

The little guide to:
GROUP-WORK



THE PBL-DRAWER
with Loni Bergqvist

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WELCOME!



Hello, you!

This edition of The PBL-Drawer is about a really important topic that I think a lot of teachers want to get better at, both in Project-Based Learning and in everyday lessons:

GROUP-WORK.

Not because it's hard to put kids into groups. But because getting kids to actually work well together takes much more than giving them a task and saying: *let's get started*.

I think you know the feeling well. Some students dive straight in. Others pull back. Someone usually takes over and a few others disappear until the project is over. Somewhere in the middle, you are left thinking: *maybe my kids just aren't ready for PBL yet since they can't work together*.

Here's what I've come to believe after being a PBL teacher myself and supporting schools for 12 years:

We don't work with PBL because kids are already good at collaboration.

We work with PBL so kids **can become** good at collaboration.

The difference really matters. Group work isn't a barrier to PBL. It's one of the most important things that PBL can teach. But it requires a commitment to explicitly teach the skills required to collaborate, reflect on collaboration and make time each day to help students become better at it.

In this pack you'll find some insight into how to help your students work better together.

As with adults, working on collaboration is a lifelong process but I hope this gives you a few concrete tools that can be used on Monday morning with your students to help them understand each other better, find the benefit of working together and experience the joy of finishing a project where everyone has contributed.

I hope it makes a difference in your classroom.

With head, hands and heart,
Loni



A HELPFUL FRAMEWORK



Group-work is one of the most common teaching methods in schools around the world. And yet research consistently shows it's also one of the hardest to make work well.

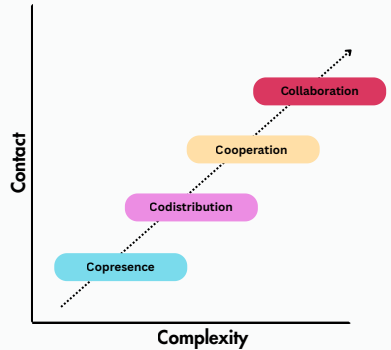
The core problem can be that we assume group-work happens naturally when we put students together or that group-work looks one specific way. According to Danish researchers Karnøe and Riis, group-work can be described in four different ways:

Collaboration: students are deeply interdependent, building understanding together, negotiating and thinking out loud with each other.

Cooperation: students divide the task and work in parallel toward a shared goal. Less contact, but still connected.

Codistribution: some students collaborate closely within the group while others work more independently alongside them. A hybrid that's actually very common.

Copresence: students sit together but essentially work alone, drawing on each other only when they get stuck.



Karnøe, J. K. & Riis, M. (2026).

None of these are wrong or bad but the real magic of group-work in PBL is often found in *collaboration* and when students really feel they need each other's strengths and ideas to get the project done at a high quality. True collaboration is not easy to do- for children or adults. It's also the most effective mode to achieving a deadline or getting work finished. But it is the most rewarding and teaches us most about ourselves and working with other people.

Collaboration requires:

- a task that everyone feels invested in
- a real need for the ideas and input from multiple people
- time to talk, share and navigate a variety of ideas
- structures that promote equity so all group members participate

Working with group-work in this way, is complex but it is exactly what PBL is designed for.

Reference:

Karnøe, J. K. & Riis, M. (2026). Group work in primary school: cooperation, collaboration and beyond. Proceedings of the Fifteenth International Conference on Networked Learning 2026.



GROUP-WORK: PLANNING



Most group-work that reaches a level of “collaboration” in Project-Based Learning begins in the planning process where we can intentionally build in group-work from the start.

Here are 4 important things to consider before designing your groups:

DO WE (REALLY) NEED GROUPS?

Not every task benefits from group-work.

Before you form groups, ask yourself: *does this task genuinely require more than one person?*

If a student could do it just as well alone, they probably should.

Group-work earns its place when the task is complex enough that different perspectives and skills genuinely make the outcome better, and when the learning itself happens through the exchange between students.

Being selective about when you use groups makes the times you do use them more meaningful.

Do less group-work, commit to doing it better.

WHAT TYPE OF GROUP?

There are different ways to form groups and the **task** should determine which approach you use.

Parallel Groups:

All groups complete the same task with the same requirements. Example: every group creates a poster, writes the same type of text or builds the same product.

Interest Groups:

Each group has a different role or task that contributes to a shared outcome. Example: in a theater project one group works on costumes, another on set design and another on marketing.

A note on combining both:

Parallel Groups can work best for the start of the project so all students work with the same academic content and Interest Groups to prepare for Exhibition.

WHAT SIZE OF GROUP?

The **task** should determine the size of the group, not the other way around.

Large groups sound inclusive but often mean some students have nothing to do or never get heard.

Small groups feel efficient but are vulnerable when someone is absent or when the dynamic between two students is difficult.

A good starting point is three to four students for most tasks. Bigger than that requires a task complex enough to genuinely need everyone. Smaller than that requires students who are confident enough to carry equal weight.

Ask yourself: *how many people does this task actually need?*

ROLES IN THE GROUP?

PBL gives us the great opportunity to match process with how things are done in the real-world.

Giving students real-world roles does two things at once. It distributes the work meaningfully so everyone has something to contribute, and it helps students understand that collaboration in the real world requires different skills and perspectives working together toward a shared goal.

In Parallel Groups, each student can take on a different role within the production of one product: *Project manager, documenter, researcher, designer, editor, presenter, quality checker.*

In Interest Groups, the group itself becomes a role within the bigger production: *Actors, camera crew, editors, sound designers, marketing team, directors.*

THE BEST GROUPS DON'T HAPPEN BY ACCIDENT.

Great group-work that leads to collaboration requires a lot of design and decision making to set students up for the best possible conditions. Deciding to invest time into planning group-work leads to a better foundation during the project.



GROUP-WORK: CHALLENGES



When a project has started, there can be many challenges that come up. Often challenges can be viewed as symptoms to other issues and the solutions can include many things.

CHALLENGE	WHY IT'S HAPPENING	SOMETHING TO TRY
One student does all the work while the others do little	The group hasn't agreed on who is responsible for what. It's easier for one student to take over than to stop and redistribute the work.	Assign explicit roles before the project starts and check in on them regularly. The Group Collaboration Profile helps students understand their own tendencies and what they bring to a group. See Tool 1.
A few students are quiet and their ideas are not heard	The group moves forward on the first idea suggested, usually from the most confident student. Others don't push back or offer alternatives because there's no process that makes space for everyone's thinking.	Before discussing, ask every student to write down their ideas independently first. Then share one at a time before evaluating any of them. A simple brainstorm protocol gives every voice equal weight before the group decides on a direction.
Students are physically all over the place	The group hasn't established what it means to be in a group together. Nobody has talked about where to sit, how to face each other or what it looks like to actually work together.	Use the Group Contract to make explicit agreements about how the group works together physically as well as academically. See Tool 2.
The group is sitting there not sure what to do next	There is no shared plan for the work session. Students are waiting for the teacher to tell them what comes next rather than owning the process themselves.	Start every session with five minutes where the group updates their SCRUM board and agrees on what they're doing today. See Tool 3. Have each group share to the class.
Students say they're done when they clearly aren't	Students don't have a clear picture of what done actually looks like. Without a shared overview of the product they default to finishing individual tasks and checking out.	Make the product and the standards visible from the start. The SCRUM board helps the group track what's actually finished versus what still needs work. Include a Project Check-List so groups have a clear overview. See Tool 3.
One student is disrupting the group	This student often doesn't know how to contribute meaningfully. Disruption is a way of being present when there's no clear role or task.	Give this student a specific and valued role. This usually requires direction from you as the teacher. The student can also fulfill a role within the entire project like making a film about the process, drawing an entrance sign or contributing with something they are already good at.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

1. Is the purpose and task of the work clear to students?
2. Is there enough time and support for all students to contribute?
3. What do individual students need to be successful in collaboration?



GROUP-WORK: REFLECTION



We do not learn from experience. We learn from reflecting on experience.

-John Dewey

GROUP REFLECTION



Groups write down the answers to:

- What did we do well as a group today?
- What went wrong or didn't go well?
- Did we stick to our agreements in our contract? Why or why not?
- What can we do better next time?

If we are serious about helping students improve at collaboration, we must give it the same weight as improving in an academic skill or mastering a subject. Creating intentional ways of reflecting on group-work during a project is essential to helping students understand what they're doing well and what they can get better at.

CLASS CELEBRATIONS



The class shares out:

- Something that someone did well today.
- Someone who helped someone else.
- Someone who showed great group-work and why.
- A great idea someone had or a risk someone took.

INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION



Students write down their answers:

- What did I do well in my group today?
- What went wrong or didn't go well?
- Did I stick to our group's agreements in our contract? Why or why not?
- What can I do better next time?

TEACHER OBSERVATIONS



Throughout the work period...

Write on a large poster each time you see a group (or individual) listening to each other, asking questions or working out conflict.

Example: Finn asked his group before editing the film to be sure his idea was shared with the others.

Share out the list with the class focusing only on things that worked.

BUILD THE ROUTINE:

- Clean up 15 minutes earlier before class is finished
- Create a calm environment by having all groups back in their seats
- Follow-up** the next day with ideas for how students can work better in their groups based on the reflection or discussion



GROUP-ASSESSMENT



Assessing each group's development in group-work is important for providing them specific feedback for understanding what they are good at and what they can do to improve. Using a rubric can be a helpful way to create a common language for a group to understand how they can get better.

	CO-PRESENCE	CO-OPERATION	CO-DISTRIBUTION	COLLABORATION
Contribution	Students are physically present but working individually. One or two students do most of the work.	Students have divided the task and are each completing their own part.	Some students work closely together while others work more independently alongside the group.	All students contribute meaningfully and responsibly to the shared work.
Communication	Students rarely talk about the work. Conversation is social or off topic.	Students communicate when necessary to coordinate tasks but not to think together.	Some students discuss ideas closely while others check in periodically.	Students talk regularly about the work, build on each other's ideas and think out loud together.
Decision making	One student makes decisions or decisions happen by default. Others don't engage.	Students divide decisions according to who owns which task.	Some decisions are made together, others are made individually within sub-groups.	The group has a shared process for making decisions and all voices are heard before deciding.
Listening	Students do not respond to each other's ideas. Ideas are stated but not picked up.	Students listen when coordinating but don't build on each other's thinking.	Some students listen and build on each other closely. Others listen intermittently.	Students actively listen, respond to and build on each other's ideas throughout the work session.
Reflection	The group does not reflect on how they are working together.	The group reflects briefly if prompted by the teacher.	Some students reflect on the group dynamic. Others focus primarily on the task.	The group regularly stops to reflect on how they are working together and adjusts accordingly.

USE IT IN PRACTICE:

- Watch a video of a show like LEGO Masters or Master Chef Junior. Talk about the different categories on the rubric and have students identify when they see examples of each.
- Use the rubric to help groups identify what they want to get better at.
- Use the rubric at the end of a work-period for self-assessment.



STUDENT REFLECTION



Elevating the skills of group-work to the same status of academic learning requires that students have time to understand how they individually relate to a group. Using a rubric that is written in "I statements" can help set collaboration goals from the beginning of a project and have a useful way to reflect on development and progress as the project runs.

	I'M STILL WORKING ON IT	I'M GETTING THERE	I GOT THIS
Contribution	I was mostly working on my own today.	I did my part but didn't always check if everyone else had something to do.	I did my part and helped make sure everyone in the group had something to do.
Communication	I didn't really talk with my group about the work.	I talked with my group sometimes when we needed to figure something out.	I shared my ideas and talked with everyone in my group about what we were doing.
Decision making	I didn't really get to say what the group decided.	I got to decide some things but not everything.	Everyone in the group got to say something before we decided what to do.
Listening	I didn't really listen to what the others said.	I listened to some people in my group but not everyone.	I listened to everyone's ideas and tried to use what they said.
Reflection	I didn't think about how our group worked today.	I thought a little bit about how we worked together.	I can say one thing that went well and one thing our group can do better next time.

USE IT IN PRACTICE:

- Focus on one row at a time. At the end of one work period, print off the row (ex. Listening) and have students reflect on how that went today.
- Use the rubric in one-to-one Check-In's when you speak with individual students.
- Make it a part of School/Home Conferences to share where students are in collaboration skills.



HOW TO USE THE TOOLS:

The tools in this edition are designed to be used tomorrow with students to support group-work.

The tools are not meant to be “one-off” activities but structures that can be used every day during PBL and in daily teaching.

Students will need instruction, support and time to get good at using these tools- so choosing one and doing it well is often a good first step.

The tools might require some editing or adjustments to fit the age and needs of your students.



GROUP COLLABORATION PROFILES

What it is: A quiz that matches students with one of five animals based on their collaboration style. A poster to reference the animals.

What it does: Gives students a shared language for talking about how they work in groups. Helps them recognize their own strengths and understand their teammates better.

When to use it: Before the project starts or when forming new groups.

TOOLS

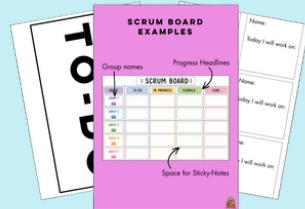


THE GROUP CONTRACT

What it is: A template that helps groups make explicit agreements about how they will work together.

What it does: Gives the group a shared reference point to return to when things get difficult. Covers decision making, disagreement, expectations and asking for help.

When to use it: At the very start of a project, ideally after completing the Group Collaboration Profile.



SCRUM-BOARD TEMPLATE

What it is: A printable template with the columns: To Do, In Progress, Feedback and Done.

What it does: Gives the group a visible overview of the project. Students write tasks on paper or Post-It's and move them across the columns as work progresses. Makes it easy for everyone in the group to see what needs to happen and who is responsible for what.

When to use it: Set it up at the very start of the project and update it at the beginning and end of every work session.

PLANNING TEMPLATE



As part of your PBL planning process, use this tool to help your team think through how and why groups will be used in your project.

**REASON FOR
GROUPS**

TYPE

SIZE

ROLES

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

What students might need extra supports to work in the groups we've planned?

What can we do already to support them? (Special roles? Extra adult?)

How can we bring our groups closer to match the world outside of school?



