Fair Play

Grouping students to ensure success

How many times have you heard a former boss announce, “Johnson and Jensen… your names start with the same letter, so I’m teaming you up to work on this presentation”? Or what about, “Hey, you’re a real go-getter with a record of success. We’ll put you with that guy who never shows up on time and forwards inappropriate comic strips to everyone. Don’t worry though. After three months of carrying the majority of the work load in order to keep up your high standards, you’ll be able to tell us in a survey that he did a bad job”?

These would be unwise ways for a business to build productive teams, so why would we do this to students? The short answer is that it’s easy, and it might be the least-bad option for splitting a class into groups.

Options:

1) **Students choose to work with their friends.** Sorry non-traditional students. We’ll throw you left-over people together in groups that will have a more difficult time because of your probable differences in culture. But the good news is that the groups comprised of friends can avoid learning from different viewpoints.

2) **Instructors choose groups based on skills, personalities, and/or schedules.** The logistics of this are tough, depending on how conscientious you are about creating fair groupings. What type of skill/personality survey will you conduct? How do you organize and rank the student data? How many late nights do you plan on spending as you move color-coded Post-it™ notes with students’ names over an elaborate diagram of possibilities? Is the benefit worth the time? (To move past the Post-it™ note method, try [this free online tool](http://esuid.wordpress.com).)

3) **Random or alphabetical assignment.** Nothing positive can be created by this method. Hopefully, some of the groups will randomly have members whose skills, personalities, and schedules work together for the good of the group, but there is no way to ensure this. But it is technically “fair,” since everyone has an equal probability of being in a dysfunctional group.

So what’s the answer? Well, here is an answer, from a 2003 study of university students, entitled “Using Student Skill Self-Assessments to get Balanced Groups for Group Projects.” It acknowledges the benefit of choosing groups based on desired skills, with the “fairness” and efficiency of the randomly-chosen method.

1) Determine what skills and roles are necessary to successfully complete the team project. (Word processing skills, public speaking experience, prowess with statistics, mechanical ability…)

2) Have students rank these according to how they would most like to contribute to their groups.

3) In a face-to-face class, simply have students raise their hands to show which role they want to play in the project, and randomly split them into the desired number of groups. Rotate through the roles, and check that all groups have the necessary members to complete the project.

The bonus is that group work can start faster, since roles are pre-assigned. The study reported that this strategy led to a 0% complaint rate in student-teacher interactions and in end-of-term evaluations regarding group work. Students saw the value in the grouping method and appreciated its benefit.

To see a few variations of this strategy that won’t fit here, look for this article on [my blog](http://esuid.wordpress.com).
Instructional Design

Interactive images

The picture that’s worth 1000 lessons

Here’s what I want when choosing a tool for delivering information to students:

- Easy for me to create and to change if necessary (without tracking down and replacing all prior versions)
- Intuitive for students to navigate, making their lives easier, and lowering barriers to their learning
- Providing access to all of the information in one place, but not displaying it all in a long, overwhelming list
- Providing “just in time” learning to help students when they need it
- Supporting access to a variety of online resources (websites, special online tools, audio, video…)
- Seamlessly fitting with what I’m already using (Does it work with my class blog? With Blackboard? With my Promethean board?)
- Clearly being worth the time

Occasionally I luck out and stumble upon something that meets most of these criteria. Then came ThingLink, which blew them all away.

ThingLink is an online tool that allows you to turn a picture into the jumping-off point for a lesson, a unit, or even an entire course. A few clicks of your mouse will add buttons to an image, and these allow students to navigate through your content. This tool has huge potential for classroom uses, and it is incredibly easy for instructors to jump in and make something awesome. To see a tutorial video for using ThingLink and for more examples, including how to set your course up like a virtual school room, visit my blog. And look out for announcements about a new U-Innovate session this spring, covering uses of ThingLink in your courses.

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