MONITORING GROUPS IN-CLASS

Scenario: The group work task has been set and you are keen to assist the groups where required, though you are conscious of allowing the students to work through the issues themselves. As you move around the groups during an in-class session you become aware that some groups appear uncomfortable with your presence and the group discussion dries up and you feel that perhaps you are impeding discussion or debate or their ability to deal with group issues. When the conversation ceases someone in the group asks a question related to another section of the course. You feel that this is so the group can have something to say and to distract you from the group work task.

Being able to monitor groups in-class without making students feel uncomfortable is not always easy. Some students may feel intimidated, uncomfortable or shy around academics; others may find your monitoring intrusive and an added pressure instead of a method of facilitating progress; the group might be embarrassed that they don’t have anything to show you. However, this is no reason not to monitor groups! It is important for you to strike a balance between monitoring, autonomy and creativity.

One of the easiest and quickest ways to monitor group progress is to allocate 5-10 minutes of class time during the first few weeks to discuss any issues. Early in the semester a small amount of class time could be allocated to group organization, administration and management issues. In-class learning and teaching activities could involve group work in order to encourage communication and involvement. It is important for you to request students to provide feedback on their involvement in group tasks. This could be verbal feedback to the whole group, brief written feedback to you, or simply involve you circulating from group to group during class time in order to gauge how things are progressing. Any consistent issues which arise can then be dealt with immediately.

If in-class group work time is set, it is important to move around to the different groups and to be available to answer any questions. It is also important to listen to general group conversations so that you can gain a picture of which groups are operating successfully and which may be struggling. Listening also allows you to pick up emerging ideas, problems or issues that may arise from the discussions. If groups appear to be struggling with either your presence or the task try asking some general questions to the whole group, and then make them more specific as their confidence in you and the task develops.

Remember you may get groups who will work at a faster pace than others and will finish their tasks ahead of the rest of the group. Such a group may become bored and potentially disruptive. In this instance you may need to consider possibilities for extension, including additional tasks, challenges or questions in your class lesson plan. Allowing early finishers to just leave class should not be an option.

The lay out of the teaching space is also an important part of being able to effectively monitor groups, and needs to be considered when using group work. Your choices may
be dictated by the size of the class, the nature of the activity, and the room configuration and seating arrangements.

For further information on the effect of the teaching space on student learning and your ability to monitor effectively see


**MONITORING GROUPS OUT OF CLASS**

**Scenario:** The nature of both the Unit of Study and the activity you have set for group work requires that it be undertaken outside formal class time. This means that you have limited opportunity to observe the groups and when discussing it with the students, they say they are on track and there are no problems. How can you determine whether they are not running into problems within the group or in completing the task?

Completing assessment tasks to a satisfactory standard shouldn’t be a puzzle that only the ‘better’ students can negotiate, many students for one reason or another will need to be nurtured and supported. Facilitating students towards the achievement of learning outcomes requires your time, advice and assistance.

Some academics allocate a group meeting time that may or may not be a compulsory or assessable component of the task and/or Unit of Study. This is also a good way to get students started and keep them on track. If students are only able to undertake group work outside class time then perhaps you could request either a written or oral progress report at relevant milestones in the project. A brief written report, with each student detailing their contribution to the project thus far is also useful for ensuring the students are on track. A brief oral report from the group in class will also provide this information to you and it also enables other students to hear from the other groups about their projects (this sharing of ideas may be a good or bad thing and will depend upon the task). An oral report is particularly useful for allowing you to probe the group on their progress. You may also find it useful to have students keep a diary or learning log of their contribution and progress. This may be handed in as part of the assessment or simply be an informal part of the learning or assessment process.

Adopting an open door policy is also an attractive monitoring option. Students appreciate it when academics offer them reading lists, helpful websites or journal articles which may help them along the way, especially in the early research phases. Advice regarding how to conduct a literature review or do a group presentation may also help them along.