



Six Ingredients of Group Development

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1. Expectations

Students need to know what's going to happen to them, what's expected, what the lay of the land is. But they need more than just being told what others will expect from them. They need to have a voice in discussing, developing, and approving their community's expectations for itself. So, we begin a new year (or a new class) by asking kids to describe their experiences as readers, writers, and thinkers. We evoke kids' experiences, concerns, and expressed interests as we plan. We try to create expectations mutually to develop a broad sense of ownership.

2. Norms

Norms are what expectations harden into. Kids need to take an active role in forming the written and unwritten rules that the classroom community will live by. Through the year, we encourage kids to make their own ground rules, work plans, and schedules. We ask kids to discuss and decide on their own small-group rules for members who don't come prepared, consistently forget materials, or let the group down in other ways (see *How Proficient Collaborators Think and Act*). Some teachers begin the year by taking the whole class through a Classroom Constitution writing process, where the big ideas of successful group operation are the explicit topic. It is important that this activity is conducted like a true constitutional convention, addressing big conceptual issues and not listing minor infractions and punishments.

3. Friendship

When groups don't work, it's often because of a lack of friendliness and support, which almost always stems from ignorance. People who don't know each other often fill the gap with assumptions, suppositions, stereotypes, and even prejudices.



The only cure is acquaintance—and guess what? We humans almost always like people once we get to know them. So we work methodically during the first days and weeks of school to make sure that every kid works with every other kid in the room, in constantly shifting pairs and small groups. We do fun things and serious things; we work on names and share out-of-school interests. We make sure everyone talks, writes, goes online, interviews, and makes art together. We may have kids develop *Me Portfolios* (Daniels and Bizar, 1998) or be Student of the Day, where their personal interests are featured. The clear message: every kid in the room is a fascinating and valuable person, and a potentially interesting and fun work partner.

4. Leadership

The most effective collaborative groups are *leaderless*, meaning that no one person is the boss, and no one has more responsibility than anyone else. We want groups where every member feels equal responsibility, equal social pressure, to contribute. Of course, in school, this is limited by some essential leadership roles the teacher must maintain, but it is amazing how many tasks we can hand off to kids once we start thinking about it. And this goes far beyond who gets to clean the whiteboards every day. Individuals or teams of students can keep records, scribe discussions, create anchor charts, steward materials, maintain classroom displays, guide visitors, and teach many kinds of lessons to one another. If we wish, this distribution of responsibility can be done quite explicitly, as with the use of specific, usually rotating roles (Joe is the Manager, Brenda is the Time Keeper, Gene is the Number Cruncher, Bill is the Illustrator, Maria is the Reporter, etc.). When we use these kinds of group roles, however, we are careful that students don't get stuck or typecast into specific jobs, thus limiting their range of action or discouraging their exploration.

5. Communication

In highly effective groups, all channels of communication are open. We work to create an atmosphere where any combination of people can talk together—kid to kid, teacher to kid, kid to teacher. To create such open communication, we thoughtfully create opportunities for every kind of conversation (whole class, small discussion groups, partner talk, and work talk). We patiently show kids through our own modeling and through explicit mini-lessons how effective, polite communicators operate. We use writing activities like dialogue journals and written discussions that put class members into silent conversations with each other as well.

6. Conflict

It is hard to imagine any human group, inside or outside of school, that doesn't experience some disagreements and conflicts. Smart groups don't wait for problems to arise and then just hope they can manage them. Instead, we talk about differences and disagreements from the very start of the year. In fact, we purposely spark disagreements by bringing in or reading aloud texts where reasonable people can have different opinions and beliefs. Then we teach mini-lessons about how to disagree agreeably.

It's easy to see the connecting threads among all these elements of group development: mutuality, openness, and ownership. If we want kids to care about and commit to group work, we have to give them a seat at the table from day one.

For more information on group development, see Richard and Patricia Schmuck's *Group Processes in the Classroom* (2001).