

## OVERVIEW OF THE TEACHING PRACTICE

Working with others provides students with opportunities to build the valuable future ready skill of collaboration. Teamwork also builds community within the classroom and encourages active learning. Students can learn to see a variety of perspectives, appreciate the contributions of others, and have meaningful conversations with diverse peers. Teamwork may even be a necessity for tasks and projects that are too big for students to tackle by themselves.

Generally speaking, the teacher should form student teams. It might be OK for students to choose their own teammates for *some* assignments or projects, but only if they have a lot of experience with teamwork and the process is managed carefully. Many issues can arise, from students finding it not so easy to work with their best friend, to some students feeling left out, to teams being unbalanced.

Heterogeneous teams are recommended for most projects. It's good for students to learn how to work with diverse others – and they often come to realize that their peers have different strengths to bring to a team. Teams of three or four work well. If more than four students are on a team, there may not be enough work for everyone to do, and group dynamics can be challenging. It might be appropriate for students to work in pairs for some assignments or projects, but they won't learn many of the collaboration skills they would gain from being in a larger group.

## EXPLANATION OF THE ACTIVITY

**TITLE:** Forming Student Teams

**GRADES:** K-12

**TIME:** Varies, depending on how many students and how fast you work

**PURPOSE:** To support the process of forming effective student teams.

## OVERVIEW

This is a step-by-step process teachers can use to put students together in teams to work collaboratively on a group assignment or a project. This activity includes an optional method for collecting information from students to inform the process, if you do not yet know them well.

## STEPS

1. Think about what skills are required for the assignment or project. Every project is going to require literacy skills: reading, writing, speaking and listening. Some projects will need more specialized skills, such as creating media, using a tech tool, or having some artistic ability.

2. Decide how many students will be on a team. Experienced PBL teachers typically find **four** to be the right number of students per team. Three can work too, but with absences or “two vs. one” dynamics it can get tricky. Some projects might be complex enough to keep five people busy, but larger teams raise challenges for communication and team dynamics.
3. Ask students to give you information about themselves. Once you get to know your students you’ll have a sense of their skills, interests, and personalities, and you can assign students to teams with confidence about who works well together and brings the right skills to the team. (You’ll also know which students should *not* be on a team together!) But if it’s the beginning of the school year, or a new semester with new students, gather information with a survey or worksheet such as the example below. Use another approach that doesn’t involve writing for very young students, such as an activity where they move to different parts of the room when certain strengths and interests are called out.
4. Assign students to project teams.  
Now that you’ve thought about the project and your students, start assigning them to teams. Some teachers like to start by first placing students on each team who are academically strong, or are good facilitators, or who have a particular skill, and working down from there. It may take you a few attempts to get it right. Tip: print students’ names on strips of paper you can move around on a table/desk, use an erasable whiteboard, or use a tech tool such as Padlet or Jamboard.

## NOTES

- Take extra care when placing English Learners, special education students, and those who are shy or have other social needs on teams. Be sure they have supportive teammates.
- Consider equity issues when teaming students; be sure not to reinforce existing social inequities, so hierarchies don’t develop within a group
- If you want students to have input into the process, you could ask them to tell you 2-3 peers they would like to be teamed with and place them with one. Students who are experienced with collaborative work can form their own teams, as long as they are using appropriate criteria and the teacher monitors the process.
- Heterogeneous teams are generally considered to be best practice, but there can be occasions when homogeneous grouping works too. For example, students can be grouped by interest in a topic, or for some projects you might allow a team of high achievers to work together.
- This activity focuses on how to form “project teams” that do the core work of a major assignment or project together, but students could be grouped for other purposes too.

For example, teachers can “jigsaw” students into “expert groups” who focus on learning a particular skill or piece of content, then bring it back to their project team. Or a teacher could form temporary small groups of students who need to review a lesson or build a skill, groups based on shared interests, or groups for mini-workshops and special support.

- With very young students it is best to do most project work as a whole class, not in teams. You can introduce teamwork in short activities with a specific task to complete.

Mock-up of student worksheet:

<i>About Me as a Team Member</i>	
<b>Strengths:</b> What am I good at? What subjects are my favorites?	<b>Classmates:</b> Who would I like to be on a team with? Is there anyone I cannot work with?
<b>Special Talents:</b> Do I have special skills, like in art, technology, drama, creating media, etc.?	<b>Needs:</b> What do I need help with? Where do I need to grow?