

Forming Groups

Groups can be formed in different ways.

Heterogeneous groups: Groups are formed to ensure diversity. That could be ethnic, gender, geography, math/verbal skills, learning styles, quantitative reasoning abilities, etc. Some researchers recommend that heterogeneity also include 'high' and 'low' ability students. They argue that this tends to improve the performance of both the 'weaker' students (because they can draw upon the knowledge of the 'stronger' ones), and the 'stronger' ones (because having to teach the weaker students improves the skills of the strong students). Any such grouping requires instructors to know about student backgrounds. The point is to encourage members to respect contributions from those who differ.

Random groups: Groups are formed on some random basis such as birthdays, playing cards, numbering, etc. This prevents the perception that the instructor is partial or unfair. The challenge is accidentally generating groups that have undesirable properties, such as being segregated or with strong personality conflicts or all people who are struggling with the academic demands.

Self-selected groups: People are asked to select their groups. The advantage is that groups start off with good feelings (though there is no guarantee that this will last). Teams of friends have risks. The qualities that make for good friendships are not the same as those that go towards good group work. The danger is that the groups might be ineffective and that friendships might fall apart.

In addition, self-selected groups tend to be homogeneous in terms of gender, ethnicity, and personality styles (such as being task-oriented versus non-task oriented). This works against one of the goals of active learning, which is to learn to be able to work with diverse peoples. Finally, self-selection frequently results in hurt feelings for the students who are picked last.

For these reasons, self-selection is the least desirable mode of group formation.

Mixed mode groups: While the instructor has final say, students have input. For example, prior to group formation, students are asked to confidentially list three people they would like to have in their groups and maybe people they don't want to work with. The instructor then tries to form heterogeneous groups in which at least one of the persons they liked is included, and the persons they disliked are excluded.

This method can also identify students who feel they do not belong and are unrequested. They can be placed in a supportive group where they might feel more valued and welcome.

Functional mode: In this mode, group members might be selected on desired criteria. For example, students who live in one dormitory may be put in one group, while commuter students are put in another. This makes it easier to work together.

Mixed expertise: Mixing expertise (computer, writing, graphics, statistics, etc.) can balance each team.