



Small Group Exercises Sample Formats

A) Answering Key Questions:

Give each group a list of strategically designed questions that they must answer about the text/object/concept that will promote the development of a critical skill.

1. Give each group: either (a) a different list of questions, or (b) the same list of questions but with a different analytical slant assigned to each group.
2. Give them time to answer the questions.
3. As a class, go through the answers and discuss the connections and differences between each groups' answers.

B) Solving a Problem:

1. Find a compelling problem concerning the text/object/concept.
2. Choose several different perspectives from which to approach the problem.
3. Assign each group a different perspective.
4. Give them time to solve the problem.
5. Each group takes turns presenting their solutions.
6. After each group presents, the other groups should be given a few minutes to question/challenge/ debate with them.
7. Close the exercise by finding the connections between each of the solutions, showing how they complete each other.

C) The Jigsaw: works with any complex problem that can be broken down into 4-5 substantive components.

1. Assign each group an area in which to develop expertise.
2. Give the groups time to analyze the text/object/concept in-depth from their respective angles of expertise.
3. Re-shuffle the groups so that there is one member from each of the original groups in each new group.
4. Now have each group solve a problem concerning the text/object/concept with their four experts weighing in with each angle of analysis.
5. Have each group present their results and discuss the differences.

D) Debate or Trial: preparing a persuasive case

Divide the class into half, instead of groups of three or four. The groups should then divide themselves into defense and prosecution sub-teams.

1. Give each half of the class a different cause to support that links the learning goal and the text/object/concept.
2. Give them time to prepare evidence to support their case.
3. The first group presents their case.
4. The second group's prosecution team then cross-examines the first group.
5. The first group defense team responds.
6. Repeat these three steps with the other half of the class.
7. You (as judge) decide which case is more persuasive and why; but be sure to acknowledge the strengths of both sides!

E). Guided Reciprocal Peer Questioning

There are times when students feel so confused by new concepts that they don't know what questions to ask. Guided reciprocal peer questioning provides students with higher order open-ended questions to generate a focused discussion in a small group setting. The questions are generic prompts students use to generate specific content-based questions.

The instructor gives a mini-lecture in class and then provides a list of open-ended questions. Below is a selection of question formats, including questions that encourage synthesis, comparison and contrast, and extrapolation to other contexts.

- Explain why _____ .
- Explain how _____ .
- What is the meaning of _____ ?
- Why is _____ happening?
- What is the main idea of _____ ?
- What is the solution to the problem of _____ ?
- What if _____ ?
- What conclusions can I draw about _____ ?
- What is the best _____ and why?
- What do you think causes _____ ? Why?
- How does _____ affect _____ ?
- How does _____ relate to what I've learned before?
- What is the difference between _____ and _____ ?
- How are _____ and _____ similar?
- How would I use _____ to _____ ?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of _____ ?
- What is another way to look at _____ ?
- What is a new example of _____ ?
- What would happen if _____ ?
- Why is _____ important?
- How does _____ apply to everyday life?

Students are then given a few minutes to individually prepare several content-specific questions aided by these open-ended questions. The students form groups and take turns asking their questions and discussing possible answers. Alternatively, the instructor can assign reading prior to class and provide the open-ended questions as a take home worksheet. With this variation, it is helpful to set aside a few minutes at the beginning of the next class for students to review the reading assignment and questions.

“Guided Peer Reciprocal Questioning” Sources:

NISE site: <http://www.wcer.wisc.edu/nise/cl1/cl/doingcl/peerqst.htm>

King, A. (1993). “From sage on the stage to guide on the side.” *College Teaching*, 41(1).

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