10 Creative Ways to Form Groups
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When you think about flipping your classroom or training session, think about using group work. Group work is an excellent way to build community, enhance collaboration, increase engagement and improve critical thinking skills. Incorporating opportunities for your learners to connect with their colleagues on a regular basis establishes a welcoming learning environment and builds their capacity to be successful in groups when they are faced with a long-term project.

Often, instructors and trainers generate discussion by asking their students or participants to turn to their neighbor or get into groups based on how the seats are arranged. While this is convenient, there are more creative ways to divide people into groups. Here are ten ways you can mix up your classroom or training sessions and increase opportunities for your participants to engage with all of their peers, not just those who sit close by.

Idea #1
Put 4 or 5 different kinds of candy in a bag. As students/participants arrive, ask them to choose a piece of candy and get into groups based upon the type of candy they have. For example, you may have a lollipop group, a Tootsie Roll© group, a Hershey’s Kisses© group, and an M&M’s© group.

Idea #2
Ask students/participants to find group members who all share the same birthday month as they do.

Idea #3
Bring a deck of playing cards to the class or training session. Playing cards have many opportunities for group work, depending on your audience. Groups can be arrange by the same number (Aces, Kings, Queens, 10’s, 4’s, etc.) or by the same suit (hearts, clubs, spades, diamonds) or by odd numbers and even numbers. There are so many variations when using a deck of cards. For large groups, you may have to use more than one deck.

Idea #4
Make index cards ahead of time. On each pair of cards, write a famous pair that serves as a way for participants to form pairs. For example, write “peanut butter” on one card and “jelly” on the other. Other ideas: “spaghetti and meatballs” or “Romeo and Juliet” or “October” and “Halloween”. You can choose topics that relate to your topic such as “addition and subtraction” or you may also want to write definitions on one set of cards and vocabulary words on the other. In order for participants to form a pair, they must first be able to correctly identify the word and its definition.

Idea #5
Ask students/participants to form a line at the front of the room. They should line up alphabetically by last name. Then, count off in groups 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, etc. for as many groups as you need. All the ones form a group, all the twos for a group, and continue until all groups are formed.

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Idea #6
Bring a children’s puzzle to class. Give each student one piece of the puzzle as they arrive to class. Their task is to find the person/people whose puzzle piece connects to theirs, and they form a pair or a group.

Idea #7
Do you have a few extra board games lying around? Grab a few of the game pieces from each box and give one of them to each of your participants. Participants find their group members by locating others who have the same pieces from the same game. Games such as Monopoly®, Sorry®, Checkers®, Life®, and Scrabble® could lead to interesting and fun discussions, especially if you have a diverse audience representing more than one generation. Millennials, GenX, GenY, and Baby Boomers have different experiences and knowledge about games based on their childhood, and the stories and memories could be a great way to break the ice, promote sharing, and help participants see different points of view.

Idea #8
“People Bingo” is a great way for participants to get to know each other, move around the room, and form pairs or groups based on common interests or experiences. On a sheet of paper, make a list of interesting characteristics or experiences on the left side of the page, and then leave blank spaces on the right side of the page. On the left side of the page, write a list of criteria, or statements, such as “I have traveled out of the U.S.” or “I enjoy collecting something” or “I supervise employees” or “I enjoy reading.” Then, make copies of the list for each of your participants. Give them time to go around the room and talk with each of their colleagues. As they find a person who meets the criteria, they write down their name in right hand column. If they share the same criteria, they can form a pair or a group, depending on the goals of your activity.

Idea #9
If you decide to use a case study as part of your class or training session, consider adding role playing to the analysis. Assign different roles based on the case, and then give each of your participants a card describing their role. Then, ask them to form groups based upon the role they have been assigned. Give them time to meet each other and discuss their response to the case based upon the role they are supposed to play.

Idea #10
Give your participants a list of five or six scrambled words (or more, based on how many groups you want to form). Ask the participants to unscramble as many words as they can on the list in three minutes. Then form groups based on who unscrambled the same number of words (Group A unscrambled one word, Group B unscrambled two words, etc.).

Some of these approaches may take more time than others to set up, but sometimes half the fun is figuring out what your students or participants have in common with each other and how they approach solving problems together. These approaches could be used at the beginning of the course or training session to help participants get to know each other, or the groups may stay the same for a few weeks as you introduce or reinforce new concepts. No matter how you use groups in your classes or training sessions, these approaches can help build community, create opportunities for collaboration, generate discussion, and enhance critical thinking skills. And they’re fun too!