

10 Easy Grouping Techniques for the College Classroom

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Talking is a critical component of the learning process (Tanner, 2009, pp. 89, 93-94; Davis, 2009, pp. 97, 102). One way to incorporate student talk into the college classroom and foster active learning is through the use of "informal learning groups," where students form pairs or small groups as needed to discuss questions or work on brief processing activities. Professors can utilize these informal groups throughout a class session to "reinforce concepts, check on students' understanding, or offer a change of pace" (Davis, 2009, p. 207).

A variety of grouping techniques may be used to avoid the classroom pitfall of students routinely pairing up with friends to avoid being forced out of their comfort zones. Pairing with a variety of peers provides opportunities for students to get to know each other, encounter different perspectives, and learn from one another.

Following are 10 quick, easy, and creative techniques designed to group students to discuss questions, examine data, analyze case studies, solve problems, discuss readings, and brainstorm ideas.

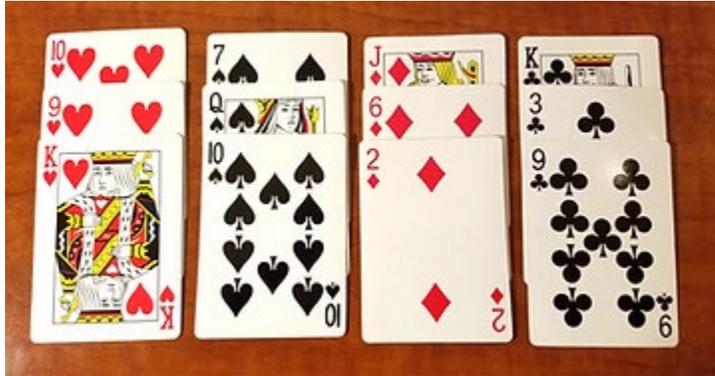
1. Colorful Index Cards



Each student is given a colorful index card, and then they form groups with others who have the same color index card. Students may also form mixed groups that contain one card of each color. This strategy works particularly well with the Text Rendering Experience discussion protocol (School Reform Initiative, 2017). In this protocol, students read a passage and write a sentence,

phrase, and word from the text that they found most significant on an index card. They then discuss their selected sentence, phrase, and word in small groups.

2. Playing Cards



Prepare a set of playing cards based on the number of students in the class and the number you want in each group. For a class of 20 students, you might prepare a set of playing cards with five of each suit and have each student select one. Students then get together with others who have the same suit. You can adapt this strategy by having students form groups based on the value/number on their cards instead of the suit, which is particularly useful for larger classes.

3. Clock Partners

You are probably familiar with the Think-Pair-Share discussion protocol, where you pose a question to students, give them time to think about it, and then have them pair up to share their responses (Brookfield & Preskill, 2016, pp. 139-142; Nilson, 2010, p. 164; Davis, 2010, p. 208, 293, Tanner, 2009 pp. 91-92; Tanner, 2013, pp. 323, 325). Clock Partners is a great way to spice up this strategy and expand opportunities for student interaction with a variety of peers!



Provide each student with a Clock Partners handout. You can use a clock with all 12 hour slots or with four hour slots (3:00, 6:00, 9:00 & 12:00), based on your needs. Give students time to walk around the room and make “appointments” with peers. To make an appointment, both people must have that hour free on their clock, and write each other's names down in the

appropriate slot. Whenever you need students to pair up, simply tell them to take out their Clock Partners handout and meet with their _____ o'clock partner! (Example: "Please meet with your 4:00 partner and discuss the text.")

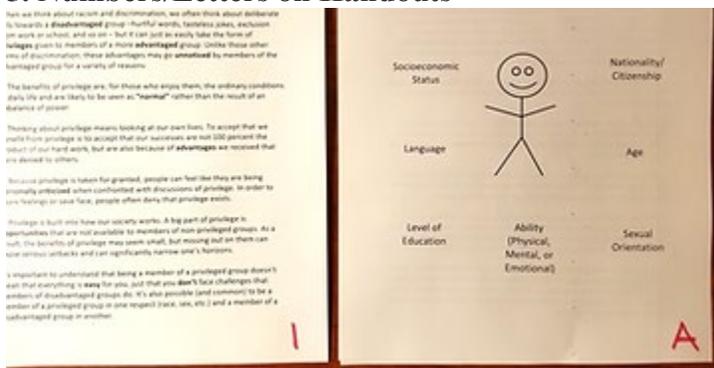
Download a free Clock Partners template [here](#).

4. Dot Stickers on Handouts



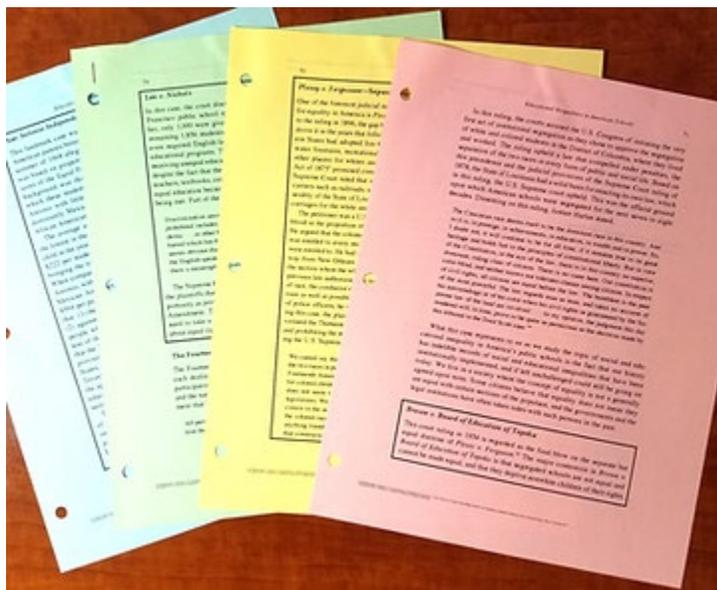
Place multi-colored dot stickers on handouts before class. Students form pairs/groups with others who have the same color dot on their handouts. Likewise, you can have students form mixed groups composed of students who have each color dot.

5. Numbers/Letters on Handouts



Write numbers or letters in the corner of the handouts you will be using. Students form pairs/groups with those who have the same number or letter on their handouts, or form mixed groups as previously described. The numbering strategy is also useful when you need students to read aloud. For example, the handout pictured on the left has five bullet points listed about privilege. I wrote the numbers 1 to 5 on five of the handouts, and the five students who had numbers on their handouts read aloud the bullet point that matched their number.

6. Color-Coded Paper



This strategy is particularly useful for activities where students read about different topics and then teach others about what they learned (Brookfield & Preskill, 2016, pp. 189-192; Nilson, 2010, p. 164; Davis, 2009, pp. 209-210; Barkley, 2010, pp. 289-295). For example, during a lecture on landmark legal cases in education, I printed each legal case on a different color of paper. Students formed groups with others who had the same color paper to discuss the context, issue, resolution, and impact of their case. Then, they formed mixed groups with others who had different legal cases and taught each other about their respective cases.

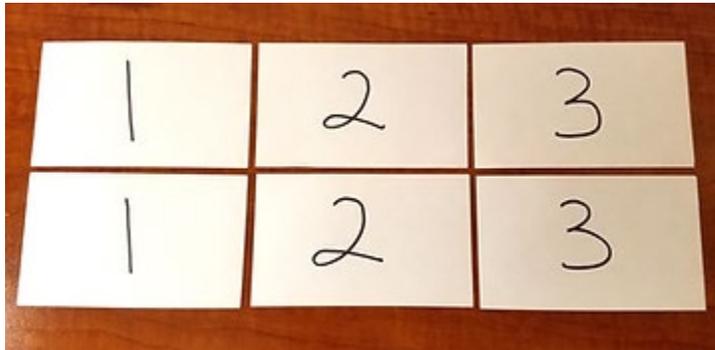
7. Markers



This technique is great for a writing activity during class! Create a set of markers where you have multiple of each color. For example, if I wanted my class of 24 students to form groups of three, I would bring eight different colors of markers and have three of each color (three red

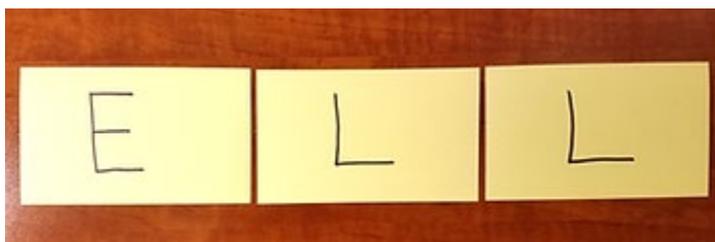
markers, three blue markers, etc.) Students group up with others holding the same color marker to work on the writing activity. One task that works particularly well with the marker technique is the Chart Talk discussion protocol (Brookfield & Preskill, 2016, pp. 13-17). In this protocol, the professor poses a question, and students work in small groups to engage in a silent written discussion about the question. They record their responses to the question on chart paper for 3-5 minutes and draw lines connecting ideas. Afterward, the groups talk about what they have written.

8. Numbered Index Cards



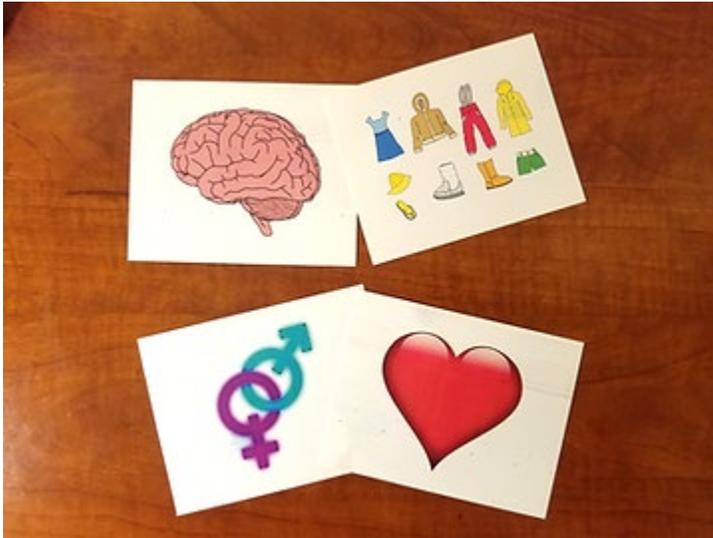
This strategy works well for in-class peer review activities. Prepare numbered index cards with two of each number. (For example, for a class of 20 students, you would create two sets of index cards numbered 1-10.) Mix up the cards, and then have each student pick a card. Students exchange their papers with the person who has the same number on their index card. Shuffle and redistribute the cards for another round of peer review. This strategy is an adaptation of Marchionda's (2004) peer review process, where she distributes index cards with students' names instead of numbers.

9. Index Cards with Letters



Select a keyword or acronym that relates to your lecture topic. For example, in preparation for a lecture on English Language Learners, I prepared a set of index cards for my students labeled with the letters, E, L, and L. Students pick up an index card and group up to spell the word or acronym you have chosen.

10. Picture Cards



Create a set of picture cards related to the topic of your lecture. For example, for a lecture on gender and sexual identity, I created picture cards that had four different images: the male/female symbols (the concept of sex), a brain (the concept of gender identity), clothing (the concept of gender expression), and a heart (the concept of sexual orientation). Have students select a picture card, but do not tell them what the pictures represent. Students form groups with people who have the same image or different images as needed. After the lecture, have students share how the pictures relate to the lecture content. This serves as a visual aid, helping students remember the lecture content!

Summary

Designing a strategy to group students reduces much of the stress in class students face when asked to “pair up” or “form a group.” This helps them to meet peers, hear diverse perspectives, and not worry about exclusion. Ten strategies have been provided, but there are many other methods. Everyday items can be used for forming groups-- different color Post-it notes, gift tags with different designs, and puzzle pieces. The possibilities are endless!

Discussion Questions

1. Think about an upcoming lecture. How could you incorporate one of the grouping techniques from this article into that lecture?

2. Select one of the techniques noted in this blog that you have not done previously but would consider doing in the future. Explain briefly why you selected this technique? List two potential strengths and two potential limitations of that grouping technique.

3. For the technique you selected, how might you adapt it in your class to make it maximally effective for your course?

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