Creating Engaging Group Work with Liberating Structures
by Andreas Broscheid

Nov 2, 2023

Many faculty, though not all, like to use group work in their classes. Many students, though not all, hate group work in their classes. Many faculty, though not all, hate meetings.

These three facts, if true (which I claim they are by virtue of a decent amount of hand waving and my awesome personal expertise), are quite funny to me. Meetings are basically a type of small-group work. We tend to hate them (if we do) because they are often a waste of time that we'd like to spend otherwise. The purpose they are meant to achieve, if there is one besides "let's pretend we are addressing this particular issue," can often be achieved in a better way than by putting a dozen butts into chairs for an hour or more. Of course, once we've left the meeting we hated, we go teach our classes, in which we put students into groups, often without a clear purpose besides breaking up the flow of our classes to get students to discuss *something*, no matter what they may or may not learn in the process (besides the fact that group-work-slash-meetings are a pain). (If you want to learn more about how to run meetings that are actually meaningful and effective, [you may want to attend this workshop](#).)

Of course, meaningful, productive, focused meetings exist, and meaningful, effective, and successful small-group work is possible. I am sure there are Teaching Toolboxes on the topic that I can refer you to (yes, there are: [about cooperative learning](#), [about student peer instruction](#), and [about POGIL](#)). Here, I wanted to introduce you to a set of tools that I find useful for organizing effective meetings as well as small-group work in the classroom (or on Zoom). These tools have been collected under the label *[Liberating Structures](#)*; they are being modified and added to by an international movement of practitioners. In the context of higher education, [Maha Bali, Autumn Caines, and Mia Zamora](#) have adapted and invented a number of the Liberating (and similar) Structures as part of the [OneHE project](#).

The main argument behind Liberating Structures is that the most common meeting structures or classroom practices either allocate power and control to just one person (the presenter in a meeting or the instructor in a lecture-based classroom) or to everybody (in an unstructured open discussion), but without guidance as to how to contribute, which in turn reduces participation to a small number of participants—not that different from allocating power to just one person. Liberating Structures attempt to shape interaction in meetings (or classes) in ways that encourage all participants to be part of a group process; in this sense, they liberate participants to contribute.

This was basically the Toolbox: Take a look at these tools, read about them, select some, try them out, and, if you feel like it, get involved in the international community developing and maintaining them.

For those who complain that this Toolbox is too short and I have not yet earned my pay, here are some examples of Liberating Structures that I've found useful or intriguing:

1-2-4-all. This is a basic structure used to make sure all participants in a group have thought about a question, talked to someone else about their answers, and interact with other participants in increasing circles. It's similar to think-pair-share, if you're familiar with it. First, you provide the group—your committee or your class—with a prompt or a question you want them to discuss. (For example, in my U.S. government class, I might ask: Which portion of the Constitution should be amended in your opinion, and how would the amendment affect how the government works?) Then you give everybody one minute (or more, if necessary) to think about, or write down, their response. Then you form groups of two, in which the partners exchange their answers in two minutes. Then two of the groups of two are respectively combined to groups of 4 (for 4 minutes, ideally); they either continue the conversations from the groups of 2, or they get a higher-level question to summarize or draw conclusions. (For example, I may want the groups of 4 to choose one of the proposed constitutional amendments, or identify questions they have about the Constitution that arose in their conversation.) Finally, the groups of 4 report out to the whole group. Often, by that time all participants are ready for a lively plenary discussion. This structure is pretty flexible as to actual outcomes pursued; its main benefit is to make sure everybody has input into the conversation.

Wicked Questions. This structure is particularly suited for identifying problems, dilemmas, paradoxes, contradictions, and other difficulties, either in questions or plans that a committee addresses or in questions and content discussed in a class. Groups of 4-6 take 5 minutes to generate questions that state a paradox related to the topic of the meeting or class. An example would be, "How can we encourage open conversation among committee members while also making decisions in a timely manner?" or, "How can we create participatory, student-centered classes while also covering the required material?" or, "How can elections be run to maximize participation while at the same time preventing voter fraud?" The point here is that the small groups *generate*, not answer, these questions. After 5 minutes, the groups report out their questions, and all participants select and refine the wicked questions they find most useful or interesting. This structure can be combined with 1-2-4-all to encourage participation by all. (Sometimes, identifying wicked questions is an important goal in itself; sometimes it's

the first stage of a group process that continues with attempts to answer the selected questions.)

Conversation Café (here is the Bali/Zamora/Caines version). OK, you may already know this one; it has been around for a while and was adopted/adapted by Liberating Structures. The basic idea is to form small groups of 5-7 participants and give them a prompt or question to talk about. Traditionally, this format has often been used to debrief crises or other shocking experiences. Each group has a participant-host who makes sure the group follows the agreed-upon structure: Only one person at a time contributes to the conversation; only the person who holds a conversation piece (any object that the group chooses) may contribute; all have to have an opportunity to contribute before a person can do so again a second time during the first two rounds; and any other conversation agreements the group may have adopted. The small group conversation then proceeds in four rounds: In the first round, everybody responds to the prompts, with thoughts, observations, or feelings, for up to 1 minute per person. In the second round, all participants describe their thoughts or feelings in response to what they heard in the first round, again for up to 1 minute per person. The third round is an open conversation, for 10-20 minutes. And in the third round, everybody gets a chance to state their conclusion or "take away" from the conversation, again up to 1 minute per person.

There is more. As I noted, take a look around on the Liberating Structures and the Mali/Zamora/Caines OneHE webpages for ideas and inspirations. Hopefully, you'll chair more engaging and productive (and less useless) meetings and create more, well, engaging and productive (and less useless) class group work.

About the author: Andreas Broscheid is an assistant director in the Center for Faculty Innovation and a professor of Political Science. He can be reached atbroschax@jmu.edu.

*****

To offer feedback about this Toolbox or any others, please contact Emily Gravett (graveteo@jmu.edu). We always appreciate a conversation with context for feedback. For additional information about the CFI's Teaching Toolboxes, including PDFs of past emails, please visit our webpage.