

How can we guide group discussion effectively?

Independent evidence

Tutors who are effective at building shared understanding through group discussion explicitly structure their group work using strategies that aim to involve all students and produce high-quality dialogue i.

Your evidence and reflections

Your students may well have experience of group work in other contexts such as work or community organisations. So you could start by seeing what happens when they engage in group work and how you respond. Some questions to guide your enquiry include:

- Did you structure the groups or allow them to form naturally?
- Within the groups who seemed to do most of the talking?
- Did your students listen to each other and take turns?
- Did all students contribute?
- Did your students ask each other for reasons for what they said?
- Did the groups build on what each other said to reach an agreed answer to the question you set?

Your answers will help you identify strengths and areas for development among your students when they engage in group work. You may find it useful to discuss your findings with a colleague who is experienced in group working, or even to observe a session and feed back to you. You may also like to reflect on the tasks you pose to your students for group work – are they conducive to fostering good discussion?

Putting the evidence to work

When you have analysed your students' group work behaviour you could identify ways of building on what they do well already. For example, you could identify those who seem to be naturally good at group work or 'natural chairs' and deliberately distribute them amongst the groups. Student behaviours would be reinforced if you always modelled dialogue, e.g. asking for reasons, inviting students to contribute and build on earlier points, etc. You might find it helpful to monitor the impact, e.g. by making audio recordings to compare before and after and/or by looking at the impact on students' work after their discussions?

i Find out more about guiding group discussion in this article: Scott, V.M. & Huntington, J.A. (2007) Literature, the interpretive mode and novice learners. *The Modern Language Journal* 91 (1) pp.3-14

For more information about collaborative learning in adult education see:

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