Overview of Collaborative Learning Techniques: Discussion CoLTs

Source: Collaborative Learning Techniques by Barkley, Major and Cross (Jossey-Bass, 2014)
With additional adaptations from George Washington University Teaching & Learning Center

1 Think-Pair-Share

The students think individually for a few minutes, and then discuss and compare their responses with a partner before sharing with the entire class. It is useful for preparing students to participate more fully and effectively in whole class discussions. It allows students time to think about the topic and practice comments and questions in a low-risk peer group. This CoLT is generally used informally to stimulate discussion and is not general used for grading purposes.

Group size

Pairs

Time on task

4 to 15 minutes

Preparation

Develop the question before class and decide in advance how the students will report on the activity.

Procedure

1. Pose the question.
2. Allow the individual students a few minutes to think about the question
3. Ask the students to pair with another (nearby) student.
4. Ask the students in the pairs to share their responses.
5. Suggest that the students clarify items on which they agree and disagree. Have the students report out by having each pair report on what they believe is their most important point.

2 Round Robin

Students generate ideas but do not elaborate on them and the ideas move from one student to the next. It is useful for structuring brainstorming sessions and ensuring that all students participate. The technique can generate many ideas and requires all students to participate. The list of ideas may be compiled for later use. This approach may also be used for having the students present the formulas relevant to solving a problem. The technique is not generally used for grading purposes. It is useful for the groups to record and submit their ideas. These can be used later in the course.

Group size

4 to 6

Time on task

5 to 15 minutes

Preparation

Prepare a prompting question or problem before class. The intent of the prompt is to help students generate many ideas quickly. It is useful to generate a list of responses before class. This can help determine the duration of the exercise. Determine how the students will report their activity.

Procedure

1. Form groups of four to six students

2. Explain the purpose of the exercise and that the students should refrain from commenting on the ideas.
3. Indicate whether there will be multiple rounds or a time limit.
4. Present the prompt
5. Group member in turn respond to the prompt until all students in the group have participated and the number of cycles has been complete or there is no more time remaining.

3 Buzz Groups

Students discuss course‑related questions informally in small groups. This is useful for generating lots of ideas quickly to prepare for and improve a whole class discussion. Students in groups respond to course related questions. They may respond to one or more than one question. Division into small groups provides more students the opportunity to participate. It is also a good way to introduce a topic in the course. Since it is informally structured students may get off task. For reporting out, it may be useful to have a member of each group indicate the main points from the group discussion. The technique is not generally used for grading purposes.

Group size

4 to 6

Time on task

10 to 15 minutes

Preparation

Construct one or more question prompts that are more conceptual than factual. It will be useful to also determine how many responses the teacher can generate. This will help in determining the amount of time for the exercise. Determine how the students will report their activity.

Procedure

1. Form groups
2. Announce prompts and time limit
3. Ask the group members to exchange ideas in response to the prompts
4. Check the groups to make sure that they are active and on topic.
5. Ask the students to return to whole class discussion and restate the prompts.

4. Talking Chips

Students participate in discussion and surrender a token each time they speak. This is useful for ensuring equitable participation. The technique is useful for controversial topics. It also provides a process solution for student interaction problems such as students randomly speaking out, dominating discussion, or clashing with other group members. The technique can help build both listening and speaking skills. A short reflective essay might be used to report out of the activity. The essay can be used to make this a graded activity.

Group size

4 to 6

Time on task

10 to 20 minutes

Preparation

Determine the question or problem for group discussion. Bring sufficient tokens for the activity. The tokens might be poker chips, index cards, or similar items.

Procedure
1. Form student groups
2. Distribute three to five tokens to the students that serve as permissions to speak.
3. Indicate the time limit for the discussion.
4. Ask students to participate equally and surrender a token each time they speak.

5 3-Step Interview

Students interview each other and report what they learn to another pair. This CoLT is useful for helping students network and improve communication skills. The activity has three steps First student A interviews student B. Second student B interviews student A. Finally students A and B summarize their partner's responses for students C and D, and likewise for students C and D. The technique encourages networking and careful listening. The technique can also help to bridge the gap between the academic and "real" world. Written summaries of the interviews and discussions can be submitted for evaluation.

Group size

2 and then 4

Time on Task

15 to 30 minutes.

Preparation

Develop a list of interview questions. The interview can be especially effective when focused on personal opinions or experiences.

Procedure
1. Divide students into groups of four and these groups are divided into pairs
2. Announce instructions and time limits
3. Student A interviews student B while student C interviews student D
4. The interviewer asks questions, listens, and records but does not respond.
5. When the time limit is reached the students reverse roles.
6. Students A and B introduce each other to students C and D through summaries of their interviews to students C and D.
7. Students C and D then do the same for Students A and B.

6 Critical Debates

Students assume or argue the side of an issue opposite of their personal views. The technique is useful for developing critical thinking and encouraging students to challenge their assumption. The students select the side of an issue that is contrary to their own views. These students form teams and discuss, present, and argue the case against an opposing team. Debates help to increase research skills, critical thinking, motivation, and communication proficiency. By adopting a position contrary to their position the students learn to more fully appreciate the positions of others and deepen their understanding of the topic.

Group size

4 to 6 and then 8 to 12

Time on task

1 to 2 hours.

Preparation

This activity requires an extended period of preparation. Identify positions that have two arguable and opposing sides. The positions should be formed into one sentence statements

that are as free from ambiguity as possible. Determine if the students in the debates will need additional (background) information. If they do, determine how that information will be provided through lecture, reading, discussion or research prior to the activity. Identify the ground rules. For example, should one person speak or should each member speak or should the number of arguments be limited in some way? Decide whether students can prepare materials before the debate class. This CoLT is best used where students already have a reasonably deep knowledge or understanding of the topic. A follow up activity such as an analytic memo that provides an equitable coverage of both sides and an analysis of the issue might be used for grading.

Procedure
1. Propose the motion and ask students to identify which side of the proposition they most support.
2. Explain that the students will argue the side that is contrary to their beliefs.
3. Dived students into four or six person teams
4. Explain the ground rules
5. Give students in teams time to prepare their arguments. (15 to 30 minutes)
6. Pair teams with opposing sides
7. Announce and allow time to present arguments (5 minutes each side and 10 minutes total)
8. Give time to prepare rebuttal (10 minutes)
9. Announce and allow time for rebuttals (5 minutes each side and 10 minutes total)
10. Hold a whole class discussion to summarize important issues and discus the experience of arguing opinions that they do not hold.