in understanding new material.

Providing groups with an information pack could help here. This could include some additional sources the group has to identify for themselves. This means that there's less scope for misinformation to be introduced by group members who mistakenly believe themselves to know something different.

It's important also to remember that it is through meeting errors, and recognising inconsistencies, inaccuracies, unwarranted conclusions and so on, that pupils are learning to be more discriminating in managing information and to make use of subject content in well-informed ways.

# Group Work

## Typical sequence of lessons leading up to a group work activity

This is a very common sequence that takes place repeatedly in classroom contexts:

1. The teacher delivers a lesson linked to the curriculum content. Pupils are expected to pay attention, listen, make notes, respond to questions, voice their understanding, and so on.
2. During this process, the teacher has to judge how to present the material, taking into account:
  - the attention span of the age group;
  - how well they will tolerate longer periods of teacher talk;
  - their readiness for the new material;
  - their attitude to the subject;
  - their attitude towards the teacher, and so on.

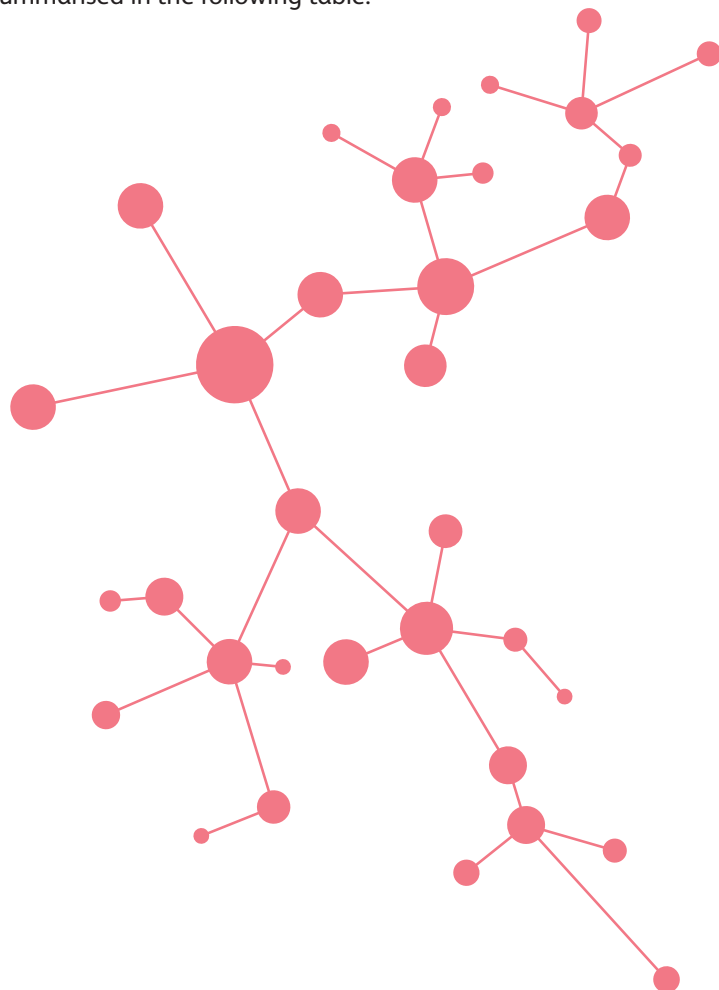
The teacher should remember that not everyone will retain all of the content straight away.

3. Next, provide some follow-up activities to help the class fully understand and learn the content.
4. These follow-up activities should be a mix of approaches such as:
  - individual work on related exercises;
  - applying the methods and techniques the teacher has just described and demonstrated;
  - extension work to expand on the teacher's coverage of the topic and to identify examples that confirm and illustrate the points made;
  - class activities to practice using the content and methods the teacher has taught;
  - homework tasks to dig deeper into the subject, look at real-world applications or parallels; or
  - class discussions, tests, and other types of classroom work.

Among these follow-up activities will be occasions when the teacher organises the pupils into small groups to perform some tasks with the new material they have supplied. The group then has to work with the content in some way using the group work strategies they have learned.

The purpose of the group task is to explore ideas, share individual responses, discuss issues raised, ask questions, consider evidence, consider pros and cons, similarities and differences, and so on. The aim is to encourage each member of the group think more deeply about the new material in ways that will help learning to occur. The teacher's role is to design the learning experience that will increase the likelihood of this happening.

This process often looks something like the sequence summarised in the following table:



# Group Work

	Sequence of Actions	Mode of Delivery	Lesson Design Considerations
1	Teacher prepares to present new subject content (gathers together teaching materials, notes, illustrations, stimulus materials, displays and so on).	Preparation for whole class teaching.	What to include, how much detail, finding or making telling examples, organising sequence, planning questions and explanations, anticipating sticking points, drawing up worksheets, writing end-of-topic test items.
2	Teacher presents new material, instructing class in subject content knowledge, methods and techniques.	Whole class teaching, instruction.	Visual aids, presentation style, handouts, information sheets, form of notetaking the class is to use, expected responses (what information should class have written down at the end of the lesson?)
3	Teacher demonstrates an example of how to apply the lesson content within a subject context.	Whole class teaching, demonstration.	Here's one I made before, worked example, step-by-step deconstruction of problem, video, use of equipment.
4	Teacher leads question-and-answer session to check comprehension and revisits details in response to whatever has caused confusion.	Whole class discussion/question-and-answer session with teacher leading class through sequence of questions.	Prepare questions, respond to issues arising, prepare a display or an information sheet that pupils can refer to as a reminder, and so on.
5	To gauge readiness of class for more involved work the teacher sets out a preliminary activity based on the content covered, stating what pupils have to do in response as learning outcomes.	Individual, paired or group work. Class respond by carrying out the activity individually or in groups. Teacher closely monitors and assists with problems.	Details of the activity, instructions, purpose of the exercise – what for? Success criteria, rubric, answer booklet, reminder of methods and techniques.
6	Once class has succeeded on the preliminary activity, the teacher provides a more challenging task, perhaps adding some refinements in a follow-up instruction session first.	Individual, paired or group work. Class move on to carry out a more demanding practice activity, still with close supervision and support.	Timeframe, deadlines, roles, responsibilities, monitoring.
7	Once the class appear confident with the content and associated methods, a follow-up activity is set that will require more independence than the activities completed so far.	Group work. Class move on to an activity suitable for a group work approach once familiar with content and method. Teacher steps back, monitoring how groups go about tackling the activity.	Details of task, group composition, rules and routines, information sheets, access to additional sources of information, timeframe, deadlines, roles, responsibilities, monitoring.
8	Results of group investigations collated. Teacher leads plenary to compare findings from different groups.	Whole class discussion, presentation and display of findings. Analysis of collated findings, led by teacher, conclusions drawn.	Means for recording responses: flipchart, blackboard, posters, presentations, minutes.
9	End-of-topic test: content revisited in test to check retention.	Test.	Test items.

# Group Work



To ensure successful group working, the group must have already developed the necessary skills and routines.

Before running a group work activity, check that:

- The groups are familiar with the expected classroom routines. They should know that social loafing is unacceptable, and that the success of the group depends on co-operation and collaboration.
- The groups are organised and motivated to do the activity, especially when they hit obstacles. For example, they should have problem-solving strategies to hand, and know how to get unstuck if they reach a block in the process.
- The groups are motivated to work together, share, help each other, resolve disputes and cope with disagreements. They can identify individual strengths and weaknesses, can make a plan, and break the task down into stages which each require separate actions by group members.
- The groups have enough relevant subject knowledge to fact check, confirm findings, and avoid errors and mistakes. If there are ambiguities, the teacher should point them out and suggest ways to resolve them through further investigating.

Use the generalised sequence outlined in the table and the checklist available as Appendix 1 to customise and refine your planned group work activities.



# Group Work

## Effective group work: membership, size, roles and responsibilities

Group work scenarios need to be designed and structured in ways that mean they can't be done by an individual working alone.

Conditions for successful group work:

1. The teacher sets high expectations for what quality in group work looks like.
2. Pupils are willing to join in and contribute to group tasks and discussions.
3. Most advocates of group work suggest that small groups (three or four) are better than larger ones:
  - The younger and more inexperienced the group, the smaller it should be.
  - Start with pairs and move to threes. Only when the learners are familiar with working in a small group should you consider larger groups.
  - The optimum for most activities at primary and KS3 is three or four maximum.
  - Older pupils who are very familiar with group work might work successfully with five in a group, but on the whole groups of five tend to be too big and allow more social loafing to occur.
4. There are pros and cons to deciding who to put together in a group as well. Most of the time, the teacher should pick the group members. Occasionally it may be appropriate to allow pupils to self-select their groups, but only once they are very familiar with the group working practices.
5. Consider using an icebreaker type of activity as a preliminary to drawing up groups. These can be a good way of encouraging pupils to talk to class members outside of their immediate friendship group. Alternatively, if you want groups of three, make slips of coloured card in multiples of three (three red, three blue and so on...) shuffle the cards and hand them to pupils as they arrive in class. Later, ask all the blues to be a group, and so on.
6. At other times, you might want to deliberately place particular pupils together for group activities.
7. Reaching the point where classes are ready to undertake group work effectively and efficiently takes time. You will need to train classes in the routines and standards you expect beforehand.
  - a. During the training phase, instruct the pupils on the need for having different group roles and responsibilities. As pupils become more familiar with the format of group work it can become counterproductive to stick rigidly to roles like 'timekeeper' or 'reporter'. Wait until pupils are familiar with what's expected of them in a group work situation before including a lot of content knowledge in the group work activity. Try picking different occasions to practice taking on roles and responsibilities or focusing on developing content knowledge as a group.
8. Keep the focus on what the group is to *learn*, not what they are to *do*.
9. Make sure to set up a group activity so all members of the group share equal responsibility for the outcome.

# Group Work

## Summary and Conclusions

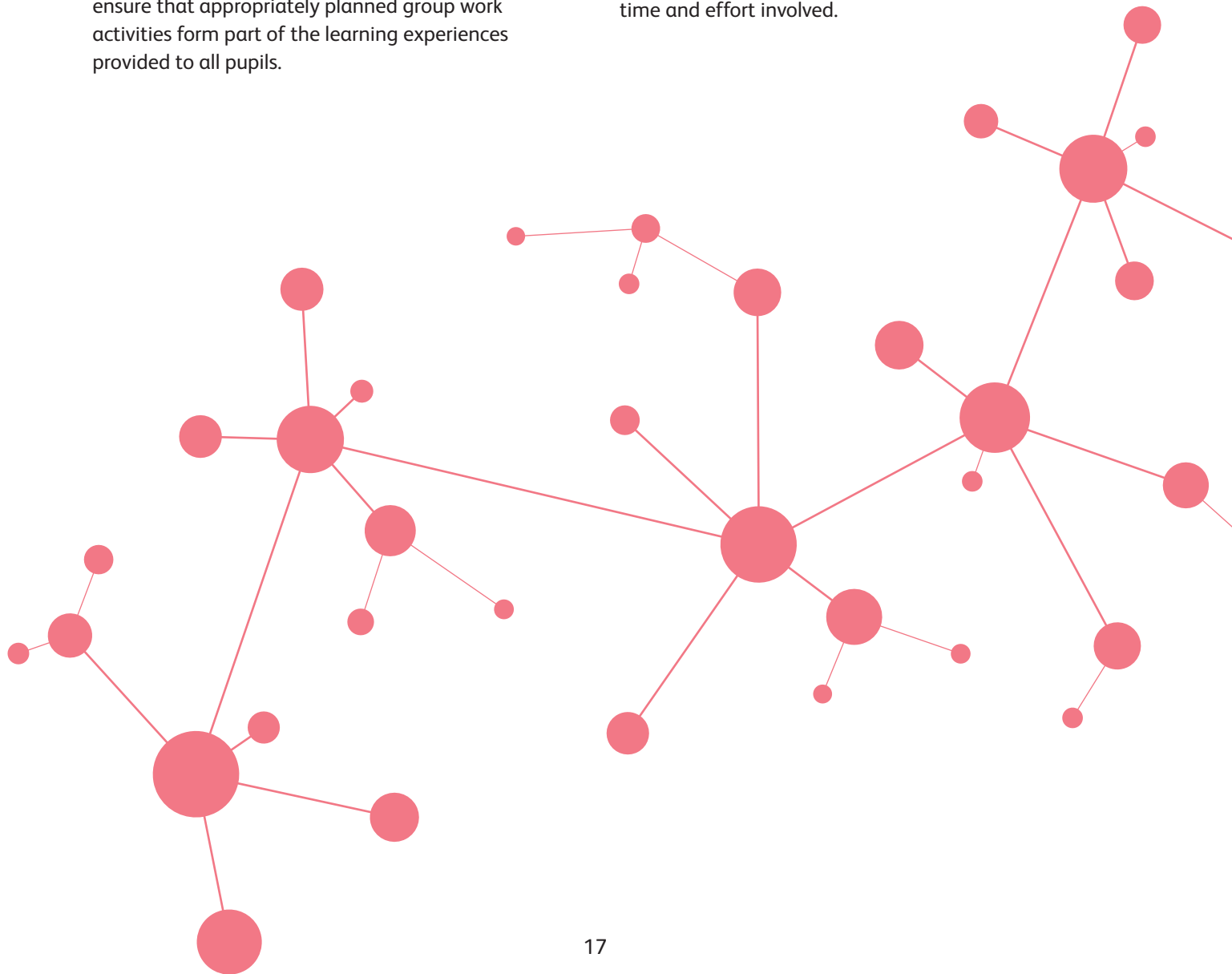
There is reliable evidence that group work benefits learners when used as part of a range of classroom strategies.

Group work can improve learning outcomes if the activities pupils engage with in a group work context are structured to stimulate peer talk, and managed in such a way that all group members participate. There is some evidence that this is particularly beneficial for pupils who require additional support to learn.

Given that the research on collaborative learning is considered so sound, schools and teachers should ensure that appropriately planned group work activities form part of the learning experiences provided to all pupils.

There is no suggestion that all teachers must use group work, or that all lessons should involve group work. Teachers should choose opportunities for group work carefully, to suit the subject content and the readiness of the pupils.

Group work requires well-developed competencies relating to Working with Others, such as sharing and turn taking. A whole-school approach to group work will help to maximise the efforts of each classroom teacher so that they need not feel overwhelmed by the process. When this is the case, using group work as part of a bank of classroom strategies is worth the time and effort involved.



# Group Work

## Appendix 1: Checklist for effective group work

### Planning Stage

- Teachers design tasks that require pupils to work together to complete them.
- Teachers are explicit about the quality of group work that they want the pupils to achieve.
- Teachers explicitly teach the group work skills they need, such as listening, framing questions, and turn-taking.
- Teachers supply or ask groups to agree a checklist, either in the form of success criteria or ground rules, and the groups keep it in sight during the activity.
- If necessary, teachers build safety requirements into the ground rules (for example, if using equipment or tools as part of the group activity).
- Teachers encourage pupils to discuss rules and criteria relating to good quality talk which go beyond established protocols such as not speaking all at once.
- Teachers consider how to choose groups to promote exploratory talk, for example, individuals in friendship groups might not readily challenge one another.
- Teachers set deadlines and time limits for the task.

### Doing Stage

#### When a group is working well pupils:

- are willing to join in and contribute to the group task;
- position themselves so that they can see each other;
- listen actively, turning to face whoever is talking;
- allow only one person at a time to speak during discussions;
- are ready to share, take turns and cooperate with others;
- show respect for others' feelings and ideas (for example, through the appropriate use of language);
- offer each other constructive feedback;
- engage critically but constructively when challenging each other's ideas, extending the thinking and learning through talk and debate, giving reasons, offering alternatives and building on others' ideas as they try to reach agreement;
- remind each other if they break the rules;
- are motivated towards achieving their goal;
- offer to help others if they complete the activity early; and
- contribute equally to tasks such as looking after resources, clearing up, and so on.

#### When a group is working well teachers:

- make spot checks, and ask learners to carry out spot checks to monitor the quality of their work in progress;
- regularly check on the progress groups are making over the course of a learning sequence, including at the end of each class; and
- update targets for group activities as work develops over time.

# Group Work

## Reviewing Stage

### If group work isn't going well, check that:

- the group understands what it is they are supposed to be doing;
- there are clearly defined success criteria for the group activity;
- you have allocated time for the pupils to agree on certain ground rules for group work and clarify the expectations for behaviour within groups;
- there is a designated group leader or chair, and that the responsibilities of this role move around the group over time;
- there is a designated person to report back or act as the channel of communication between the group and the teacher or the rest of the class, and that the responsibilities of this role move around the group over time;
- the group has made a plan which they have all agreed on;
- the group has procedures in place for making decisions and solving problems, such as listing pros and cons and considering alternatives; and
- on longer tasks, pupils keep notes of who should be doing what and by when, in keeping with the group's plan for their task and associated deadlines.

## Troubleshooting

### If problems persist, check:

- **The classroom layout** – is the classroom set up to support group work? Is the furniture arrangement appropriate for group work?
- **Resources** – are there appropriate resources for the task readily available? For example, is the written material pitched at a readability level appropriate to the age and experience of the pupils?
- **Time** – have you invested enough time in setting up the task effectively, or is the activity maybe too vague so that some pupils lose focus and drift off-task?
- **Activities** – have you designed and structured tasks for group work so that they can't be done by an individual?
- **Ground Rules** – are the ground rules right? Do the pupils need to revisit them, or even completely revise them?

# Group Work

## Links

### **Pedagogy and Practice: Teaching and Learning in Secondary Schools Unit 10: Group work**

This is an advice and guidance booklet produced in 2004 by what was then the Department for Education and Skills. Much of the material on group work in it remains relevant. Of particular interest are the tables weighing the pros and cons of different methods for placing pupils in groups, and for various sizes of groups (pp. 10 – 12). Download this as soon as possible, as there's no guarantee this link will be available indefinitely.

### **University of Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, Centre for Teaching Excellence, Group Work Node**

This University of Waterloo webpage hosts a range of downloadable resources dealing with various aspects of group work. While the information is targeted at lecturers delivering courses to undergraduates, many of the general principles are transferable to classroom activities with younger pupils with a little editing and adapting.

### **Toward a social pedagogy of classroom group work; Peter Blatchford, Peter Kutnick, Ed Baines, and Maurice Galton**

This research paper from 2003 reiterates some of the arguments in favour of group work, citing various benefits. The paper also cautions that many of the studies which show benefits to group working involved programmes where participating teachers received training in implementing group work. Teachers need equivalent training and support to replicate the benefits described in research. The conclusions drawn argue that group work is beneficial, but too often underdeveloped in educational settings in the UK.

### **Robert E Slavin; Co-operative Learning: What Makes Groupwork Work?**

This is a 2010 summary of Robert E Slavin's research findings on group work. Slavin is the leading academic researcher and advocate in establishing an evidence base for the beneficial impact of using group work approaches in the classroom.

### **Education Endowment Foundation Toolkit: Collaborative Learning**

The studies carried out by the EEF evaluate the benefits of a range of popular educational interventions including the cost of the intervention, the strength of the supporting evidence, and the impact on learners as measured in months of additional progress. In collaborative learning, they estimate an extra five months of progress compared with not using it. While some of the EEFs methods used in aggregating results from studies has been criticised as overestimating the impact, the materials do set out the pros and cons and emphasise that the studies report positive impact which may not be replicated elsewhere.

