

To Maximize Group Work, Make It Metacognitive



By [Larry Ferlazzo](#) — May 28, 2019

[Opinion Contributor](#), [Education Week](#)

Larry Ferlazzo is an English and social studies teacher at Luther Burbank High School in Sacramento, Calif.

This series is “wrapped-up” with commentaries from Nancy Frey, Doug Fisher, Michael Fisher, Dr. Laura Greenstein, Debbie Zacarian, Michael Silverstone, and Cindy Terebush.

Teachers and educational researchers agree: Meaningful peer interactions fuel learning. The outdated model of a silent classroom as a sign of learning is long gone. Instead, teachers and school leaders listen for the hum and buzz of students as they explain ideas, justify their thinking, pose questions to one another, and make decisions with classmates. We have a colleague who calls this use of academic language “productive noise,” as opposed to the chatter of a disengaged class.

Educational researchers similarly report on impact of meaningful peer interactions on learning. High-yield group-work routines with a proven track record include reciprocal teaching (Palincsar & Brown, 1984), cooperative learning (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1991), and the jigsaw classroom (Aronson, Bridgeman, & Geffner, 1978). While they differ in purpose and execution, each has something important in common: a metacognitive component. In other words, these and other productive group-work routines require that students reflect on their learning and interactions with peers.

The Metacognitive Element

Metacognition is the ability to think about one’s thinking. Examples of metacognitive thinking:

- * Monitoring goals*
- * Reflecting on one’s performance*
- * Revising plans to improve future performance*

But these metacognitive actions can’t be left to chance. While we would like to think that this is something students should automatically do, in practice they don’t. As with other skills, these metacognitive actions need to be taught and practiced. They require time dedicated to building these habits of mind. The way to do so is to build these actions into the structure of productive group-work routines.

Monitor Goals

Productive group-work routines typically require more time than simple peer interactions such as turning to a partner to briefly exchange ideas. The investment in time should begin with opportunity for learners to determine their goals for the group interaction and how these goals fit into their overall learning goals. Success criteria are a great starting point for monitoring goals. Success criteria are sometimes in the form of “I can” statements. The success criteria for a poetry unit might include:

- * I can identify figurative language used in text through similes and metaphors.*
- * I can explain how figurative language influences the meaning of a poem.*

Before moving students into their small groups, review the salient success criteria to be addressed and return to the same statements after in order for students to gauge their individual progress toward these goals.

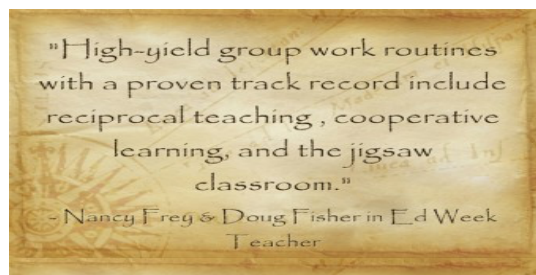
Reflect on Performance

The social and emotional learning aspect of group work can't be overlooked. Communication skills, turn taking, and reaching consensus are as important as the academic skills being utilized. Develop a productive group-work rubric of the social and emotional skills that are developmentally appropriate for your students and ask them to self-evaluate weekly on their performance in groups.

- * Did I give the speaker my attention?*
- * Did I ask questions of others in my group to help with our thinking?*
- * Did I ask questions of others when I didn't understand?*
- * Did I restate and paraphrase other people's ideas?*
- * Did I summarize our decisions?*

Revise Plans for Future Performance

Metacognitive thinking is for naught if there isn't a plan of action for the future. Students should revisit their learning goals, as measured against success criteria, and their self-evaluation of performances in groups, to establish new personal goals. For instance, a student who notices that he is still having difficulty with accurately identifying influences of figurative language in poems, and has noted that he doesn't ask clarifying questions very often in groups, now has some insight into what he needs to do more of the following week. To be sure, students don't arrive at these “a-ha moments” all on their own. But a teacher equipped with their initial insights can broker these reflective conversations such that students can realize the link between academic learning and their investment in learning with peers.



Response From Michael Fisher

Michael Fisher is a former teacher who is now a full-time author and instructional coach. He works with schools around the country, helping to sustain curriculum upgrades, design curriculum, and modernize instruction in immersive technology. His latest book is [*The Quest for Learning: How to Maximize Student Engagement*](#), published by Solution Tree. For more information, visit The Digigogy Collaborative (digigogy.com) or find Michael on Twitter ([@fisher1000](https://twitter.com/fisher1000)):

To maximize learning in collaborative work groups, teachers may want to consider helping students situate their expectations and their students' interactions by attending to the following:

- ***Clearly define the task and product of the group.***
Students should know explicitly what they are expected to do and what product of their work is desired. This is a good time for negotiation of methodologies and potential products to give students a voice in the how and the why of their work.
- ***Model a group goal-setting procedure.***
My colleague, Silvia Rosenthal Tolisano at Langwitches.org, advocates a tweak to the popular KWL chart, by adding an H. Her KWHL chart asks students to define what they already Know, What they want to Know, HOW they are going to learn it, and finally, what they Learned. You can also ask students to map out action steps associated with a particular learning target. Add to that checkpoints for completing tasks or meeting deadlines, an outline of group responsibilities, and a commitment statement for the end deadline.
- ***Model group norms for interactions and contributions.***
Let students have some conversations about what types of interactions are useful and which ones are not. Guide them through thinking about the value of evidence over opinion statements, how to give feedback with actionable steps rather than surface-level praise, and comments or facial expressions that aren't helpful.
- ***Have students commit to a particular role.***
Make sure students choose and commit to a particular role in their groups. This doesn't mean they can't perform other tasks outside of their role, but it does give them a specific responsibility to attend to.
- ***Students should individually reflect on their roles and contributions.***
When the work is done, students should be able to, orally or in writing, share what they contributed to the product or task with specific evidence of their impact on the final product.

"Just asking students to work together doesn't give them enough direction for working on a task or creating a product."

Michael Fisher in Education Week Teacher

Be mindful of group or paired tasks without parameters. Just asking students to work together doesn't give them enough direction for working on a task or creating a product. Some intrinsically motivated students may be able to handle that

level of open-endedness, but many students still need those parameters to maintain focus and engagement throughout the group learning experience.

Response From Dr. Laura Greenstein

A lifelong educator, Dr. Laura Greenstein has served as a teacher and school leader, professor and professional-development specialist. Her passion for excellence in assessment is evident in her numerous books, articles, and blogs on the topic:

Maximize Group Work via Assessment

“Individual commitment to a group effort is what makes a team work.” —Vince Lombardi

THE VALUE OF GROUP WORK

Group work and collaboration are more than buzzwords: They are lifelong skills for success. Group work is a substantiated strategy when it engages learners and relies on best practice. On the plus side, group work leads to higher levels of engagement and ownership of learning. It also supports the development of effective communication and collaboration skills as learners work together to share knowledge, know-how, and solve problems. On the downside, the group work may not be equally shared, and some students may not have the requisite critical-thinking skills, self-regulation, and social competencies.

THE IMPORTANCE OF ASSESSMENT

Effective assessment is essential in strengthening group learning and improving learning outcomes.

Incorporating effective assessment in group work means:

- 1. Deconstructing of big-picture standards into well-defined and achievable learning intentions.*
- 2. Confirming that individual roles and responsibilities are clearly defined and understood.*
- 3. Making certain that students understand the scoring criteria and how learning will be assessed.*
- 4. Relying on assessments that emphasize outcomes (depth, clarity, relevance) rather than ego and effort.*
- 5. Consideration of elements of group process such as respectful listening, adherence to deadlines, perseverance, focus, and the furtherance of group learning.*

PUTTING INTO PRACTICE

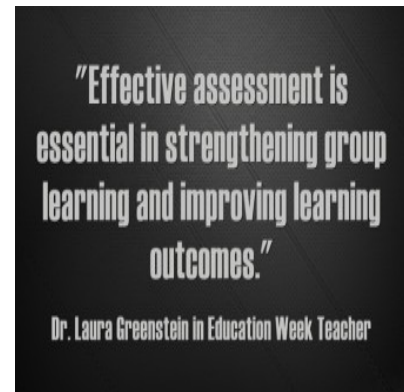
Once students understand the goals, recognize exemplars, and have a voice in assessment, they are ready to begin their learning and ultimately assess their own learning. Assessments can be by individual students, learning groups, and teachers. Here are a few suggested assessment criteria for group work:

- *How well did we listen to and respect the viewpoints and ideas of others in the group?*
- *What steps did we take to stay on task and reach consensus?*
- *How would you describe the quality of individual contributions?*
- *What are 2 strengths of your group work and 2 limitations?*
- *What would you do differently if you were to start over?*

Student learning through group work is maximized by high-quality self-monitoring, reflection, and peer review/feedback. Students can write review questions using [Quizlet](#), design a [Jeopardy](#)-style game, or contribute to the development of the summative assessment. In addition, students can annotate their assessment checklists and rubrics with examples and explanations of ratings. Jasona shares, "I convinced my group that the question was about burying someone in a grave, not the seriousness of the situation. Ha, leave it up to Shakespeare to confuse. We'd like to rewrite our response, if that's OK?"

Self-assessment of your understanding of quality indicators of self-assessment

- 1) *Which learning target is more understandable to a student?*
 - a) *"Plot the values of quantities whose ratios are always the same."*
 - b) *"I can use the equation to draw a slope showing the ratio of circumference to diameter."*
- 2) *Which is a substantiated strategy for engaging students as self- and peer assessor*
 - a) *The best way to improve student ownership and achievement is to give more practice tests.*
 - b) *For students to improve, they must know what high-quality work looks like and have the skills and strategies to monitor their learning.*



Answers to questions 1 and 2: Both are choice B

Response From Debbie Zacarian & Michael Silverstone

Dr. Debbie Zacarian brings three decades of combined experience as a district administrator, university faculty member, and educational-service-agency leader. With expertise in responsive leadership, instructional practices, family-school partnerships, and educational policies, she's authored many books and local and state policies and presents extensively.

Michael Silverstone began his education career as a 2nd grade teacher in the Amherst, Mass., public schools. He is currently a Montessori lower-elementary teacher (ages 6-9) and an American Montessori Society Emerging Leaders Fellow as well as a teacher consultant with the Western Massachusetts Writing Project.

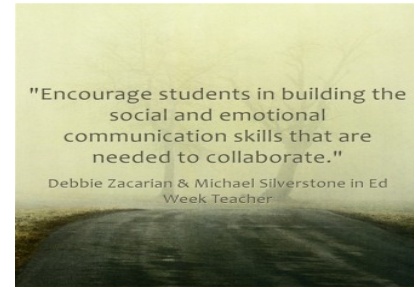
Debbie and Michael are the co-authors of *In it Together: How Student, Family, and Community Partnerships Advance Engagement and Achievement in Diverse Classrooms* (Corwin 2015) and are completing a manuscript on empowering students to find their voices to be published by ASCD in 2019:

Group work is one of the most common approaches that we use with students of all ages. It's also one of the most researched. Despite its proven usefulness as a learning method, the most critical component of it is our support in enhancing students' abilities to contribute equitably, resolve conflicts, stay on task, and support the success of the group. Here are some proven strategies for maximizing our students' learning.

1. ***Make sure the physical set-up of our classroom is designed and ready for cooperation.***
Involve students in the design process and check with them periodically to see that the layout is working for everyone. Use a flexible design so that the desks, tables, chairs, electronic equipment, and the space between these can be easily adjusted for students to interact with their peers and for us to walk freely among them as they do so.
2. ***Invest time to learn meaningful details about each student's habits and interests***
so that the academic tasks that we assign are interesting and engaging for them. An example is a high school mathematics teacher whose students are studying probability. She knows that many are concerned with issues of equity in their school and community. She tasks small groups in exploring issues that are of concern to them by using the mathematical concepts they are learning. One group decides to look at the likelihood that students of color enroll in honors courses, another at the likelihood of women participating in traditional men's sports.
3. ***Model the task that we assign students to engage.***
We can strengthen students' success in the tasks we assign by modeling what we want them to do. For example, the high school math teacher provided an example of an equity issue and described the sequential steps that she would do to explore it mathematically. She then engaged small groups in choosing an equity issue and the steps that they would do to engage in it. In places where problems commonly arise or do occur in practice, it's important to preview and demonstrate the steps to take. The math teacher carefully observed each group and intervened positively with suggested steps to take.
4. ***Encourage students in building the social and emotional communication skills that are needed to collaborate.***
Provide specific instructions to support students' listening skills, empathy, expression of their feelings with peers, mediating their own emotions, and resolving conflicts.
5. ***Model an attitude of acknowledgement, respect, and consideration.***
Help students honor, value, and acknowledge each other by continually modeling this type of interaction with them and acknowledging them when they do the same with their peers. An example is a teacher who (a) specifically acknowledges each student's pair or small-group efforts with comments such as, "That's a great use of logic; I appreciate your

suggestion," and (b) looks for and acknowledges the same type of positive strengths-based interactions among her students.

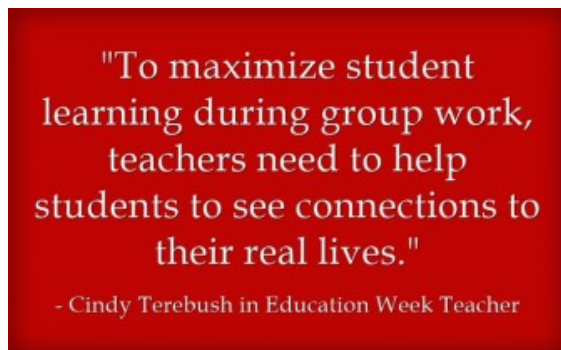
Engaging students in these five strategies helps in strengthening their success in school and in their lives beyond school.



Response From Cindy Terebush

Cindy Terebush is an early-childhood consultant, presenter, and author of *Teach the Whole Preschooler: Strategies for Nurturing Developing Minds.*:

All learning needs to be taken from the classroom to the world, or it has no lasting impact. When I was in high school, I spent a year learning chemistry. No one connected that classroom learning to my real life or the larger world. I memorized some things, did some experiments and equations, but today, I couldn't tell you one thing about chemistry. Most people can name a class that they passed but did not remain a part of them beyond that term. The same is true for group work. It needs to be taken from the group to the students' worlds. Their worlds are built around their interests.



Learning is all about creating connections—known information to new information, classroom information to the lives of our students. To maximize student learning during group work, teachers need to help students to see connections to their real lives. Get to know as much as you can about their interests and hobbies. Even today's youngest students are already enrolled in extracurricular activities that we can use as a basis for connection. They take dance, play sports, and go for lessons that lead into elementary, middle

school, and high school activities. Listen to your students as they talk about what they are doing outside of your classroom. Converse with them to learn tidbits about their lives that can help you find the connections that will make their group work meaningful.