

ORGANISING FOR LEARNING

CLASSROOM TECHNIQUES TO HELP STUDENTS INTERACT WITHIN SMALL GROUPS

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Instructional Technique 1

PARTNER DISCUSSIONS

Partner discussion is often one of the first techniques that teachers use to facilitate peer-to-peer interaction. It requires little prep time and can be an excellent entry point to having your students interact with each other during learning. In this technique, there is limited group accountability. Students may be asked to share their perspectives with the class after their partner interactions, but they are not usually asked to hand in a work product as a result of their interactions.

Sharing perspectives with peers is a key aspect of learning new content. Asking students to respond to prompts and then share information with peers allows them to experience multiple perspectives. Sharing with partners allows students to see how others interact with and process information, enlarging and even changing their own understandings. Shared experiences, such as partner discussions, are essential building blocks of the teaching–learning process (Marzano & Brown, 2009).

How to Effectively Implement Partner Discussions

Recall the six teacher behaviours needed for the essential implementation of organising for learning that were listed in the introduction. They are noted here to refresh your memory: 1) identifying critical content, 2) planning meaningful tasks, 3) structuring intentional interactions, 4) organising students into groups, 5) establishing routines for interacting and 6) teaching and reinforcing conative skills. The following sections describe each of these behaviours as they apply specifically to implementing partner discussions.

Identify Critical Content

Determining the specific aspect of critical content that you want students to discuss is the first step in the implementation of partner discussions. Use the learning target you have selected to help you identify that content. Student interactions must have a specific purpose and that purpose should be linked to the learning target. If you are vague about what content you want students to discuss with their partners, your students will be confused regarding the point of their interactions.

Plan a Meaningful Task

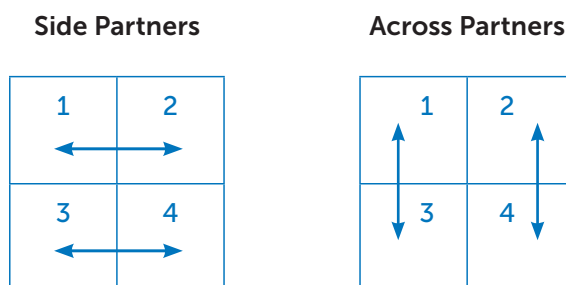
Answering questions the teacher poses is one of the most common ways to facilitate partner discussions. To maximise the quantity and quality of your students' interaction, develop questions that require more than a single-word response. Single-word responses foster choppy interactions that interfere with the flow or give and take during conversation. One way to introduce quality questions is to periodically embed an open-ended response question during direct instruction. Frame questions that are cognitively complex and require extended responses. Open-ended response questions have two advantages: 1) they give your students opportunities to be active learners and 2) you are able to listen in as students talk to each other, immediately knowing whether students are learning what you want them to gain from the lesson. Rich conversations result when students discuss their complex thinking. If students do not have previous experiences interacting with one another as they learn and process content, they may be nervous about sharing ideas with their peers. Teach your students how to engage in productive conversations by modelling how to carry on rich conversations.

Structure Intentional Interactions

After you have identified the critical content and determined the question or prompt that will spark a conversation about the critical content, decide how you will structure student interaction during partner discussions. Structure which partner talks first and how long each partner talks. Instruct students in how to take turns talking and responding to their partners' statements. Routines are essential during intentional interaction to prevent individual students from grabbing the spotlight from their partners.

If you want to rearrange partners periodically without moving desks, seat students in groups of four, and then direct them to talk to either their side or across partners. Figure 1.1 illustrates a desk arrangement for designating side and across partners.

Figure 1.1: Sample Desk Arrangement for Designating Partners



Plan a Meaningful Task

The next step is to determine what you will ask students to do during their paired practice. Think about which aspects of the procedural knowledge you want students to practise with their partners. Short practice sessions with frequent interaction can be more powerful than expecting students to practise a long, complicated procedure. If the procedure has multiple steps, have students practise in pairs for each step separately. They will then be able to focus on the critical content of each step and receive specific feedback from their partners.

Structure Intentional Interactions

Next, plan for how students will interact with each other during the paired practice session. If two students are left unmonitored, one student may often do all of the work, leaving the other student to either watch or totally disengage. The interaction should unfold in the following sequence. First, one student works on the skill, strategy or process while the other student observes. Then, the observing student gives feedback. Partners check each other's work for accuracy and discuss their personal approach to the activity. Students give their partners feedback on what part of the procedure they performed accurately, as well as note areas for growth. If students do not know how to solve a problem or complete the process, they should still attempt it, listen to feedback and write down what they learn.

When first implementing paired practice, guide students to prevent one student from monopolising the interaction. The purpose of this technique is for both students to practise. Students do not have to know the answer to be the one writing. The purpose of paired practice is two brains working together to practise one skill.

Think about the logistics of which student will write first and how long you will give the partners to explain their thinking. Determine in advance how you will facilitate individual accountability. Individual student mini-whiteboards work well for this strategy because you can readily see students' thinking and they can quickly erase and change their responses as their thinking changes. Not all practice needs to be recorded for students to later review, but students might find it useful to copy down the last example they practise for each chunk of critical content so they have an example to refer to when they are independently practising.

A variation of paired practice is Share and Compare in which, after the team practises, they join a neighbouring group to become a group of four. Students compare their answers with the other group and revise any discrepancies they find. This variation helps ensure accuracy and allows students to hear multiple perspectives.

Instructional Technique 4

STRUCTURED GROUPING

Your key role when implementing structured grouping is to provide students with both structure and accountability to complete a work product. Structured grouping works well when students are deepening their knowledge, because it allows them more time to work and requires them to apply what they are learning. Both individual and group accountability are prominently featured. Because there is an expected work product, structured grouping works most effectively with extending knowledge rather than processing new content. Thus, "productive group work is an essential stepping-stone to learning and mastery" (Fry, Fisher & Everlove, 2009).

How to Effectively Implement Structured Grouping

There are six teacher behaviours to effectively implement structured grouping: 1) identifying critical content, 2) planning a meaningful task, 3) structuring intentional interaction, 4) organising students into groups, 5) establishing routines for interacting and 6) teaching and reinforcing conative skills.

Identify Critical Content

Because structured grouping works best when students are extending knowledge rather than processing new content, decide which critical content you want students to deepen. Then, plan what you want students to do to extend their knowledge. If you simply want students to discuss critical content, this is probably not the best technique. This technique lends itself to being paired with activities that ask students to examine similarities and differences, examine their reasoning or other rigorous instructional strategies.