

Group facilitative learning

Freedom and responsibility



EN

Introduction

Group work is a well-known method of working with students during lessons, about which a lot has been written. It would therefore, make no sense to compete with so many publications on the subject. However, the presented bulletin offers something other than a description of the work's methodology. For us, as teachers who have experienced it, group learning is a principle of how to create a learning society out of our students. It is a way to intensively develop the freedom and responsibility of students for their learn. You certainly know the usual problem of dividing students into groups to engage the "weaker" students, conflict resolution, lack of interest, procrastination, and hiding behind other members of the group. For us, these risks were a challenge and an ideal opportunity to learning. More than passing on the knowledge of a subject, we want to create an opportunity for personal growth with all that it encompasses – support of independence, freedom, responsibility, cooperation, and reflection. The teacher doesn't just stand there like an "officer" passing information and grades, but as a facilitator of learning who enables and facilitates the process and creates space for their reflection. It is a work of art – to assign instructions as precisely and briefly as one can, to help create an atmosphere of cooperation and eventually to open a social and reflective circle at the end of the lesson, so the students can develop their metacognitive processes – to reflect their freedom and responsibility.

This bulletin is also a part of an important pillar of the inclusive school. It is a method of facilitative and reflective learning. It is certainly not the only way, because frontal learning can be reflective and supportive. In group work, however, there are more processes and more dynamics – and it is a huge opportunity for the teacher to grow as a facilitator of learning.

Eva Kúdelová a Viktor Križo

What is group work with reflective and facilitative learning?

The approach described here is more of a **teaching style** rather than a particular method. Compared to the typical group work method, there are some different principles and guidelines:

- The content of the assignment becomes a tool, **the goal is to acquire skills**, necessary for **teamwork** focusing on cooperation, (self)reflection, and relationships;
- **Mistakes are welcomed** from the side of students as well as teachers. We can learn together from our failures and achievements to become more effective;
- We take **responsibility for our actions**, and instead of blaming others, we discover what is alive inside of us – **non-violent communication**;
- Gradually, we **give responsibility and freedom to the students**, and they become directors of their lessons;
- **The students overtake various roles within the group.** Mutually, they learn strategies on how to acquire the curriculum, how to resolve personal conflicts, challenges, and problems in real life;
- **We learn and respect the boundaries of others**, that of the other students, teachers as well as our own = everyone has their limits and is an asset to the group in achieving their common goal;
- **Instead of grades, together we look for strategies** to achieve the lesson's objectives;
- The most important part is **the reflection at the end of the lesson**, where we can share our observations and experiences, and analyze the course of the lesson and our experience from it. All the miracles happen right there in the circle.

Group work is not the only form of work. It is also suitable as a combination with frontal, project, or self-learning. We can include it once a week or a month as needed, to build new skills. If the schedule allows it, we connect different classes. Joint learning of students between different classes brings advantages like tutoring, healthy relationships, and a decrease in bullying. The teacher and the assistant, or two teachers can divide tasks (e.g. one coordinates and the other reflects) and together they can perceive much more than just one, which becomes an advantage during the final reflection.

Preview of structured group work during a lesson:

TIME	PROCESS	WHAT	DESCRIPTION
5 min	Activation	Dividing students into groups	Finding and creating challenges in form of dividing students into smaller groups of 3-4 members.
3 min		Instructions, task assignment and the goal	The teacher gives the instructions and sets the goal for the group, which will be reflected at the end.
3 min		Task division	Getting acquainted with the assignment, individual groups will divide into groups – how they will work together.
20 min	Cognitive process	Group work (case-based learning, project learning, etc.)	The group works on the assignment - solving effectively and preparing outputs.
3 min		Task check / work with a mistake	Joint check of the results, outputs, error analysis, e.g. each group chooses and describes one of the mistakes.

12 min	Reflective dialogue	Reflection in circle	Groups or individuals will briefly reflect on their feelings, but also their work: 1. How was the cooperation? 2. What have I (we) accomplished? 3. How did we manage our time? 4. How did we divide tasks? 5. How was the team's communication?
2 min		Teacher's feedback	The teacher reflects the group dynamics, group work, and work processes.

„The thing I like the most was that we could get closer and therefore, learn more.”
— Janko

“I like groups with other classes because I can learn something new and repeat the curriculum. And it can be in different forms.”
— Vinco

“I like our groups because we always have fun, but I also learn something that I didn't know before. from my classmates”
— Alex

Video preview of intergenerational group work of 6th and 7th grade: www.youtube.com/watch?v=0bFRZXaRyXg

How to create a task assignment?

When choosing tasks, we apply our most important principle – **the content of the curriculum as a means, not an end. It becomes a tool to acquire skills for the future life of students, such as the skill to cooperate, sensitively and openly communicate, work with the time and be tactical.** With the amount of daily work for the teacher, there is not always the time or energy to create imaginative tasks, prepare them into envelopes, and create stations. The lesson can be enriching for students, even when they work on common tasks from the workbook/textbook. The ideal state, which we can get to with an experienced class, is a state where during the workbook/textbook. The ideal state, which we can get to with an experienced class, is a state where during the students' work the teacher has enough time to observe the process, "drink a coffee" and the class is self-manageable. We will share several used forms:

- **Station rotations with various types of tasks** = stations are desks (each one has a different type of assignment or a group of other students who act as the assignor and controller) and the groups move between the desks after a specified time;
- **Checkpoint** = older students fill the role of controllers, groups go for the results continuously, as agreed;
- **Planning/ presentations** = clearly defined frameworks to be met by the group (e.g. a class plan on a certain scale, country prospectus in South America, plan a budget of a school trip, sorting adjectives by type...)
- **Analysis/creation of a written work** = students in groups correct or create a test, we are focusing on setting conditions for the groups, what is it exactly, that they are supposed to do until the end of the lesson to meet the goal;

- **Students as teachers** = mutual explanation of the curriculum, e.g. before or after the written exam. It is suitable to divide students so that in each group there is at least one "teacher" who understands the curriculum;
- **Everyone works on the same assignment** = in this case, it is important to set a clear goal – what we should, as teachers observe and acquaint the class with.

The goal of the lesson, what is being monitored and evaluated at the end of the lesson, will be written on the board, or explained. This way, the groups can focus on, what we are trying to achieve together. We will also add some conditions and rules for the groups to follow.

"I like group works because we learn how to cooperate and express our opinions."
— Helena

"Group work means getting experience in counting on people and cooperating in a group."
— Emma

"It bothers me, that sometimes I get a stupid group and then I am bored for the rest of the lesson."
— Jakub

How to split your time?

Working with time is one of the most important skills that students need to acquire. As teachers, we set the time limit very clearly from the beginning, writing it on the board together with the goal of the lesson is the best way. We can even create a “timekeeper” as a volunteer among students. Example of a lesson's timeframe:

9:00 – 9:05	Instructions, goal
9:05 – 9:10	Division into groups, task assignment
9:10 – 9:30	Work in groups
9:30 – 9:45	Joint reflective circle

Observing the acquisition of this skill with time can be the goal of the lesson. Success/Failure of the group's tactics is then reflected in the circle and the acquired knowledge is checked during the next lesson. Time frames naturally change during the group work training as needed and are considered by the teacher. The students are lacking communication skills, so in the beginning, we have to work on this intensively. Therefore, at the beginning of the lesson, we set aside more time for the final circle, even if it is just 20 minutes. **With growing experience, the efficiency of time increases significantly.**

“I like groups. Sometimes we don't have enough time but other than that, everything is fine. Sometimes I learn more there than when I am alone.”

— Hali

How to create groups?

The students are more motivated if they manage the choice themselves. They choose according to their friendships, which creates space for conflicts and injustice against those who are left out. This is kind of a challenge that we can come back to during the final reflection. We have found that random group division has been the most effective – it can be quite motivating for the students if they perceive it as a challenge for acquiring a skill for possible situations in the future, where you will have to deal or cooperate with various types of people in your workplace. The classroom offers a safe environment, where the students can practice this. The most appropriate size of the groups is 3-4 students. Sometimes we do random drawing – examples include:

- **Pens** – one student takes a container, or a pocket/hat and collects pens from everyone, which are then randomly drawn. The owners come for their pens and the created **groups then find their place to work.**
- **Name** – papers with the names of the students are in a container. **Anyone can draw.**
- **Animal** – various types of animals are written on a paper - three from each species. Each student draws their animal and looks for the other animals from his species.
- **Puzzle** – we cut the required number of pictures into three parts each. The students draw and look for a picture to complete **the image.**
- **Other** – various variations of images, geometric shapes, songs, names of famous people, years and events, etc.

How to manage groups and their work?

Formed groups will be seated apart to have enough space to work, some can even sit on the ground. After reading the assignment, they will have 2-3 minutes to divide tasks within the group, e.g. controller, “calculator”, runner (goes to the control point to check the results), timekeeper, rule keeper, speaker, captain, etc. They solve the task together or individually. After the time runs out, we will ask them to share their decision with the class. This part is skipped if the class is more experienced with group work, this is only a way to guide them until they acquire the skills needed for group work. The work itself lasts about 15-25 minutes (in case of a block it is more). The teacher serves as a guide, he reflects on conflicts, facilitates (easiest) processes, advises, guards the silence, and appreciates and encourages the students. He monitors the process and collects suggestions for feedback. An **exit ticket for a teacher** serves as an aid, where he can observe the following processes:

- How do they communicate in groups?
- Do all of them work in a group?
- Do they work together?
- Does each have his task?
- Do they help each other?
- Do the conditions I gave, suit them?
- Are they checking their time or other groups?
- How do they implement the established goal of the group?
- Group reserves;
- Suggestions for reflection;

How to evaluate group work?

As we have already emphasized, it needs to be said that the primary goal shouldn't be the learning outcome but to learn new skills. Therefore, we apply a different approach for evaluation, the analysis of the learning content itself can be implemented the next day.

- **results** = to save time, we write the results in advance (on the board), make the “answering sheet” available to the groups, explain, and appoint controllers (leave the result preparation to the older students). If we take the role of the controller, we won't have enough time left or energy to observe the events in the classroom and prepare for the final reflection.
- **the evaluation itself** = with this type of group work, classification loses its significance. The motivating factor becomes the common goal set at the beginning of the lesson, the opportunity for an experience, entertainment, and a game. Strong motivation by grading strengthens the competitiveness and individualism of students, it takes months to change that. If we lose the grading system, we observe the consequences it has on the groups (failure of a group is often interpreted as a fault of an individual - weaker student) and we reflect on it.
- **competition, where every group can be the winner** = by changing the typically set goal we can easily achieve the feeling of success for the weaker groups. We divide the space on the blackboard into as many parts as we have groups. The team chooses a name as well as their goal – how many tasks do we have to do correctly to be satisfied? They choose completely freely, and in the line below their goal they fill out their actual result. We all have our maximum.

How to lead reflection?

The most important part of the whole group work is the reflection in a circle. However, first, we need to create a safe and secure environment, where the students can express themselves fully and without fear. This is helped by a clearly defined agreement, respected by all. The students desire a certain responsibility and also boundaries but they are more likely to accept them if they are agreed upon rather than given from above. That is why it pays out to take some time to create a common deal. It is a repayable investment for years to come. Ideal training for reflection is regular guidance of morning circles at school or reflection at the end of the week, project, activity, trip, or conflict. It happens that if students have little room to talk regularly, this reflection is very overwhelmed by their desire to talk at all costs.

Example of rules:

- **Sitting in a circle** – on one level (on chairs or the ground). The circle ensures, that we all see each other. We are equal, so we sit on the same level. We form one whole, where everyone has their place.
- **Only one speaks** – so that everyone's thoughts are said and heard.
- **Raised hand rule** – always applies. This method of silencing can be used by any member of the group.
- **Do not comment** – we respect the opinions of each of the group members. His perception can be different from ours, we can disagree, but we hear him out.
- **We talk about ourselves** – we describe our feelings and experience. If I want to point to a behavior that I didn't like, I will say: "I am angry, that you didn't work with us, because I wanted us to do more tasks today", etc.
- **Conciseness** – we react briefly, to give space to the next one.

Another challenge is the **practice of communication skills of students** – to listen, to express in the first person, to read non-verbal cues, the ability to name our feelings, needs... The method of ethical education – the chapter on communication – will serve as an adequate tool, also the intensive use of **the principles of Non-violent communication** (M. Rosenberg). We don't have to be afraid to give a couple of hours to the training, the students can learn something about themselves and the group can become closer.

The teacher guards time, he tries to give the floor to more students, while he can help himself through several techniques, e.g.:

- **Method 1-10** = after checking the results, the class will sit down in a circle and the teacher asks them to show with their fingers how well they worked (or a different question). The worst is one and the best is ten. Everyone shows it at the same time but talks one by one. Who wants to say why they chose that number will raise their hand. In the beginning, the teacher only chooses 3-4 students to speak, so as not to take up the space and to manage the rules.
- **The Exit Ticket for students** = is a very suitable exercise or training in the beginning. After the activity, each student (or a group) gets a ticket with easy questions (see picture on the next page). It can be group communication, tactics, classmates' awards, goal achievement, etc. They will organize their thoughts, and when they have trouble talking, the speaker talks for the group, or they give the ticket to the teacher. After a few times, they no longer need the help because they know how the reflection takes place. If we focus on a specific question within the circle, it can save a lot of our time..

Exit ticket:

Write at least one thing that you learned about your classmates in the group:

When Michael disagreed with something, he corrected me.

Who would you like to award from your group and why?

Michael, because he was thinking more and I was just counting.

What is it that you need to work on more as a group?

On the quality of calculating.

What three words describe today's lesson?

Speed, cooperation, something that we didn't learn before.

Previews of some of the questions for the reflection are shown below:

EVALUATION	What was your strategy? What can you do to finish with two more tasks the next time? What were you most satisfied with?
GROUP WORK	What did you do to help your team? What was the group work for you like? How did you divide tasks? What worked well in your group? What is it that you, as a group, need to work on? How could you achieve this together?
GOAL	What new did we learn today? How can we verify, that we fulfilled the goal? What can you do specifically, so that your group achieves the goal?
FEEDBACK	Today, you worked well in the group, I noticed that there were only smaller conflicts but you managed to resolve them between yourselves. Though not every group achieved their goal, we were able to figure out together, how to divide tasks differently, and how to set the controller... Thank you for the lesson.

If a student brings an interesting moment into the discussion, we encourage the discussion further in that direction. The end of the circle consists of the teacher's short feedback, a summary, and tactics for the next lesson.

Challenges and risks

- **Student refuses to participate in group work/ he is excluded by the group** = we make sure that the other groups know what to do and we mediate the conflict. Ideally, we create a discussion focused on resolving this situation, so that the students come up with them, or we will propose two solutions and they should agree on one. In the final circle, we can return to the conflict. "What would help you to feel better in the group?" But we can also respect that someone didn't join or works alone and we reflect on it.
- **Differences in performance between groups** = each group brings interesting stimuli to the circle. We openly name what we perceive and we try to make a discussion about enrichment from a variety instead of blaming each other. The students' statements are translated into non-violent communication as their needs and feelings. Through cooperation with other classmates, everyone has a chance to see different methods of learning, and different needs relating to time and explanations. Everyone has their sources and limits. There comes an opportunity to lead the classroom to inclusive education and mutual respect and help.
- **Cheating** = we mentioned above that the groups can have an approach to their results. Initially, this trust brings the opportunity for cheating, when teams copy from each other. We come back to it during the reflection, how much we fulfilled the conditions, what we learned during the lesson, and what did it bring to us. The students are set up to achieve the desired result in a certain time. Pursuing another goal throws them off balance and brings a certain form of relief, eventually, they can focus more on the process than the results. Deleting the evaluation greatly helps.
- **The repeated conflict between specific students** = we solve outside of the circle. If the situation requires it, we ask for the help of a professional.

- **The class doesn't want random division** = if there is a persistent rejection of cooperation between more students, we respect the needs of the class. Dividing according to friendships/ performance can work when we can estimate the needs of individual groups and be their guide, or motivate skilled students to become our assistants. In groups with weaker students with appropriate support, a moment can appear, when a "teacher" will appear among them as well.
- **Not everyone, everything, or the same way** = during group work, the division of tasks, and the reflection, it is appropriate to slowly leave the need for everyone to do everything the same way, to speak or present in the same way. If this kind of work occurs regularly then a person can try out all kinds of different possibilities of connecting, once to talk and another time to be quiet. Sometimes, it is not even possible because of time, to involve everyone the same and it is alright.

"I like the division into the groups and getting tasks"
— Samuel

"I love groups, but I want to be the guide more times."
— Lucka

From responsibility to freedom

Group work is really "just" a means on the path to more freedom and responsibility for the students. Everything that happens in school can serve this main goal, so that the students can learn independence, to like to take enough responsibility, and learn to choose. In this sense, we can point to those basic developmental steps of group work:

1. **Teacher – guardian** – if the teacher doesn't want to lead the class to anarchy, right at the beginning, he needs a process, time, goal, and to hold the structure firmly in his hands. He gives less space to creativity and freedom. The tasks are prepared and set in advance, the teacher sets the goal and divides the groups, in the reflection he uses numerical pointing and gives the floor to the students.
2. **Support creativity** – when the students acquire the basic ability to work and follow the rules of the group. The teacher gives them space and supports their creativity. During the final reflection, he can point out the untraditional solutions of some groups and certain skills that they used.
3. **From process to content** – with this type of work, the teacher should first learn that the learning content will be poor. The students will fight more and cooperate less. They will not be able to self-reflect. If the teacher focuses on these processes first, it will return to him later, because the students will learn how to do a higher quality work content. They will, for example, be able to prepare in this way for an exam, test, admissions, etc.
4. **Student – guardian** – the teacher can gradually entrust his role to students – e.g. guardian of time, division, drawing into groups, setting the goal and content of the lesson. The teacher can gradually become "only" a facilitator – to facilitate the freedom and responsibility of each student – and reflect on the processes.

5. **Intra-generational meetings** – when students learn how to work in groups, they can face new challenges in the form of lessons mixed with older or younger students. Here the freedom and responsibility do not transfer from teacher to student, but the students become a learning community. The older students can prepare the whole lesson for the younger ones with various topics so that it becomes a challenge and a benefit for both sides. They can also mix and work together while two teachers can facilitate and coordinate the lesson.
6. **Project learning** – the whole system of working in a group in one lesson can become a ground base for high-quality project learning. Where students learn to reflect, work with time, and divide tasks. In project learning, the students can go deeper into the curriculum/given topic, they can meet outside of school as well, look for new sources, come up with more creative solutions, discover the strength of freedom and joint creativity, experience intra-generational cooperation, reflect on wide processes and strong and weak sides of cooperation, and can solve complicated and very practical social tasks.
7. **Organizing events and solving problems** – if the students learn to work in groups, but mainly discover the charm of skills, they can solve problems and challenges, that real life brings. They learn to solve their conflicts and can prepare a trip for the whole day, birthday celebration, sleep-over for younger students, draft school order of rules, paint the classroom or organize a concert.

Our Publications:

We create the bulletins in cooperation with a team of experts on inclusive education. Employ them as a useful guide in your work or for explaining the principles of inclusive education to the general public.

We also create useful videos for you on Inklucentrum's YouTube channel, some of which are available in English or German. For deeper understanding of the topics, we recommend signing up for the training courses we organize.



Our Publications:
inklucentrum.sk/publikacie

Our Courses:
youtube.com/c/inklucentrum

Webinars and Videos:
inklucentrum.sk/kurzy

We cover Inclusive education

Inklucentrum – The Centre for Inclusive Education is an advocacy, educational, consulting expert organization on a national level, working in the field of support to inclusive education. It is dedicated to supporting quality and humanistic education in the school environment for the benefit of development of potential for all children, families and the school staff. It provides support, consulting and education in accredited programs and workshops, especially for pedagogical and professional employees.

We are preparing a project of establishing a primary school with an inclusive center, which will be using humanistic and inclusive principles described in our bulletins.

INKLUCENTRUM – Centrum inkluzívneho vzdelávania

Hálova 16, 851 01 Bratislava
www.inklucentrum.sk
facebook.com/inklucentrum

INFO: info@inklucentrum.sk
COURSES: vzdelavanie@inklucentrum.sk
COUNSELLING: poradentsvo@inklucentrum.sk
ONLINE: inklucentrum.sk/publikacie
inklucentrum.sk/kurzy

The support of the EU in publishing this material does not automatically approve of its content, which reflects only the opinions of its authors and the Commission does not take responsibility for the information used in this material.



Co-funded by
the European Union

Iceland 
Liechtenstein
Norway **Active
citizens fund**

Nadácia 

Project 'On the path to Inclusive Education' is supported from ACF-Slovakia program, which is financed from a financial mechanism of EHP 2014-2021. The program administrator is the Ekopolis Foundation in partnership with the Open Society Foundation Bratislava.