



What is it?

Small group management refers to the organization of students in the classroom into groups of around five to eight students with the aim of using learner-centered instruction to raise learning. Especially useful when a class has too many students for a teacher to teach and monitor effectively, small groups are also valuable even with smaller sized classes. The main advantage is that small groups permit the teacher to engage students actively and productively in their learning during the whole class period. This is true even if the teacher is concentrating on one or a single group. Among the many benefits of small groups are that they allow students to learn better by:

- Promoting fuller understanding
- Motivating them to strive
- Engaging everyone (it's harder to hide)
- Easing frustration & embarrassment
- Promoting team spirit
- Allowing teacher to give individual help
- Cultivating leadership
- Cultivating collaboration skills
- Promoting peer assessment & help
- Etc.

How does it work?

Successful management of small groups involves the following guidelines:

- ❖ Organize students in groups of five or six (and possibly up to eight, for older children);
- ❖ Give students achievable tasks to complete, with clear instructions, time, and other details;
- ❖ Tasks may require that students first work individually and then turn to the group for help, to check their work, for feedback, or to help each other understand better in other ways;
- ❖ Tasks may require students to collaborate, with many sub-tasks to complete and combine;
- ❖ Students should have specific responsibilities—leader, note-taker, time-keeper, presenter, etc.—, which should not be permanent but rotate among the members with new tasks;
- ❖ Students should have access to the materials and other items they will need for the task;
- ❖ Facilitator monitors the groups as they complete the task, guiding as necessary;
- ❖ Groups can share their results with the full class after, and maybe what they did, too; and
- ❖ Students provide each other feedback to help all succeed, in the groups and as a class.

How do you create small groups?

The creation of small groups is not random. To the contrary, it must be purposeful and strategic, matching students in ways that will provide all with the greatest opportunity to learn. At the same time, creating groups has a social purpose, serving to create a sense of belonging and solidarity, and fostering pride, respect, and positive competitiveness. Given these two aims, Speed School expects facilitators to create small groups that will stay together to create a unified social group, creating a positive, loyal, dynamic working unit. The selection of a group mascot and the adoption of a team slogan aim to contribute to this result. To repeat, one of the facilitator's jobs is to support groups to help them become happy, effective learning teams.

At the same time, Speed School asks facilitators to consider when, for learning purposes, it will be valuable to re-group the students, focusing on the best matches to achieve different learning outcomes. For learning purposes, it is usually most useful to choose between mixed-ability and same-ability groupings. The main reason for using *mixed ability groupings* is to

take advantage of peer instruction, support, assessment, and encouragement. This arrangement is useful when:

- a learning task requires a variety of strengths, knowledge, talents, and other assets—including intellectual, practical, and socio-emotional, or personal—to complete well; for example, completing a project that requires a combination of language, mathematics, leadership, creativity, and communication skills; and
- the facilitator wants to take advantage of stronger students to help classmates who are slower in learning the lesson content, with the understanding that who is stronger may differ from one topic or learning objective to another and recognizing that acting as a peer educator or evaluator also helps the stronger students, who must work to understand the content better to be able to explain and assess it completely.

The main reason for using *same, or similar, ability groupings* is to allow students to progress at a pace and to a level that suits their particular needs and abilities. This arrangement serves:

- *stronger students* by allowing them to dig more deeply into a topic, either completing more complex, challenging learning tasks that the facilitator gives them or joining to learn more about a topic in ways that they, themselves, identify and organize; and
- *slower students* by allowing them to focus on the basic elements of the content, working on tasks of a level that challenge them without being frustrating and permitting the facilitator to work more intensively with them with confidence that the stronger students are working on their own, suitably challenging learning tasks (not being slowed down and bored by simpler learning tasks that suit their slower classmates).

To repeat, who is slower and who is stronger may change from one topic to another, so the composition of the same ability groups will also likely change.

What does learning in small groups look like?

Learning in small groups, students don't just acquire the content from their lessons, they learn it well and, at the same time, they develop as more productive, engaged, motivated, and fulfilled individuals. Specifically, they learn:

- To critique gently & helpfully
- To plan, organize, & produce
- To explain clearly
- To listen carefully
- To convince and become convinced
- To collaborate and to assign tasks
- To disagree and to compromise
- Each other's strengths and interests

What are the risks?

There are risks with small groups, but there are also ways to manage these:

- ❖ The teacher does not control the class fully, *but students learn self-control and independence;*
- ❖ The classroom can be noisy, *but learning noise is good and can be moderated;*
- ❖ Students have varied levels & abilities, *but students can help each other, excelling differently;*
- ❖ One or a few students may try to dominate, *but roles can be shared to foster the learning assets of all students;*
- ❖ The teacher must work harder, preparing clear tasks & instructions, *but the results are compelling, & should actually lighten classroom work;*
- ❖ May invite conflicts, *but it forces students to learn to collaborate and to disagree well.*