

Types of Groups

Should the groups be formal or informal?

An informal group is formed more or less spontaneously to handle a task. The group disbands after the task is completed (usually in a very brief time). For example, informal groups can form by simply asking people to discuss a question with those around them. Formal groups, on the other hand, are created with a little more planning, the tasks are also more structured, and they tend to remain together for a longer time.

Should the groups be structured or unstructured?

In a structured group, each member is assigned a particular role to play or task to perform in achieving the overall group goal. In unstructured groups, the group is simply given the task to be performed and each person in the group is free to contribute as he or she wishes. The option chosen depends on the level of collaborative small group skills displayed by its members. If the group has people with a high level of skills, the group can be unstructured. If however, the group is not functioning well together, then some structure might have to be imposed. It should be remembered that the goal of active learning is to make people independent and self-monitoring. Thus, structured groups should be perceived as an interim measure and thus they should eventually learn to perform well in an unstructured setting.

What should be the size of group?

Group sizes are determined by many factors. Sometimes the number of groups required defines it. For example, if the instructor wants six things done, it might be necessary to divide the whole group into six small groups and assign each group one task. On the other hand, when a limited amount of equipment and other materials are available, the number of people in a group is determined by the class size and the number of groups allowed.

If such constraints do not exist, then the preferred number of people in a group is either three or four. There seems to be a slight preference for four in the cooperative learning literature but three is viable, especially for older people. Pairs are useful for specific situations (such as for quick discussion in bookends lectures) or when you want to ensure that everyone gets a chance to participate (in handling laboratory equipment, for example). Groups of six or more are to be avoided for any extended task. They quickly form sub-groups of two, three, or four. The larger groups also have the disadvantage that they enable shy, quiet people to withdraw unnoticed and not be part of the learning process.