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Twenty-one ways of forming groups

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- **Introduction**

Teachers and trainers often need to form groups. Much of the best learning experiences and discovery take place through group activities and discussions. The purpose of this note is to provide a menu of some methods for forming groups. There must be many, not just those which follow. Please write in with comments and additions.

The methods can be grouped as:

- Random;
- pre-allocated;
- mixed;
- homogeneous;
- self-selected; and,
- formed through moving on.

Random groups

These are groups where the membership cannot be foreseen, and where participants know that group members are there by chance.

Random groups are especially good early in a workshop process. They mix people up in a manner which is usually quick, simple and fun. Most involve physical activity which wakes people up, and so leads in well to group discussions and other activities. Good also for the graveyard hour in the afternoon.

1. Numbering

Ask people to call out numbers in sequence up to the number of groups needed, and then to start again, until all have numbered. For example for 4 groups it goes: 1,2,3,4,1,2,3,4,1,2....etc. The ones then form

one group, the twos another, and so on. This is the easiest and most common method. A variant is to number straight through, say 1 to 22, and then to stand divided as odds and evens, and then split each of these into two or three. This has the advantage of more movement, chaos and wake-up activity.

Plus: quick, simple, random; mixes participants across seating groups; no preparation needed.

Minus: no group identity.

2. Number clumps

Prepare four or more sets of numbers in groups which sum to the total number of participants. For example, with 15 participants:

2 of 5, 1 of 2, 1 of 3 = 15

4 of 2, 1 of 3, 1 of 4 = 15

1 of 4, 1 of 5, 1 of 6 = 15

5 of 3 = 15, where 5 of 3 is the desired final outcome.

Plus: active, fun.

Minus: needs preparation; needs improvisation if someone has gone to the loo; no group identity.

Tip: to handle last minute changes in numbers, make the last clump 1 of x (as above), and add or subtract from x in calling out the numbers.

3. Alphabetical names

People group by place of their names in the alphabet. Either ask them to form a circle, and

then separate out groups; or simply let chaos reign having said the required group size.

Plus: active, fun, a good mixer for people on first meeting; people in groups use and learn others' first names, and then have a collective first-name identity.

Tip: (but not essential). Name cards put on beforehand with participants' preferred names.

4. Jungle (also known as fruit salad, vegetable stew etc.)

All sit on chairs in a closed circle. You stand in centre. They name wild animals (or fruits, or vegetables, etc.) in sequence going round the circle. You limit the animal types to the number of groups desired, which are then repeated in sequence (e.g. it might be "Lion, tiger, elephant, monkey - lion, tiger, elephant, monkey - lion ...etc"). Then when the person standing names an animal, all of that animal have to move. The person standing finds a seat, leaving someone else standing, who names another animal. For everyone to move, say 'jungle'.

Plus: random, very active, fun; moves furniture and clears a central space for work on the floor later, leaving chairs in a circle.

Tips: insist that everyone must move; if an animal is left out, get left in the centre yourself and name it; end on a 'jungle' leaving yourself in the centre to tell people to form their groups; limit the number of animals, fruits, or vegetables to four or at most five. People cannot usually remember more, and the more there are, the less activity there will be in changing seats; to form six, eight or ten groups, have three, four, or five jungle animals. After naming, divide half and half into female and male. Check everyone is clear. Proceed with jungle (lionesses and lions all move together), but at the end each animal forms two groups (lionesses and lions separate).

5. Birthdays

Participants form a circle by sequence of birthday. Proceed as for alphabetical names.

Plus: fun, can lead into identity by signs of the zodiac, reflections on seasonality and so on.

6. Postcards or jigsaws (random)

Cut up as many postcards as groups to be formed, with one piece for each member. Jumble these up. Participants are each given or take one part, and then try to find their counterparts to make the picture.

Plus: fun, active, group can have the identity of whatever is on the card.

7. Farmyard

Write animal names to form groups on slips. Jumble them up. Hand them out or participants pick them up. Participants then act out their animal, both non-verbally and with animal noises, until they find each other. A variant is that for each animal there is a hunter/shepherd appointed for each animal, briefed outside the room, and then responsible for finding and gathering her/his animals.

Plus: fun, active, group has identity.

8. Neighbours

Ask participants to discuss with their neighbours where they are sitting, one-to-one, or in groups of threes, or at the tables where they have sat down.

Plus: good for buzzes; people often sit next to people they know and are comfortable with.

Minus: not fully random, and less of a mixer than other random methods.

Tip: With chairs without tables, encourage people each time to move their chairs so that they face each other. With threes, ask them to make an equilateral triangle. Moving chairs to face each other makes a big difference to the quality of quick buzzes.

Pre-allocated groups

These are groups where the individual composition of each group is decided in advance, with or without some consultation.

Pre-allocated groups are useful where group composition and chemistry is really important, and especially if there are some difficult group members. Appropriate when prolonged group work is to follow. Groups for extended fieldwork are an example. Pre-allocation can assure an appropriate mix of disciplines, genders, experience and personality.

9. Announce or post up

The easy, lazy and obvious way. Announce who will be in which group, or post up a list.

10. Postcards or jigsaws (planned)

Cut up postcards or pictures as for (6) above. Write the names of participants on the back so that they will form pre-planned groups. Hand out carefully to each person. Participants then seek out cut outs that fit and form their groups.

Plus: for forming field teams this has the advantages of helping the team find itself through fun; and unselfconsciously giving each team an identity (the lions, the monkeys, the elephants...).

Tip: postcards of wild animals are good for team identities.

11. Farmyard (planned)

Write animals on slips as for (7) above. Write the names of participants on the back so that they will form pre-planned groups. Participants then act out their animal and flock together.

Mixed groups

These are groups which contain a deliberate mix, specifying sorts of people to be in each group but not individually who those people should be. Mixed groups can ensure a range of points of view, and are more participatory than pre-allocated groups. They are useful for learning the points of views, knowledge, experience and skills of people from other backgrounds. The knowledge that people who are strangers, junior, young, female, etc. have been deliberately mixed tends to add to their voice and others' listening, especially if stated at the start as a reason for the grouping.

12. Meet strangers

Ask people to sit with others whom they have not met. This can be used when people come into a room, or at any stage when substantial numbers of people have still not met each other.

Plus: usually encourages people to introduce themselves, meet others.

Tip: best with small groups of two to four, with three usually a good number.

13. Mix-it-yourself

Give the desired mix and ask participants to form their own groups. For example:

- Gender Balance. Groups of 4 each to have two women and two men.
- Junior-Senior. Groups of 6 each to have two person from headquarters, two from field offices, and two from the front-line.
- Disciplinary Spread. Groups of 5 each to include at least one social anthropologist and one economist.

14. Share the experts

Ask those with special knowledge, experience or skill to raise their hands (e.g. people who have managed and analysed a questionnaire survey, facilitated participatory mapping, done a cost-benefit analysis for real, etc.), and then others to cluster so that each group has one or more with that experience, which they can then share.

Plus: good for participatory sharing of knowledge, experience or skills.

15. Take out the talkers

If a few people are dominant in groups, inhibiting others, ask them out of the groups for a special discussion or task. The smaller quieter groups left should then participate better. Those taken out can often make a good contribution in some other task or discussion.

Plus: used well this can help some of the more timid and junior to express themselves.

Homogeneous groups

Homogeneous groups are often useful towards the end of workshops when people need to work out implications and action. They can also be a stage in analysis or negotiation, followed by intergroup presentations and discussions.

16. Focus groups

A focus group brings together people with similar characteristics e.g. occupation, type of organisation, country or region or origin or experience, age, seniority, sex.

17. Interest groups

These are groups which come together through common stated interests or knowledge, for example those concerned with health, or agriculture, or credit etc.

Self-grouping

Self-grouping is where choice is devolved to participants. Convene-your-own-group, and sign-up, are both good for groups which are to investigate different topics, since they allow each individual to express a preference.

18. Pick a team

This is common among children, for example picking a football team. Participatory, but can be invidious and hard on those picked last.

Tip: best used light-heartedly for games; speed the selection to minimise embarrassment.

19. Convene your own group

Participants are asked about topics they wish to work on. Those with ideas announce them and seek recruits. Others choose which group to join.

Plus: allows the expression of strong preferences and leadership; gives a range of choice; good for choosing topics for fieldwork.

Minus: Can mean that an important topic is not covered if under-subscribed.

20. Sign up

As for (19), but participants write their names up on a board to show their options.

Plus: less publicly face-to-face than (19); gives more time for the choice.

Move on

Finally, a method which crosscuts the various types. To mix up groups which are already formed.

21. Move on

Ask one or more person from each group to move on to a new group, either together or splitting up as they go. Those to move can variously be:

- self-chosen (giving those who wish a chance to move).
- designated to be random (e.g. names earliest or latest in the alphabet).
- specified (e.g. skill- or knowledge-related as if the experts in share-the-experts all move to new groups).
- whoever is talking most (which makes this a joke, and the new group is warned!).
- involve everyone in turn, one or two at a time, through a series of changes.

So second, third etc. rounds of movement can be made. (the Margolis wheel is a special case of move-on). Move-on is, I think, rather underused.

Plus: can be used to reduce dominance by a few talkers; help participants to get to know more people; enable a few experts to share their knowledge by rotating around groups.

Minus: can disturb a group which is getting on well. A group may also not wish to lose its main talker!

May I request and challenge anyone who sees this to add to and amend the list, and to write to *RRA Notes* with ideas and experiences. I will then try to send you an updated version.

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