
**Collaborative
Learning
Technique**

3

Buzz Groups

Characteristics

Group Size	4–6
Time on Task	10–15 MINUTES
Duration of Groups	SINGLE SESSION

**Description and
Purpose**

Buzz Groups are teams of four to six students that are formed quickly and extemporaneously to respond to course-related questions. Each group can respond to one or more questions, and all groups can discuss the same or different questions. Discussion is informal. Students do not need to arrive at consensus but instead simply exchange ideas. Typically, Buzz Groups serve as a warm-up to whole-class discussion. They are effective for generating information and ideas in a short period of time. By dividing the whole class into small groups, more students have the opportunity to express their thoughts. Because students have had a chance to practice their comments and to increase their repertoire of ideas in the Buzz Group, the whole-class discussion that follows is often richer and more participatory.

Preparation

Prior to coming to class, decide what the Buzz Groups will discuss. Craft one or more engaging discussion prompts that tend toward the conceptual rather than factual and that will stimulate an open-ended examination of ideas. Try responding to the questions yourself so that you are confident that they will generate a variety of responses. Choose the manner in which you are going to present the prompt questions, such as on a worksheet, presentation slide, or whiteboard.

Procedure

1. Form groups and announce the discussion prompts and time limit.
2. Ask group members to exchange ideas in response to the prompts.
3. Check periodically to see whether groups are still actively engaged and focused on the assigned topic. If off topic, shorten the time limit. If on topic but the time has ended, consider extending the limit for a few minutes.

4. Ask the students to return to whole-class discussion and restate the prompt to begin.

Online Implementation: Buzz Groups

Timing: Synchronous

Tools: IM, text, teleconference

In the online environment, the impromptu, spontaneous, low-threat character of Buzz Groups can encourage normally shy students to participate. Moreover, since all comments appear to be of equal weight, students who might normally over participate are less likely to appear to be dominating the discussion.

Buzz Groups require synchronicity and speed of response, so to implement this CoLT online create

several chat rooms, divide students into groups, and assign each group to a room. Announce the time limit, post the prompt, and ask students to exchange ideas informally without trying to come to consensus. When the time limit is up, close the activity.

Just as in an onsite classroom, Buzz Groups online can get out of control with students getting off task or contributing inappropriate responses. Therefore, make sure you are monitoring groups by moving among the different chat rooms and be prepared to intervene if necessary.

Examples

The Nature and Origin of Major Social Problems (Traditional Onsite)

Professor Jen Derr was frustrated with the superficial quality of discussion in her lower-division sociology class. Despite her efforts to engage students in meaningful dialogue about significant social problems, students avoided controversy and offered only safe, predictable comments. In an attempt to move a discussion on gender issues to a more meaningful level, she decided to experiment using Buzz Groups as a warm-up to whole-class discussion. To introduce the topic of gender discrimination, she divided the room into male and female students and then asked them to subdivide into groups of four of the same gender. Her hope was that at least some students might have personal experiences related to this topic and that they would feel safe sharing these experiences in a small group of same-sex peers. On a presentation slide, she posted the prompt: *Can you recall a situation in which you experienced or observed gender-based discrimination? What did you do?* After about eight minutes, she posted an additional prompt: *What strategies and techniques could you use to confront and combat gender-based discrimination?*

The groups were soon engaged in spirited discussion. After fifteen minutes, she stopped the Buzz Groups and shifted the focus back to the whole class but asked students to remain in the male or female sides of the room. She alternated between male and female groups, asking a volunteer from each group to report out to the whole class one or two of the experiences their group found most

compelling. Following each report, she invited comments from students on the other side of the room. Professor Derr found that students felt empowered and supported by the presence of their same-sex peers. The whole-class discussion proceeded at a level of depth and with a sense of immediacy that had been lacking when she had tried to generate whole-class discussion on this topic in previous semesters.



Leadership Issues in Community Colleges (Traditional Onsite)

A professor of a graduate-level seminar containing students who were primarily upper-level college administrators had been accustomed to lecturing about a topic first and then moving to whole-class discussion. She decided to reverse this order and to use Buzz Groups to introduce students to the topic of mergers and consolidations in the community college sector. Among the list of questions she prepared for each group to discuss were: *What is the difference between a consolidation and a merger? Have you had any experience with consolidations or mergers? What are some of the issues that would attend a consolidation or merger?* These were open-ended questions, and she hoped that students would be able to draw on their own experiences in college administration to respond to them.

It soon became apparent that several students within each Buzz Group had experienced consolidations and mergers on their campuses and had strong opinions. When Buzz Groups reported out, the professor used group comments as the basis for a whole-class discussion. She was able to integrate the information that she had intended to cover in the lecture by offering comments such as, *What Carol is describing is an example of what is called _____*. In the whole-class discussion, students explored the political issues, organizational problems, and personnel dilemmas associated with consolidations and mergers at a level that was deep and engaging. The Buzz Group discussions had provided a good introduction to the topic by allowing students to connect theoretical constructs to work-related situations that had occurred in their professional lives. Furthermore, by integrating what would have otherwise been her lecture on theory into the whole-class discussion, the professor was able to offer students a framework for understanding their personal experiences that illuminated the importance of connecting theory to practice.



Introduction to Organic Chemistry (Online Course)

A professor decided to use Buzz Groups during a prescheduled synchronous session to introduce students to volatile organic compounds. He asked students

to meet in chat rooms, posted a list with the order of participation (he chose alphabetical order), and presented three prompts, one at a time, over the course of the activity: (1) *Name some common chemical compounds in your household.* (2) *Why is it important to know about these compounds?* (3) *What are some of the potential health effects of exposure to these compounds?* (4) *How can individuals limit exposure to these compounds?*

He allowed the discussion to run for about five minutes per prompt. He then gave them an introduction to the main topics they would study throughout the term.



Introduction to Media Studies (Large Lecture)

This class enrolled 175 students and was taught in an auditorium-style lecture hall. The instructor began each semester with a lecture titled “Popular Culture as a Window for Understanding American Society.” To engage students and start developing a sense of classroom community, the instructor used a Buzz Group. He did a quick count-off of the rows (A-1, A-2; B-1, B-2; C1- C2, and so forth) and then instructed the students to pair with the students sitting next to them and then work with the pair sitting either in front or behind them in the like-lettered row to share ideas in response to the prompt, *Which influence is stronger, and why? The public’s influence on the media? Or the media’s influence on the public?* He kept the activity short, approximately five minutes, and then asked for volunteers to summarize the group’s views.

Variations and Extensions

- Assign the groups a task other than responding to questions. Instead, ask them to generate questions or ideas, share information, or solve problems.
- Hold the discussion without formal or structured questions but rather as an opportunity to discuss the course texts in general or a specific assigned reading. This variation, called relaxed Buzz Groups, is simply a conversation, and students do not report out. Students are required, however, to keep the discussion focused on issues from the readings. They can question, highlight passages, look for the thesis, and identify flaws (Brookfield & Preskill, 1999).
- After each Buzz Group has completed an initial discussion, have two Buzz Groups join together and continue the conversation as a single, larger group. Groups can combine again, with each group doubling in size at successive iterations. This variation, called Snowball Discussion (Brookfield & Preskill, 1999), is good for allowing students to network with their

peers and to hear many diverse views and opinions. Furthermore, students generate additional ideas at each new combination, so the conversation becomes more complex.

**Observations and
Advice**

- This is a good technique for introducing a topic and having students engage in semistructured conversations about important issues in the field. However, the informal, minimally structured nature of Buzz Groups can allow students to get off task and discussions to degenerate into aimless chitchat. Avoid this problem by creating engaging, open-ended, multiple-response discussion prompts and by enforcing a time frame. Walking around the room monitoring group progress and offering procedural guidance as needed may also help to keep discussion focused.
- Because of the unstructured nature of Buzz Groups, students might miss important issues (Brookfield & Preskill, 1999), so be prepared to offer these ideas during the closure period.
- In the Snowball variation in which students combine groups multiple times, adding new students and new ideas each time, students may feel shaken up or disjointed by the process (Brookfield & Preskill, 1999). Ameliorate this by alerting students to this in advance and by emphasizing that the purpose is to meet many students and to generate lots of information in a short period of time.
- For the reporting out stage, go around the room and ask a representative from each group to share one of the group's most important points with the whole class, contributing only ideas that have not yet been mentioned. Invite students to comment on how different groups' ideas compare and contrast.
- If the Buzz Groups responded to different questions, an alternative report-out strategy is to have each group serve as a panel. Each student who serves on the panel can share one of the major themes or discussion points generated in his or her Buzz Group. The whole class is then invited to ask panel members questions.
- When Buzz Groups report out, instructors typically receive sufficient insight into how much or what students have learned in their discussions. To gain additional feedback, consider using Directed Paraphrasing (CAT 23, Angelo & Cross, 1993, pp. 232–235). Ask students to summarize and restate the most important ideas or information from their Buzz Group discussion, imagining that the paraphrase would provide a succinct summary for a student who was not able to attend class that day. These paraphrases will illustrate how deeply students have understood and internalized the

information generated in the discussions. These written summaries may be used for grading purposes.

- If the Buzz Groups were conducted in online chat groups, then the instructor could copy and paste the chat transcripts into word clouds (e.g., using Wordle), which give greater prominence to words that have been used more frequently to give everyone a quick overall sense of each discussion. Current links to word cloud-generating software include Tagul (<http://tagul.com/>), Wordle (<http://www.wordle.net/>), and Tagxedo (<http://www.tagxedo.com>).

- Primary Resources** Brookfield, S. D., & Preskill, S. (1999). *Discussion as a way of teaching: Tools and techniques for democratic classrooms*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, pp. 104–105.
- McKeachie, W. J. (1994). *Teaching tips: A guidebook for the beginning college teacher*, 9th ed. Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath, p. 44.