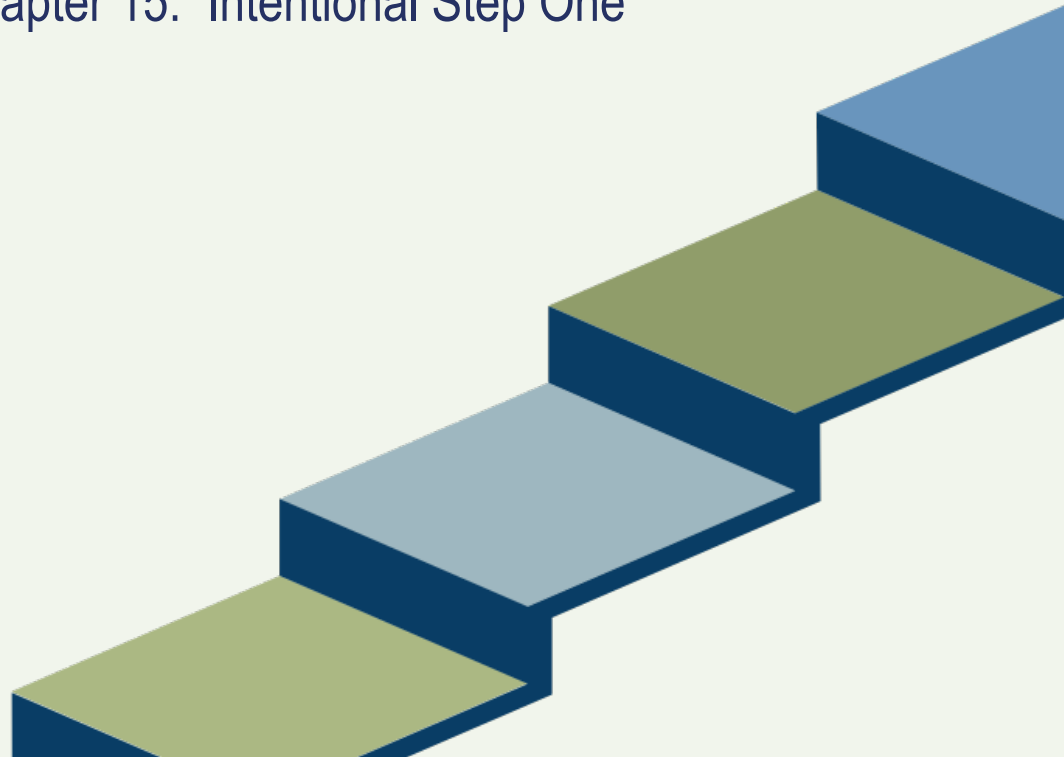


Intentional Instructional Moves

Strategic Steps to
Accelerate Student
Learning

Companion Guide

Chapter 15: Intentional Step One



Chapter 15: Group Work

While group work has been a go-to strategy in education for thousands of years, it can still seem intimidating for teachers and students, especially if they're new to the practice. For teachers who haven't done much (or any) group work before, where do they begin? My mantra is always: start small and be intentional.

Group work doesn't necessitate a long-term, highly-involved project that takes weeks (or even months) to complete. Teachers can start with brief, five-minute exercises and work their way up to larger projects. Using a variety of formal and informal group work, with low to high levels of commitment will be advantageous for both students and educators. Informal collaborative learning involves a simpler task which can be completed in less than 15 minutes. Medium level projects usually take place over several class periods and are more structured. Formal group projects typically involve a greater degree of complexity and a longer time commitment. Students might meet in and out of class, in person and/or online. However, group work shouldn't replace whole-class and individual learning, but add to and enhance classroom practices.

Before beginning, teachers can assess their comfort level with group work and make a plan for developing their use of this strategy. For instance, they can introduce group work by having students work in pairs for a brief activity. As their comfort level grows, they can increase the length of the activities and gradually grow the size of their groups.

Likewise, teachers will need to evaluate students' familiarity with group work and what they can handle. Some classes might struggle to work together initially, while others seem more cohesive and agreeable with each other. If teachers notice that students need more support in

these face-to-face interactions, they can slowly introduce group work and provide direct instruction on how to successfully work together.

Chapter 15

Intentional Step One: Plan Ahead

Recently, I conducted a classroom walk-through where I observed students working in groups of four. However, the task they'd been assigned only allowed two students to work on it at a time. This meant that the other two students in the group had to wait and watch the work. With more intentional planning, we can avoid this situation by ensuring there is enough work for all members of the group to contribute.

Planning ahead allows teachers to choose the most effective group activities that will promote learning and growth. Teachers can also utilize clear learning intentions and success criteria to create assignments and ensure students understand what's expected of them. Productive group work taps into students' strengths, skills, and talents and allows them to feel capable and valued.

Planning Reflection Questions:

To get the most out of cooperative learning, teachers should consider the following:

- Is there more than one way for students to complete the task? Are there multiple solutions or different ways to create the final product?
- Is the task engaging, challenging, and rewarding to students?
- Can all group members contribute in meaningful ways and utilize their strengths?
- Does the success of the project depend on the participation of all group members?
- How will you assess students' individual and group progress?
- How will you build in reflection and revision time throughout the process?

Strategy 1: Group Problem Solving

Students work together in small groups to solve a relevant problem. Generally speaking, the teacher presents students with a problem, offers structure and guidance for how to solve it, and then the groups work together to find a solution. Escape Room activities work well for this strategy (Center for Teaching, n.d.a). Students must work together to “break out” of a room by solving a series of problems. For example, a teacher can invite students to break out of a mummy’s tomb, or use figurative language to solve a series of riddles to escape the classroom.

Teachers can also try Improve This activities where students are given an answer to the problem and must work together to improve it. Why is the answer incomplete? How can they strengthen it? For example, science teachers can keep projects from the year before and invite current students to improve on them (as in the example of building a car). This can also be done in an English class. The teacher can use an essay or a fictional story written by a previous student (or even published examples) and invite the class to make it better. The students don’t have to write the whole paper or story themselves, but they will practice the skills needed to make it stronger.

Group problem-solving activities promote authentic, inquiry-based learning that centers the students. As groups work together toward a solution, they will practice critical thinking, team-building, reasoning, ideation, and innovation. The activities also offer an engaging way to review content and concepts while tapping into SEL skills like responsible decision making and social awareness. Group problem solving is also perfect for practicing cognitive task analysis (1.29).

Strategy 2: Jigsaw

Group members become experts in one aspect of a problem. Then, they use their

collective expertise to solve the whole problem. For example, if students are creating a biography of an historical figure, the teacher can divide up the task to allow each group member to become an expert in certain aspects of that person's life. One student might research the person's accomplishments, another might look at their early life and childhood, another could find inspirational quotes, and another could find photos and videos about the person. The students will then come together to synthesize their materials into a final product. For more ideas on using this strategy, see Chapter 5.