



Facilitating Tasks for Small Groups

As experts in our respective fields, we create and maintain complex neural networks that link important facts, concepts, and procedures. These networks allow us to access information quickly and link new information with little effort. We tend to process information quickly and can identify commonalities across problem types. We recognize when to apply what we know.

For novices, this is not the case. Most of your students will not have strong mental models for your content and the mental connections they do have will often be weak. However, we know that stronger organizations of knowledge can lead to deeper learning, stronger performance on assessments, and can even facilitate later learning. So, we want to consider how to help students create these strong models. One way that we can facilitate the creation of strong mental networks is by embedding classwork that causes students to discuss key ideas in small groups.

Nearly any task that you would ask students to complete as homework or as an assessment can be tweaked to serve as a small group task during your class time. By providing small-group tasks in class, you give opportunities for students to practice—with support—the types of things you will expect them to later do independently. Here are just a few of the ways that you can embed such practice:

- Have students identify and list the five key ideas from the week's readings.
- Ask students to solve a mathematical problem or even a just a portion of the problem.
- Pose a quiz-style question and have small groups select the best response and the best incorrect response.
- Ask small groups to list three real-world scenarios that relate to a previously taught principle or theory.
- Have students create a chart or map that illustrates how particular ideas connect.
- Require students to draw a visual representation of a concept and then explain their visual to others in the group.



For small-group tasks to be most effective, your groups need focus. We recommend that each group have some type of deliverable—a list, a solution, a chart—and group members should be prepared to share if asked to do so. Also provide the least amount of time necessary for completion of the task. It is much easier to devote three minutes to a task and add another minute if needed, than it is to provide 10 minutes and have to reign the groups back in.

It is also important to debrief the work at the end. Have students compare their 5 key ideas to yours, have them submit their problem solving attempts, or ask students to justify the selection of their answer on the quiz question. This sort of debrief helps you decide on next steps as an instructor and it helps students recognize areas where they need to continue studying.

These types of tasks can occur anywhere during a lesson. They can serve as a springboard at the beginning of your lesson. They can provide a moment for processing content mid-lesson. And they can be used at the end of a lesson in order to reiterate the big ideas of the day. For more information, read chapter 5 in the book *On Course: A Week-by-Week Guide to Your First Semester of College Teaching* or chapter 2 in the book *How Learning Works: 7 Research-Based Principles for Smart Teaching*. Both are available electronically through the OSU library. Or, contact us at ITLE and schedule a visit!

Lang, J. M. (2008). *On course: A week-by-week guide to your first semester of college teaching*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Ambrose, S. A., Bridges, M. W., DiPietro, M., Lovett, M. C., Norman, M. K. (2010). *How learning works: Seven research-based principles for smart teaching*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.