

PRIMARY ENGLISH TEACHING ASSOCIATION



Jo-Anne Reid

Small groups of students are a familiar scene in Australian primary classrooms. But why are small groups used, and who benefits from them?

Jo-Anne Reid has been working with the ideas and practices around small-group learning for over 20 years. Head of school at Charles Sturt University's School of Teacher Education, she argues that "much of what is seen as 'small-group work' in classrooms today is not group work at all, but is merely individual work planned to be done in group seating arrangements".

So what characterises authentic small-group work? First and foremost, argues Jo-Anne, it is the presence of a *community of practice* — a

not be friends. They generally operate in the middle of a learning cycle in order to respond to a clearly defined task.

Later in the cycle, students might form sharing groups to present their findings and new understandings. In these groups they need to refine their language to meet the more formal demands of presentation. They may be questioned or evaluated by their peers.

Regardless of how a cycle of learning runs, Jo-Anne recommends that students ultimately return to their home groups in order to reflect on their understandings, and on the learning process that they've just been through.

Small is beautiful

grouping of people who share a commitment to completing a common task.

"A number of things happen when students operate in this way", she says. "They're able to build on common interests, but they're also able to benefit from individuals' prior knowledge and expertise. And they're able to do things together that draw upon higher-order thinking skills."

Small groups won't automatically 'work', of course. The purposes of both teacher and learner can't always be served by formulaic arrangements. But Jo-Anne identifies three kinds of groups that can be configured and reconfigured to suit most situations: home groups, work groups and sharing groups.

The names are fairly self-explanatory. Home groups bring together students who are friends or familiars — students who share a first language, for example. Typically, they form early in a learning cycle to discuss and explore a topic that has just been introduced by the teacher. They are safe places where ideas and speculative talk are encouraged.

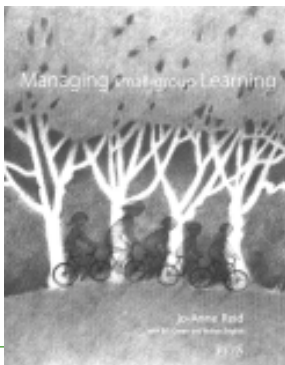
Work groups, on the other hand, are formed to 'do business'. The students in these groups may

The need for reflection applies equally to the teacher, whose program and practices should be reconsidered at the end of every learning cycle. Jo-Anne believes that teachers' need for centrality can be a great obstacle to success in the small-group classroom.

"There are clear points at which teachers need to command the attention of the whole class — topic introductions, task explanations, explicit teaching episodes, or perhaps disciplinary intervention. But these things are all aimed at enabling the students to carry learning forward themselves. In fully functioning small-group classrooms, the teacher holds herself back, and only intervenes to support the independent progress of the group."

In particular, she says, teachers must accept that they need not always be the final 'audience' when students present their work.

"If the purpose of a presentation is only finally to provide the teacher with a basis for marks, then we have a problem. Students need real purposes and real audiences if we want them to see the point of what they're doing."



ABOUT THE BOOK

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with Bill Green and
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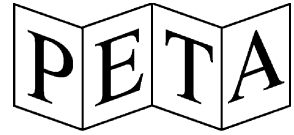
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