EDITORS’ MESSAGE

Identifying Why Groups Work Well, Then Giving Grouping Another Try

When statements such as “Let’s get into our groups . . .” bring both unintended delight (for those who are sure the group work will give them a chance to goof off) and anguish (from students who believe they do all the work while their off-task peers profit with the same grade), we know something has gone wrong. Students may also be worried about the nature of the group task, the configuration of the participants, or the plan for student accountability. In any case, this reaction and the reasons for it are not what the teacher had in mind.

Have you or your colleagues attempted to implement grouping practices several times with the same negative consequences? Maybe you weren’t sure who had completed what or the room was too noisy or several students were always fooling around. If you eventually concluded that grouping practices meant to support differentiation, while applauded, can be tough to implement, you are correct. The stumbling block could be in not knowing enough about the students or the types of grouping practices one could use. Perhaps it is in the logistics of managing the groups. What information were you missing that caused you to wonder if the strengths of grouping students really outweighed the limitations? What’s a teacher to do when every conference you attend and every journal you read suggests that small-group arrangements are a significant feature of purposeful learning? How do you react to explicit and implicit statements that grouping is the “way to go” if you want to engage your students in differentiated learning experiences that will prepare them for the collaborative practices of their 21st-century workplaces?

On the other hand, you may have also had enough successes with small groups to realize that they work well when you are flexible in your approach to teaching and the ways in which you expect learning to occur. You know that effective grouping practices involve purposeful attention to the curriculum, and you realize that there are many ways in which information can be shared and learned. Instruction that incorporates flexible grouping patterns requires students to work together on tasks. When done well, these students benefit from increased knowledge of targeted content and skills. Additionally, Lapp and Flood (2005) found from their work with teachers who were attempting to implement successful classroom grouping practices that attention must be directed to the grouping compositions, the task purposes, allocation and management of time, the match between materials and tasks, assessment and subsequent instructional tasks, and, most important, the teacher’s knowledge about effective grouping practices.

Colleagues Kelly Chandler-Olcott, Jodi Burnash, Danielle Donahue, Maureen DeChick, Michele Gendron, James Smith, Mary Taylor, and John Zeleznik had concerns and questions as they co-taught a summer writing institute designed to enhance the writing skills of eighth graders who were transitioning to ninth grade. Using think-pair-share, dyad groupings, and digital story groupings as their instructional contexts, they
share the values gained by the students and the insights they, as co-teachers, gained about grouping practices.

Other articles in this issue of *Voices from the Middle* have also been selected to address many of the concerns and hesitations teachers have about implementing group practices. For example, Trudi Nelson discusses the perspective of the student who views group practices with angst, as well as that of their teachers who realize there are “freeloaders” in the group but aren’t sure what to do. She helps us to realize that groups can become very productive workplaces when attention is given to the size and structure of the assignment, and when the assessment of the group and its members involve considerations of content, product, and process. In addition, Nelson recommends that students are taught what it means to be collaborative in advance of the group’s work.

If you’re starting to again feel ready to implement grouping practices in your classroom, don’t be discouraged if you momentarily remember the out of control behaviors of the early finishers or the staggered completion times for the various groups. Tonya Perry reminds us that completing tasks within varied time frames is also an element of differentiation. Additionally, she shares ideas for creating anchor activities that keep everyone on task until each group has had time to productively finish their work.

One common group configuration in middle school is the literature circle—an often homogeneous group resulting from the common expectation that everyone who is reading a particular book should be reading at the same level and speed. Elizabeth Batchelor believes that one significant element of literature circles is the relationships among the participants. She shares insights about how to heterogeneously group students to work efficiently and effectively in literature circles. Her practical insights regarding how to build, manage, monitor, and assess literature circle participation provide details needed to try these in your classroom.

Brian Horn also highlights the potential for group success when relationships play a major role. He takes us inside an 8th-grade language arts class to witness the powerful learning that occurred when seven students independently grouped themselves and began to develop a community of practice. His account of their success is contrasted with the experience of the classroom teacher who had to convince a skeptical administration that this was indeed “best practice.”

The power of the literature circle also depends on the material that is being shared. Mary-ann Tobin describes digital storytelling as an engaging medium for exploring both narrative and expository texts. The group practices she details clarify how to use technology as a medium and how to help students collaboratively learn about a text thesis. She notes that together, both support rich group collaborations.

During her work with students in grades 5–8, Gretchen Hovan became convinced that writers grew in their craft through the feedback they received from other students. Her students viewed writing more purposefully and were significantly more engaged in writing when, through writing group interaction, they became increasingly aware of the views of their audiences. Knowing their audiences added authenticity to the feedback they were receiving, thus supporting their growing skills as writers.

The examples these authors have shared illustrate how to build from students’ strengths, reinforce their skill and knowledge bases, and provide choice and engagement through productive group work. Our motivation to dedicate an issue of *Voices* to a discussion of grouping practices is fueled by what we sometimes observe as we visit middle school classrooms. Whole-group instruction and independent work still dominate, but we believe that while there is a place for each of these configurations in the school day, more flexibility is needed with regard to grouping configurations if students are going to take some ownership of their learning. If you’re trying to expand your grouping practices, the examples shared by this issue’s authors present many facets of flexible grouping while also focusing attention on the fact that flexible, productive grouping
practices support students’ learning as they participate in instruction, projects, and communication about topics that engage and expand their bases of knowledge, language, and skills. These articles also share many instructional ideas designed to support you in implementing purposeful, productive, collaborative group work in your classroom.

Please continue the conversation online through the journal’s Web resource, Moving from Print to Practice (http://www.ncte.org/journals/vm/print-to-practice). You’ll find a discussion guide that is perfect for professional development, as well as short podcast interviews with the authors. Most important, we invite you to share your reflections, questions, and grouping practice tips. Your voices are essential.

Reference

2013 David H. Russell Award Call for Nominations
The National Council of Teachers of English is now accepting nominations for the David H. Russell Award for Distinguished Research in the Teaching of English. This award recognizes published research in language, literature, rhetoric, teaching procedures, or cognitive processes that may sharpen the teaching or the content of English at any level. Nominations of publications to be considered should be postmarked no later than March 1, 2013. Any work or works of scholarship or research in language, literature, rhetoric, or pedagogy and learning published during the past five years (i.e., between January 2008 and December 2012) are eligible. Works nominated for the David H. Russell Award should be exemplary instances of the genre, address broad research questions, contain material that is accessibly reported, and reflect a project that stands the test of time. Normally, anthologies are not considered. Works nominated for the award must be available in the English language.

To nominate a study for consideration, please email the following information to fmann@ncte.org: Your Name, Your Phone, Your Email, Author, Title, Publisher, Date of Publication, and one paragraph indicating your reasons for nominating the work. Please include four copies of the publication for distribution to the Selection Committee, or give full bibliographic information so that the Selection Committee will encounter no difficulty in locating the publication you nominate. Send nominations and materials by March 1, 2013, to: David H. Russell Award, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1010, Attn: Felisa Mann. Final selections will be announced in mid-August 2013.