

Expert Groups

Purpose

Expert groups are a great tool to use when a teacher has limited time to cover complex material or when the value of learning the content is enhanced by having the students delve deeper into the subject matter. Expert groups can be used for a single class exercise or for an extended period of time. In either case, groups of students in the class will become the class experts on particular topics or in specific content areas.

Forming Expert Groups

To form expert groups, first determine the content you want to develop as class expertise. This is an important step, because only the most important topics that warrant further study and research are chosen in this exercise. For example, if the class is studying literature (such as any of the works of C. S. Lewis), you might designate expert groups in character, plot, theme, and setting. Students would be assigned to an expert group and spend time studying their area of expertise. Then, either in a single class session or over several weeks, the students in the character expert group, for example, would be responsible for analyzing the characters in the literature and helping the other students in the class to understand the importance of characterization in literature.

Once you have decided on the important areas of content for expertise development, this list will determine the number of groups you need. Next, give each expert group a name, assign students to each expert group, and give the students clear directions for the type of investigation you want them to conduct in order to become experts in the area assigned.

Implementing Expert Groups

To successfully implement expert groups, you will need to be clear about the topics, content, or areas for study by the groups and provide clear directions for how and when each expert group will interact with the whole class. You may want to assign students roles within the expert groups. The roles could include facilitator, fact checker, recorder, and timekeeper. All the students in an expert group should be charged with the responsibility of presenting, because all members of the group can be called on at any time to speak about the group's topic. The students will need time to meet in their expert groups to research the assigned content area or to synthesize their research and develop consensus about how they will represent their expertise when called on to do so.

The following ideas suggest different ways to implement expert groups:

- **Expert group commentary** Each expert group, after spending time researching the topic, becomes the class authority on its topic. In this way, you can refer to members of the expert group to give facts or opinions when the class is discussing related topics.
- **Expert group jigsaw** Members of expert groups, after researching and synthesizing their group's topic, are reassigned to other groups, so that each new group includes one member from each expert group. The students are responsible for bringing the particular expertise of their expert group to share with or inform the new group. Additional information on the jigsaw process is available in the handout "Using the Jigsaw Process" (Document #: TX002392) available at smp.org/LivinginChrist.



- **Expert group presentation** Members of an expert group form a research and study group charged with presenting relevant information, data, or opinions to the class. In this way, the students share the responsibility of whole-class research in small groups.

Assessing Expert Groups

Expert groups can be assessed based on the depth of the information gathered or research conducted to bring each member of the group to expert status. Expert groups can also be assessed by considering the value the group adds to the overall class learning and understanding of the material covered using this instructional strategy.

Expert groups are a valuable classroom instructional strategy that helps to build student confidence, class collaboration, and expertise in chosen topics.

