

How to Get Your Students to Work Together

It's frustrating:

You spend your entire prep-hour strategically placing students into groups. You teach, model, and role-play what you want them to do. You assign roles, provide clear objectives, and confirm their understanding of your expectations.

You give them all the support you know how to give, setting them up for easy success—a slam dunk on an 8-foot rim. All they have to do is follow your clear and simple guidelines and they'll succeed.

But once they start working, you realize that it isn't going to be so easy. Sure, they may be getting along okay, but it's taking them forever to warm up to each other, to get into substantive discussion, and to make even the most basic decisions.

Some students don't say a word. Others lean in, perhaps, but feel too unsure around their group mates to assert themselves. Still others are too assertive and end up doing most of the heavy lifting.

Your leaders try their best to get everyone involved, but it's a tough task. They look at you with eyes that say, "What more can I do?" So you find yourself jumping in, taking over, and making decisions for them—defeating the whole purpose of group learning.

There is an easy solution, though, that also happens to be a lot of fun. It's called the decision game, and in mere minutes it will accelerate your students' ability to work together to a level that otherwise could take weeks.

Here's how it works:

Number each group.

Assign each group a number and write these numbers in separate columns on your whiteboard. You'll keep score of the game by tallying points below each column.

Encourage your students to lean in.

The object of the game is for each group to quickly come to a unanimous decision. Because of the urgency involved, encourage your students to lean in—even if it means placing a knee or two on their chair.

Provide a decision topic.

After asking for attention, give your students a simple topic of interest to them for which to make a group decision—like, for example, their favorite amusement park or favorite subject in school. There is no need to write it on the board. Just call it out.

“Your favorite flavor of ice cream!”

Allow ten seconds to make a decision.

Each group will then agree on one answer that represents the entire group. Whether each individual actually likes chocolate chip ice cream or Six Flags is irrelevant. The idea is to come to a consensus. The challenge is that they only have ten seconds to do it.

Give your “times up.”

After ten seconds or so, depending on your grade level, call “times up!” If any group continues to talk, subtract one point from their column. The game is fast and fun and losing points is part of it. No big deal.

Call each group.

One by one call each group number. Say, “Group one?” Then allow that group to respond aloud and in unison with their answer. In a short time, you and your students will find a rhythm to this part of the game.

Example: “Group one?” “Chocolate!” “Group two?” “Cookies and cream!” “Group three?” “Chocolate chip!”

Assign points.

If every member of a group responds the same, then give that group a score of five. If not, if one student calls out a different answer or no answer, then they get a score of four. If two students call different answers, then give three points, and so on.

Go to the next round.

To be most effective, move the game along quickly. Don't give your students a chance to lament their lost points or consider who may have made a mistake during the previous round. Call out your next topic as fast as you're able. "*Funniest movie!*"

Model how to play.

Although it's critical to teach and model the game thoroughly before playing, it will take actual play before you and your students get the hang of it. After a few practice rounds, though, you'll pick it up quickly.

Add challenge and creativity.

One way to make the game more challenging, especially for older students, is to assign greater points for more creative answers—which can be based on your judgment or on whether any other group provides the same answer.

So if they want to agree that their favorite soft drink is beet juice, they can—and should be rewarded for their creativity.

Let the winning team celebrate.

After playing the game for ten minutes or so, tally up the points and declare a winner. You can call them up to the front to take a bow, dance, or high five each other. Give them their brief moment in the sun, then erase the points and move on with your day.

Why It Works

The decision game works because its speed and urgency forces students to count on each other—in equal measure. And because it's fun and furious, and the engaging topics seize upon their natural desire to voice their opinion, they'll readily set aside their fears and anxieties and dive right in.

You may have students who naturally take on a leadership role, but as long as they're not making decisions for the entire group, it won't diminish the effectiveness of the game. Your class will still grasp that the betterment of the group comes before any individual preference.

You can use the game as a warm up before beginning academic group work or as a stand-alone exercise. Either way, once your students get

down to business collaborating on a science project or sharing their thoughts in literature circle groups, you'll be thrilled with how much better they work together.

Although there is always the need to thoroughly teach what you expect of your students—i.e., taking turns, compromise, active participation of every member—making the jump from knowing what to do to actually doing it can be a challenge.

The decision game is an experiential way to speed up their understanding of how to work together. It turns what can seem like an impossible leap across a rushing river . . .

into a stroll over a footbridge.

