

Transforming Groups into Successful Teams

One of essential principles of the Team-based Learning (TBL) method is that the teams must be properly formed and managed. Teams need to be constructed in a way that enables them to do the work that they will be asked to do. This involves minimizing barriers to team cohesiveness and then providing the resources they need (in terms of talent, time, etc.). The following suggestions give a brief overview for creating successful teams based on Michaelsen et al. (2004).

Teams are not the groups!

While team work does benefit student learning, it can be hampered by “social loafers,” or students who do not pull their weight and may distract the team. As a result, many students learn to dislike team work and may seek to avoid it. The TBL approach is different. It evolves out of a small team that works together for a period of time, over several sessions. It ensures that members of the team are held accountable for their own learning outside of class. Students who do not prepare adequately before class will perform poorly on the iRAT (individual readiness assessment tests) and will not be able to contribute in a meaningful manner to the tRAT (team readiness assessment tests) and/or application exercises. As a result, most students are quickly motivated to do the assigned work out of class in order to perform well on the iRAT.

How long does it take for a team of students to work together to develop into a team?

As a general rule, it takes about six to eight separate sessions. Thus, from this perspective it is recommended that the team should stay together for at least 15-20 sessions to allow students to profit from the team. Therefore, instructors commonly reassure that teams stay intact for one semester or an entire year.

What should be taken into consideration while creating teams?

- **Minimizing barriers to team cohesiveness** – Previously established relationships between a subset of members in the team, or the potential for a cohesive subteam based on background factors such as nationality, culture or native language are the greatest inhibitors to the development of team cohesiveness. Allowing students to form their own teams practically ensures the existence of potentially disruptive subteams. Thus, a team-formation process should be used that mixes students up in a way that forces the teams to build themselves into teams “from the ground up.”
- **Distributing member resources** – Teams should be as diverse as possible. Each team should contain a mix of student characteristics (e.g., academic ability, race/ethnicity) that might make it easier or more difficult for a student to do well in the course, as well as demographic characteristics like gender. The goal here is to equip teams to succeed by populating them with members who will bring different perspectives to the task.

- **Learning teams should be diverse** – Because TBL assignments involve highly challenging cognitive tasks, teams must be large enough to maximize their intellectual resources, as heterogeneous as possible, and yet not so large as to prevent full participation by all team members. In general, this means the teams should be comprised of 5-7 members; however, many instructors vary the number of team members.
- **Teams should be permanent** – Michaelsen suggests leaving teams intact as long as possible, preferably for the duration of the whole term or academic year. Team development occurs through a series of interactions that enable individual members to test the extent to which they can trust their peers to take them seriously and treat them fairly. In time, most teams will develop more productive interaction patterns. Michaelsen and colleagues suggest most teams require 20-25 hours before they can fully assess and benefit from the resources of all members of the team. It is clearly beneficial when members of the team have worked together over an extended period of time.
- **Teams must be formed by the instructor** – Transforming groups into teams might be a challenging task for instructors. Given the requirements for minimizing barriers to team cohesiveness and evenly distributing resources across teams, the teacher must directly control the team-formation process. See *Team Formation* link before for strategies.

Criteria on which team work is based (from Felder & Brent, 2004):

- Positive interdependence – In order to accomplish the goal, the team members must rely on one another.
- Individual accountability – Each team member is held accountable for doing his or her share of the work and for all of the material in the assignment, regardless of who was principally responsible for it.
- Face-to-face interaction, at least part of the time – Some or all of work must be done by members working together (as opposed to parceling out the assignment to individual members and putting the complete piece together without discussion).
- Appropriate use of interpersonal skills – Team members must practice and receive instruction in leadership, decision-making, communication, conflict management, and other critical teamwork skills.
- Regular self-assessment of team functioning – The team members periodically reflect on what they are doing well as a team, what they could improve, and what (if anything) they will do differently in the future.



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Resources

- Stages of team development: Tuckman's (1965) model is well-known, but not always to students. The Colorado Community College's site has a useful overview of Tuckman's model and activities for in-person and online classes:
<http://studyres.com/doc/19669695/creating-teams>.
- Team exercises for teams: This site provides a list of strategies to get teams to work as teams. It includes a technique called Guided Reciprocal Peer Questioning, which allows students to generate higher order open-ended questions:
<https://teachingcommons.stanford.edu/resources/teaching/small-groups-and-discussions/sample-small-group-exercises>.
- Team formation: Larry Michaelsen (TBL founder) distills the basics of team formation:
<http://tinyurl.com/TBLteamformation>.

Citations

- Michaelsen, M.K., Knight, A.B., Fink, D.L. (Eds). (2004). *Team-based learning, A transformative use of small teams in college teaching*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.
- Felder, R. M., & Brent, R. (2004). "The intellectual development of science and engineering students. Part 2: Teaching to promote growth." *Journal of Engineering Education*, 93(4), 279-291.