

---

# Learning as Collaboration:

## Group Work at University Park Campus School

---

University Park Campus School (UPCS) strives to prepare all of its students for success in college, and the school has had tremendous success meeting this goal. Every graduate of UPCS has matriculated to a two- or four-year college, even though the majority of these young people entered the seventh grade at UPCS with skills far below grade level. UPCS faculty attributes student achievement gains to their relentless focus on providing rigorous instruction and to creating a supportive culture of excellence. In describing their practice to other educators, UPCS faculty have consistently highlighted the importance of group work, which they say provides an effective means to address the diverse needs of UPCS students and to establish and maintain a culture of shared success. This paper looks at the reasons why UPCS faculty believe so strongly in the value of group work—and offers strategies they have learned for facilitating groups effectively.

### ***Why group work?***

---

Group work is not an add-on at UPCS. It is central to the school's mission: to prepare every student academically for any college or university. Beginning in grade 9, all students pursue a rigorous college-preparatory curriculum consisting of all honors classes. At the same time, instruction is individualized to connect to each student's particular level of development—including English language learners and special education students. There is no tracking. Instead, there are small classes, supportive relationships with faculty, 90-minute instructional periods, and daily homework sessions. Group work is a key ingredient to this instructional design, as it maximizes student engagement with academic content and teachers' ability to personalize instruction to meet every student's needs.

Group work is also a key ingredient to creating the kind of school culture in which everyone shares a deep commitment to one another's success. At UPCS, collaboration is the norm. Faculty, students, families, and community partners work together to solve problems and improve results. Teachers and students are empowered to take risks and are not afraid to admit mistakes or ask for help. Such an environment encourages effort and persistence from even the most discouraged learners who enter the school.

For group work to address the academic and cultural objectives of UPCS, it must be carefully crafted. The assignments must be robust, allowing for high-level thinking and multiple entry points, and they must be structured so that every student contributes in a meaningful way. UPCS teachers describe the following benefits of well-designed group work:

### **Academic Benefits of Group Work**

*Increased engagement with learning:* With group work, more students are engaged in learning for more time. The founding faculty of UPCS figured out right away that they couldn't lecture or have students do independent work for a full 90 minutes, though students required some form of extended learning time to get up to speed. The teachers needed to find ways of getting everyone to actively participate. Group work brought more students into the process of learning.

---

I love class discussion, but in the best class discussion there's one person talking at a time. In group work, you can have a third of the class talking at the same time, productively.  
- Peter Weyler, English teacher

---

**Deeper, more flexible understanding:** Through discussion with peers, students are forced to communicate and, thereby, clarify their own thinking. They also must listen to others, becoming familiar with multiple ways of thinking about complex problems or ideas. Entertaining multiple understandings requires students to think beyond their initial response and understand the content in a more rich, connected way. These habits serve students as they learn course content, and in the long-run: the ability to weigh multiple perspectives is demanded in college courses as well as civic activities.

**Differentiated support for individuals:** With diverse groups of students, group work is just more efficient. When students work in groups, they have access to many supportive teachers—their classmates. Peers can quickly, and effectively, remediate each other's weaknesses or misunderstandings (and, in teaching each other, solidify their own learning). The teacher can focus on the needs of the whole class and on supporting those who need something extra.

**Tool for assessment:** When students are working together, their thinking becomes transparent. No one can hide in a classroom where everyone is expected to participate. The teacher, by listening in on groups, can quickly assess understanding (and misconceptions or gaps in knowledge) and tailor instruction accordingly.

---

One of the rules I say in here is, "Ask three before you ask me." I'm only one person. I can't get to every single kid, unfortunately, in one class period. I can't be everywhere. It's more productive for me to say to the kids, "Ask one another before you ask me," so that they get immediate help, instead of having to wait for me.  
- Kate Shepard, math teacher

---

---

It allows me to be that fly on the wall and just sit and listen and take notes on what the kids are talking about or thinking about... I'll have a notebook with me, and I'll jot notes down, "Sally really isn't understanding that"... I've been using that a lot to figure out, "Well, what do I do tomorrow? What misconceptions are still floating about?" or "Who really gets this and who doesn't get it?"  
- Jody Bird, science teacher

---

**Practice for college and professions:** In their group work, students become accustomed to the qualities of good discussion. When groups present to the class (which they do regularly at UPCS), they get practice with public speaking and learning to present and defend their ideas clearly.

## Culture-Building Aspects of Group Work

**Group-generated solutions:** A group approach to solving difficult problems helps build a group-oriented school culture from the inside out. Students regularly see (and benefit from) each other's strengths in small groups. They celebrate multiple solutions for complex problems. Those classroom-based experiences help build a school community that values the contributions of each individual and the belief that "we can all do this, together."

---

There's not one way to do math. If kids aren't working together and talking with one another, they won't see all of the different ways. When you get to see lots of different ways to get to one answer, you understand the math behind it a lot more.  
- Kate Shepard

---

**Culture of mutual responsibility:** A key factor of students' success at UPCS is their commitment to each other's success. No student allows another to fall behind. Group activities are not simply product-oriented; they demand that each individual understands and completes his or her share. Group members, then are responsible for ensuring that everyone understands the material.

**Behavioral norms:** There are relatively few disciplinary problems at UPCS, largely because positive academic behaviors are taught and reinforced in every classroom every day. Group work is a key vehicle for teaching students the behavioral norms that maximize engagement in the classroom and ensure an orderly, minds-on culture throughout the building.

*Comfort with risk taking:* Academic challenges can be intimidating, but group work provides a peer support system that prevents students from shutting off when learning feels risky. Group activities tend to be messy by design and help students to experiment with new understandings, and to value mistakes as rich opportunities for learning.

## **What group work looks like at UPCS**

---

On a given day, UPCS students will engage in some form of group work in almost every class. The size, structure, and purpose of group activities varies in each class. In science, students may do a lab report in pairs for a couple of days, split into foursome “reading circles” on another day, and then work on a group experiment as threesomes the next day. Each group may have a different assignment as well. In math class, student pairs often complete different levels of assignments at their own pace, though they typically stay under the same umbrella of a curricular topic. In English, groups may be reading different plays, or they may each use a different literary analysis activity (such as an “I Am” poem, a comparison/contrast diagram, a drawing of imagery) to respond to the same text.

Teachers at UPCS share favorite literacy-building group activities that provide every student with an appropriate entry point into high-level texts and concepts. Teachers also craft group activities specific to each discipline that mimic the type of work done by scholars and professionals in the field. In history, primary source circles allow students to analyze challenging texts and apply the skills of historians. In math, students tackle complex problems, using a variety of manipulatives and methods to find their own solutions. In English, students use a range of text analysis activities that require multiple styles of thinking and learning. In each class, students become accustomed to particular types of activities or recurrent structures.

Not all learning at UPCS happens in groups. Each class comprises a set of routines and learning structures that students practice throughout the year. The activities range from whole-class discussions, to independent writing-to-learn activities, to note taking during a mini-lecture. Group activities are built into this web of activities where they can leverage deeper learning opportunities and build student engagement. During one class period, then, students might begin working independently on a problem or prompt, then participate in a discussion or teacher-directed mini lesson, before they move their desks into groups to extend their understanding of a topic. Desks are always moving, and groups are not always the same. Teachers assign students to groups according to the activity, sometimes grouping students at similar levels and sometimes differentiating roles within heterogeneous groups. While not every topic lends itself to formal group projects, students are in the habit of sitting in groups and assisting each other even during independent work time.

## **How does it work?**

---

Any teacher who has tried to implement group work knows that it doesn't just happen perfectly on the first try. It's uncomfortable at first, messy, maybe even chaotic. Implementing group work requires a shift on the part of the teacher. S/he has to design and manage new structures and release some control (of content, though not necessarily behavior) to students. The students themselves need time to get used to their new role in the classroom. They require some training about how to work in a group.

In the end, conducting group work requires a lot of planning and careful forethought. The teachers at UPCS have mastered the craft in many ways, though they still continue to learn new techniques. Here, they share some of the main lessons they have learned about using groups well.

### **1. Teach students how to work in groups**

Teachers work hard to craft activities that put students in charge of their own learning and that promote

responsibility toward others in the group. It's not easy to do, and it takes time to get students accustomed to this work. UPCS students are introduced to group work right away, during the August Institute, a three-week summer experience designed to expose students to the academic and behavioral expectations of the school. Teachers "stay on" the seventh graders, showing them what is expected of them at UPCS and providing them with tools for organizing their work and staying on task. The younger students receive constant feedback about their academic behaviors, as well as about the content of their work. The students generally rise to their teachers' expectations, partly because the school has a culture of serious work and of student success. Younger students witness older students working well in groups and performing interesting projects and assignments.

---

Be patient with it. Be patient with yourself. It's not going to be perfect the first time you try it, especially with kids who aren't used to it. You'll have to do a lot of work to show kids how their role has changed as a member of a group. A lot of kids are resistant to it because they know how to "do school" well. "If I sit down, listen, don't upset the teacher, pretend that I know what I'm talking about, and don't disrupt, I can get by." Group work tends to take kids out of that safe spot and makes them the center of it.

- Ricci Hall, social studies teacher

---

The successful induction of new students also requires explicit teaching. Over their six years at UPCS, students become accustomed to moving in and out of groups. In each activity, norms and expectations are set so that all students are accountable for contributing to the final product. This eliminates a common scenario where one student does that activity and the others disengage. Many activity structures cut across disciplines and grade levels, so the process and norms of working

together become habitual to students within their first year or two at UPCS. Over time, group work creates a culture where no student is allowed to fail—because his/her peers won't allow it to happen.

***Favorite strategies for establishing group behavior:***

- As a class, create a list of what a good group member does, or how you know if someone is participating well.
- Institute a "check" grading system, where students receive a "check" on the spot if they are following the criteria for good group behavior.
- Provide very structured roles to every member of the group. Model each role first.
- Create role-alike groups, where everyone gets to try the same role together. Later, when every role has been tried at least once, assign different roles to members of the same group.
- Conduct a "fishbowl" to model a group discussion. Require students in the outer ring to keep track of the modeled discussion in order to analyze it as a class.
- Provide a task list and clear expectations for the product that day.
- Design activities that no student can do on his/her own. For example, provide each person with a different chunk of information that may only be shared orally, or require that each person complete a particular piece of work and sign off on it.
- Model and practice effective discussion practices, such as "piggybacking," where a student must refer to a previous comment before entering the conversation.
- Institute the "ask three and then me" rule, which forces students to rely on each other before seeking help from the teacher.

## 2. Form groups carefully, according to the demands of each assignment

A “group” at UPCS might be a diad, trio, a group of four students, or a group of about 10 students (half of the class). Groups change frequently, depending on the assignment. Teachers decide the size and membership of groups ahead of time. Often, assignments require strategic grouping, so that groups have the right blend of strengths and needs to meet the objectives of the lesson. Because UPCS is a small school, where students loop with their teachers for two or more years, their teachers know them well enough to shape groups based on skill, behavior, and past performance.

If students will be allowed to choose their own groups, the teacher makes that decision in advance because s/he knows it will work for the particular assignment. Middle school students rarely choose their own groups (in some classes, they never do), and in the upper grades, choice of group members is contingent upon the lesson and on the capacity of students to prove themselves as effective collaborators.

---

You really have to know your kids, and know their strengths and weaknesses to put a group together that can function well. I've come to understand over the years that if you just haphazardly put a group together and you don't think it through, then the repercussions won't be good.

- June Eressy, current principal and former English teacher

---

### *Tricks for shaping effective groups:*

- Select groups in advance. Even pre-selected groups can look “random” to students.
- Hand students a colored sticker or crayon as they walk in the room. Use the colors to assign groups in a way that looks random, but is not.
- Pair an English language learner with a buddy who can offer translation support.
- Create heterogeneous groups for activities that have multiple entry points or roles.
- Assign the most challenging roles to more advanced students initially. Once everyone has had a chance to see each role modeled, start pushing lower-level students into the challenging roles.
- Pull together students who struggle in a similar way for intensive coaching from the teacher.
- Let the “high flyers” work together sometimes, especially in skills practice assignments in which they can move more quickly and complete extension activities.
- Pair students who tend to think differently, so that they’ll learn new approaches.
- Pair students who have a history of working well together.
- Notice who does not work well together, and avoid putting them together again soon.
- Make sure the size of the group works well with the activity. Consider keeping some students in smaller groups than others if they tend to struggle in larger groups.

## 3. Set clear expectations... with just enough structure

Groups at UPCS work well because students know what is expected of them. Teachers build in time to model new group procedures and make sure that new (or especially challenging) activities are broken down into clear steps with a concrete product. Younger students tend to need the highest level of explicit structure in their group assignments. Providing clear instructions and carefully structured assignments takes time, but it's worth it. When students have clear structures to rely on, they are less likely to engage in non-productive behavior and more likely to engage in real learning.

### *Suggestions for providing enough structure:*

- Always provide clear instructions. Watch out for time gaps or ambiguous language. Every student should know what is expected at every moment.
- Provide instructions in multiple ways: verbally, on a guide sheet, on a white board, in a diagram, etc.
- Chunk the activity into a set of steps or checklist.
- Try out the activity yourself before using it in the class. Look for areas where your students might feel confused.
- Establish a repertoire of common activities, so that students can rely on familiar assignment structures when working with new content.
- Take time out to model new activities or procedures. Students will be able to work more efficiently and tackle more difficult content once they have the procedures mastered.
- Prescribe tightly defined roles when students are new to using groups or are likely to feel anxious about the content.
- Figure out the logistics in advance and have all materials ready to go when students arrive. This is especially important for younger students, who are less likely to wait patiently through messy transitions.
- Require every student to produce something by the end of the activity, and make the expectations for that product clear.
- When an activity is going off course, check to see if the instructions were clear. Review and adjust instructions midstream, if necessary.
- Revise, revise, revise. If an activity hasn't worked well the first time, consider how the instructions and structures could be revised to match your objectives.

## **4. Hold students accountable for their work**

UPCS students know that they are always held accountable for the work that they do in groups. Some of that accountability is informal; because UPCS students learn a sense of responsibility to each other, students don't want to let their group down. Other accountability measures are much more formal and result in

---

The kids monitor themselves, especially when we get to the stage where they're the managers. They take that very seriously, and they actually become better at keeping the kids on task than I do.

- June Eressy

---

grades. Group accountability methods used at UPCS include individual written products, shared public presentations, group self assessments, on-the-spot process grades from the teacher, and high-stakes tests. A combination of these accountability measures might be in place for any particular group assignment. Taken together, there is very little room for any student to slack. Each student is always held accountable for something.

### *Typical accountability measures:*

- Require everyone to put something in writing. When each student has to write out a math problem or take notes for a debate, everyone solidifies their understanding... and the teacher knows that no one has remained idle.
- Assign an "exit ticket" at the end of class in which each student summarizes what s/he learned in the group. The teacher will know right away if someone wasn't listening or isn't getting it.

- Divide multi-day group assignments into target tasks. Require groups to complete and show the teacher the chunk of work they accomplished each class period.
- Walk around the room with a class list, and put a “check” next to the name of each person who is participating in discussion or actively listening. Translate those “checks” into classwork grades.
- Require each member of a group to sign off on the section of the assignment that s/he contributed.
- Ask students to assess themselves (and each of their group members) on a group work rubric. Require students to justify the rubric grades they give, and make those grades count.
- Institute a “group manager” in charge of collecting work, keeping students on task, and assessing the group.
- Let students know how the work they are doing in groups today will help them prepare for a test or essay next week.
- Keep groups small enough so that everyone has to contribute to get the work done.
- If students are off task (even one member of a group), take points off of each group member’s product. Make that deduction visible immediately.
- Remove individuals from group assignments when necessary. Being forced to work independently is often punishment enough.
- Provide students with certain privileges (like choosing their partners) when the assignment allows for it, but hold individuals accountable for making wise decisions. If a particular pair doesn’t work out, don’t allow them to work together again for the rest of the quarter.
- If too many students get off task, end group work for that day. Pull the class back together to work with the teacher.

#### 4. Differentiate assignments and support

Differentiated instruction is a must at UPCS because of the range of student needs, and group work is a key strategy for reaching students who are diverse in their skill levels and learning styles. Students are grouped intentionally for each activity. In some cases, teachers will group students with a wide range of skills, knowing that everyone will have a way to contribute to the work and will benefit from seeing a variety of approaches. Often, these heterogeneous groups include specific roles; weaker students can take on a less-advanced role until they have mastered the procedure or skill, while a more advanced student can take on a more complex role immediately.

Not all groups are heterogeneous. Sometimes UPCS teachers group students of similar levels and provide them with different tiers of the same assignment or a range of extension assignments. This allows more advanced students to dig more deeply into the material, while the teacher can focus attention on the students who struggle more. Typically, homogeneous groups are used when students are reviewing previously taught material or when the teacher has identified a group of students who need help acquiring the same strategy.

---

A lot of the advanced students want to just say the answer, and group work prevents them from just spitting out a formula because they always have to have discussion. The upper level students don't always like to do that. They just want to get their work done and hand it in. But when they're doing group work, they have to talk about it. They have to think about it, sometimes in a different way... Even if their first way to solve it was great, they can come up with multiple ways, and that just makes a stronger problem solver, a stronger thinker.

- Jody Bird

---

UPCS teachers generally prefer heterogeneous groupings for assignments that allow it, especially when the content is new and everyone can enter from different points.

Heterogeneous grouping doesn't only benefit the weaker students. More advanced students often struggle, and push their understanding deeper, when they are forced to look at a problem or issue in multiple ways. UPCS teachers have found that while advanced students might prefer to write an answer quickly and move on, the practice of working in groups makes them think more flexibly and understand concepts more deeply.

#### *Methods for differentiating group work:*

- Look for rich problems or readings that allow for multiple entry points.
- Make talking a priority. Encourage students to clarify one another's difficulties and talk through different approaches to the same assignment until everyone understands.
- Early in the year, assign the more advanced students to challenging roles, particularly those that require group leadership.
- Allow English language learners to start out with roles that provide a less threatening entry into the group. The "artistic interpreter" or "vocabulary wizard" can bring important information to the group, but are roles that help an ELL student solidify his/her comprehension before jumping into a conversation.
- Select different texts for different individuals or groups. All of the texts might revolve around the same theme or concept but require different levels of reading skills.
- Keep manipulatives, maps, class-generated charts, and other supports on hand for students to use as necessary.
- Pair students who have a track record of helping each other out.
- Have extension assignments ready to go for the "high flyers."
- Be aware of how much teacher support each group will need. If you plan to work intensively with one group, make sure the other groups have assignments that they can tackle on their own.

### **5. Use group work as a formative assessment tool**

When students are working in groups, the teacher is in an ideal position to gauge student understanding. In a well-supported group assignment, students can take care of themselves for the most part, so the teacher is freed to listen in on conversations. Because group work requires students to talk (and allows many more students to talk at once), UPCS teachers take advantage of what they hear to assess how much students understand and where misconceptions may reside. Sometimes the teacher uses this opportunity to step into a conversation and immediately clarify a concept or guide the conversation in a more fruitful direction. More often, the teacher uncovers issues that can be brought to the whole class and might alter the next day's lesson.

In addition to the rich data that can be found in talk, teachers can use low-stakes writing, class presentations, or group self-assessments to identify areas of strength and weakness. Group rubrics may indicate that the whole class needs work on discussion skills, or an "exit ticket" concluding a group activity might indicate that three or four students need extra support. All of the work that comes out of groups can be harvested to inform next steps for instruction.

#### *Tips for keeping assessment at the forefront:*

- Resist the urge to jump into conversations. Hold back and listen as much as possible.



- Take notes on what you notice happening in groups. Who gets it? Who needs help?
- Use what you hear, read, and observe to shape future lessons.
- Step into groups when redirection is necessary. Use questions to get group conversation going in a useful direction.
- Be prepared to hear ideas that you may not have thought of yourself. Celebrate those ideas and bring them back to the whole class.

## 6. Find comfort in the noise

Group work gets noisy. For teachers, the noise can be unnerving at first. UPCS teachers note that it's important to distinguish good noise from bad noise. When students in each group are talking about the work, the noise level multiplies. That on-task talk is exactly what group work is designed to achieve. Off-task talk is another story, and UPCS teachers make that clear to students by setting group norms and accountability measures. Talking should stay within the group and be at a level that allows other groups to work. Sometimes, when one group needs more space to focus, or when an activity requires a lot of boisterous talk, UPCS teachers allow groups to spill over into the hallway.

Noise aside, the move to creating groups can be intimidating to teachers for other reasons as well. For starters, the teacher can't always know what each student is doing at every moment. Discussions may lead to misconceptions. Students may come up with questions that the teacher can't answer. The groups may not work at all the first time around.

These concerns are real, but UPCS teachers believe it's important to get beyond these fears. They know that, with practice, and a little letting go, group work does get their students more engaged and learning more efficiently than could happen otherwise.

---

The first time I tried it, I was scared to death. It really feels like you're giving up so much control. It's much easier to put the kids in rows, stand in front, and have all the control in your hands. Many of us went through school like that. There's something really nice and safe about it. The concept of having kids in groups, in charge of their own learning—that's a scary thing.  
- Ricci Hall

---



---

I was intimidated doing group work when I began teaching... I did not do group work for years. It was because I was so intent on getting order in the classroom and getting things to work that I thought that was going to work against me. I was wrong.  
- Peter Weyler

---

## 7. Change course when necessary (and be patient with less-than-total success)

Group activities don't always go well, especially at first. UPCS teachers encourage their colleagues in other schools to be patient with learning how to implement groups... and to change course when necessary. If an activity is going badly, especially if multiple groups are having a rough time, it may be necessary to intervene and try again later. While it's important to try to anticipate and plan for potential problems, some problems will arise anyway. Over time, as teachers develop a strong repertoire of group work methods and interventions, there are fewer surprises, but even the most seasoned group work facilitator has a bad day. Sometimes you just have to change gears.

---

If something goes wrong, if it's not working, it needs to be changed. You can change it midstream. You can say, "You know what? This isn't working. This is what I wanted and it's not happening. Let's try this." Or "We're going to come back to our seats now, and we're going to try this again tomorrow. I'm going to change the activity a little."  
- Peter Weyler

---