

How can we increase students' participation in learning by promoting their interactions with each other?

Research evidence

Eliciting ground rules for talk in students' own words is particularly helpful for encouraging students to draw other, perhaps quieter students into the group's discussion. During a guided discussion, the teacher draws from the class the kind of rules they think should be used in group work and displays the resulting list on the wall for students to refer to. Such rules can include the need to:

- ask everyone for their opinion
- ask for reasons why
- respect other people's ideas – don't just use your own, and
- make sure everyone agrees after talking

Your evidence

You might like to gather evidence about how your students behave during group work. You could use the questions below as a framework to analyse what happens. Or you might like to ask a trusted colleague or even a group of students to observe a group work activity in one of your lessons and give you detailed information about the following items:

- Do students take turns or do they frequently talk over each other or interrupt?
- Do they invite contributions from each other?
- Do they listen to each other, and respond and react to each other's contributions?
- Do they invite each other to offer explanations (eg. by asking 'Why do you think that?')
- Do students elaborate their contributions by providing reasons, explanations, and examples?
- Do students modify what they say in the light of each other's comments?
- Do they pool ideas before reaching a group decision?

How do you feel about what you have discovered? Are there any surprises? What is similar and different for different groups of students e.g. boys and girls, shy and less forthcoming students?

Next steps

Using yours or your colleague's or your students' observations, can you identify strengths and weaknesses in group work behaviour in your classes? Could you use your evidence as a focus for a discussion about group work with your students? Would it be helpful to work with your students to build rules for structuring group discussion and observe the effects of these rules on a subsequent group work activity?

Find out more

- RfT: Collaborative mathematics
- Participation anthology RfT Section 1, page 3 available at www.gtce.org.uk/tla.rft
- RfT: Raising achievement through group work available at www.gtce.org.uk/tla.rft