

Online group work/collaboration

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What's the idea?

Pupils work together in pairs, small groups or as a whole class and co-construct knowledge and understanding, solve problems, and/or create artefacts together. The teacher's role is to provide a structure for effective learning to take place, and support students as and when necessary. Technology lends itself to supporting this approach through a wide range of communication tools and by providing shared access to documents and resources.

What does the research say?

Syntheses of research evidence provide compelling support for the effectiveness of group work when it is well-designed and well-set up (Tenenbaum et al., 2019); this has also been found in studies of online learning (Means et al., 2013; Chen et al., 2018). The role of the teacher can be challenging, requiring a careful balancing act between too much and too little support and guidance (van Leeuwen and Janssen, 2019). In particular, pupils should be supported to take greater control of the learning and be provided with guidance (as and when necessary) on how to manage and organise collaborative learning tasks (van Leeuwen and Janssen, 2019).

How does this work in practice?

Collaborative learning can take many forms from brainstorming ideas and short discussions to co-producing artefacts such as reports and presentations. Remember

to ensure that knowledge-building (rather than recall for example) is at the heart of the activity. When planning activities for pupils, careful thought should be given to the types of tools that might usefully support it. Your school's virtual learning environment may provide the tools you need to support collaboration and knowledge representation.

If you want to use tools outside your school's learning environment, applications like Padlet, Wakelet, Flipgrid or Edmodo support online communication and the sharing or collating of resources. Google Docs and Google Slides allow students to collaborate on a shared document and online whiteboards (e.g. Microsoft Whiteboard, Google Jamboard) can help students to generate ideas together synchronously or asynchronously. Video-conferencing applications are great for synchronous whole-class or small-groups discussions. Whatever tool you choose, make sure you follow appropriate guidance on e-safety and data use, particularly if you intend to use video.

During group work, pupils need clear guidance on what is expected of them, the timeline, including whether they have specific roles in a group, how often they should interact (e.g. post messages), and how the activity will be assessed. In addition, it should be made clear to pupils what they can expect of their teacher and how the activity will be facilitated.

Any collaborative activities should also be framed by ground rules that will help peer interactions to be productive. Exploratory talk (Mercer & Dawes, 2008) offers a useful

starting point by highlighting the importance of: all group members actively participating, students providing reasons for their individual suggestions, and the group taking collective responsibility for making decisions on how to proceed.

Top tips

- Agree the ground rules together so that pupils have ownership of them. Review the rules regularly, especially after the first few activities, so that adjustments can be made if anything is not working as expected.
- Keep it simple to begin with, particularly if your pupils are not used to working in this way. Start with a short, easy task and keep a close eye on how the groups (and individual group members) are coping with it. Provide more support and advice initially to make sure that the pupils understand what is expected of them. Continually model the interactions that you would like to take place.
- Encourage pupils to provide peer feedback and support so that your role in doing so is more manageable.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

- Bates AW (2019) *Teaching in a digital age: Guidelines for teaching and learning*. 2nd edn. Vancouver, B.C.: Tony Bates Associates Ltd. Retrieved from <https://pressbooks.bccampus.ca/teachinginadigitalagev2/> See section 4.4 Online collaborative learning. (free access)
- Mercer N and Dawes L (2008) The value of exploratory talk. In: Mercer, N and Hodgkinson S (eds) *Exploring Talk in School: inspired by the work of Douglas Barnes*. London: SAGE (pp. 55-71).
- Tenenbaum HR, Winstone NE, Leman PJ and Avery RE (2019) How Effective Is Peer Interaction in Facilitating Learning? A Meta-Analysis. *Journal of Educational Psychology*. Advance online publication.