TURNING CONTENT INTO GROUP WORK

Group work activities need not be complicated or always involve critical thinking or learning theories. A solid basic questioning technique is a good start, as is the ability to guide and stimulate small group discussions. Here are some tips for facilitating questioning and keeping group discussions moving along:

• Questioning is used to: probe, encourage deep thinking, assess, diagnose strengths and weaknesses, arouse and motivate, promote active learning, encourage participation, check comprehension and understanding, review, evaluate, summarise.
• There are different types of questions: closed (usually a right or wrong answer requiring factual information eg What is Newton’s third law?); open (eg may be several possible responses eg What is your view on smoking bans in bars and clubs?); hierarchical cognitive questions (questions at different levels of thinking eg use Blooms); probing (additional questions to probe deeper thinking in order to prompt, justify, clarify, extend, redirect).
• Start a session with closed questions and develop towards deeper questioning approaches.
• Allow time for students to think about what has been asked, perhaps even opportunity to chat in pairs or groups.
• If a question appears to be misunderstood paraphrase, re-word, re-direct and ask students to repeat it back.

Some more ideas:

• Be an active listener.
• Prepare a selection of questions at various levels.
• Use stimulus material or suitable resources to prompt questioning.
• Avoid responding with sarcasm.
• Explain expectations, activities or tasks clearly and succinctly.
• Use questions to clarify student comprehension of the task and learning.
• Respond to student comments, ideas or questions (don’t just gloss over them). Maybe use questions to probe responses further.
• Provide feedback (to good and poorer responses).
• Ask students to pose a series of questions about an issue or problem, perhaps with other students/groups.
• Be aware that environmental conditions affect student responses (e.g. heat, cold, room layout, time of day). Perhaps use some ice-breakers to get students started or to re-gather and re-direct.
• Try not to over question. Questioning is a good starting point but it needs to move somewhere. Perhaps follow it up with a small group problem or issue which relates to the questions/responses.

(modified from Exley & Dennick, 2004)

A key shift for many teachers is moving from leader to facilitator and for some this requires patience and confidence. The table below lists some of the skills necessary for facilitating small groups in different contexts.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of group work</th>
<th>Key facilitator skills</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group discussion</td>
<td>Producing aims and learning outcomes; conducting teambuilding, warm-up and ice-breaker activities; questioning; time management; monitoring; summarizing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Group activities</td>
<td>As above <strong>plus</strong> providing clear instructions; good pre-planning; resource preparation; managing the task; circulating the room</td>
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<tr>
<td>Workshops</td>
<td>As above <strong>plus</strong> organisation; task continuity (moving from task to task)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student-led seminars</td>
<td>Facilitating ground rules; identification/choice of topics; appropriate resourcing; good communication and clear instructions; providing feedback</td>
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<tr>
<td>Problem based learning (PBL)</td>
<td>Monitor activities and group progress; encourage student responsibility for own learning; ability to intervene and re-direct; trust students put own desires to ‘answer’ on hold; good communication; get to know students’ strengths and weaknesses; ability to take on multiple roles; FACILITATE</td>
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(modified from Exley & Dennick, 2004: 49, 88)