THE K. PATRICIA CROSS ACADEMY

## INSTRUCTOR'S GUIDE

Teaching Technique 38

# Affinity Grouping

**ACTIVITY TYPE**

- Graphic Organizing
- Reciprocal Teaching

**TEACHING PROBLEM ADDRESSED**

- Low Motivation/Engagement
- Lack of Participation

**LEARNING TAXONOMIC LEVEL**

- Application: Analysis and Critical Thinking
- Human Dimension

THE K. PATRICIA CROSS ACADEMY

# Affinity Grouping

In *Affinity Grouping (AG)*, individual students generate ideas and identify common themes. Then, students form groups to sort and organize the ideas accordingly.

1. Clarify your teaching purpose and learning goals for the *Affinity Grouping*
2. Identify the learning task's underlying problem and prompt
3. Set assignment parameters (including time allowed)
4. Develop a plan for learning assessment or grading
5. Communicate assignment parameters to students
6. Implement the technique
7. Reflect upon the activity and evaluate its effectiveness

# Step-By-Step Instructions

In this section we provide you with guidance on each of the seven steps involved as you consider this technique.

## STEP 1: CLARIFY YOUR TEACHING PURPOSE AND LEARNING GOALS

*Affinity Grouping* is a teaching technique that involves brainstorming and group organization of the ideas. It allows students to unpack a complicated idea and to quickly generate new ideas about a topic. *Affinity Grouping* can help student teams build groupings, or separate themes, from the different pieces the individuals generated. Because students work together to identify clusters of ideas and information shared by several people, this technique can help build group consensus.

## STEP 2: IDENTIFY THE LEARNING TASK'S UNDERLYING PROBLEM AND PROMPT

Think of a complex topic for students to explore. Do your own brainstorming to make sure the topic stimulates a sufficient number of ideas that can be organized into clusters. Identify an area where all groups of students have a flat surface with ample room to move slips of paper around the whiteboard or wall space with taped-up flip chart paper works well for sticky notes; large tables can be used for slips of paper or index cards.

## STEP 3: SET ASSIGNMENT PARAMETERS

In considering the assignment parameters, you will want to consider how long you will leave groups working to compile their results. Typically 15 to 30 minutes will be sufficient, depending upon the complexity of the task.

## STEP 4: DEVELOP A PLAN FOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT OR GRADING

If you want to use the activity as a grade, consider whether it would work best as part of a participation or engagement grade. To score, you can use a simple plus, check, or minus to gauge for completeness.

## STEP 5: COMMUNICATE ASSIGNMENT PARAMETERS TO STUDENTS

In addition to presenting the prompt, the teacher can clarify that individual ideas must be on separate cards. The teacher can also suggest that initially, the goal is simply to generate as many ideas as possible. The teacher can also suggest that students be flexible and value the diversity of opinions among team members. The sorting process can be done silently, so it may be beneficial to remind students to be silent as they sort; it does not have to be silent, though, so teachers can strive to ensure that no members dominate the sorting process; for example, if a student seems to be taking over, the teacher can suggest that team members take turns sorting ideas, in round-robin fashion.

# Step-By-Step Instructions (CON'T)

## STEP 6: IMPLEMENT THE TECHNIQUE

- Distribute enough 3 x 5 cards, slips of paper, or sticky notes so that each student can have several pieces for brainstorming ideas.
- State the category, issue, or problem to be explored and provide a time limit for the activity.
- Organize the students into groups, but then ask each student to separately and silently brainstorm ideas, writing one idea per piece of paper.
- When time is up, ask one team member to collect the cards or sticky notes, mix them up, and spread them out (or stick them) on a flat surface.
- Instruct the teams to discuss and arrange the cards or sticky notes into related groups.
- Have students create a title or heading for each grouping that best describes the theme of each group of items.

## STEP 7: REFLECT UPON THE ACTIVITY AND EVALUATE ITS EFFECTIVENESS

When reflecting on the activity and how effective it was, consider the following questions:

- Did the technique match the course learning goals and objectives?
- Did it meet my goals for this learning module?
- Was it appropriate for the students?
- Did students understand their roles and responsibilities?
- Did the technique keep the students engaged?
- Did it promote student learning?
- Did it provide me with information about student understanding?

If you answer yes to all or most of these questions, next consider how you might improve the activity for the next use.

# Support Materials

The materials in this section are intended to help you with the process of implementing this technique. For *Affinity Grouping*, we are providing you with ideas to vary it.

## VARIATIONS

- This technique can be especially effective when groups have a complex decision to make, such as determining a topic to research as a group, and are experiencing difficulty reaching consensus. Have students brainstorm ideas for the topic, write them on the slips of paper, and then sort them into categories.
- If there are multiple teams, have them review each other's categories; sometimes a fresh eye can bring clarity.
- Have only a few of the team members—instead of the whole group—arrange the cards or sticky notes into related groups while other team members observe without commenting. When they are finished, ask other team members to review the groups and make suggestions for any reorganization.
- Extend this teaching technique by using it as preparation for another.

# Technique Template

Following are two templates to assist you as you think through how you might implement this technique in your own class. The first is a completed template, providing an example of how a Claire Major adapted *Affinity Grouping* in her course, *Qualitative Research Methods*. The second is a blank template for you to fill out to tailor this technique for your course.

# Technique Template

Sample *Affinity Grouping* Completed Technique Template:

Content from Claire Major

*Qualitative Research Methods*

**Course Name**

## COURSE CHARACTERISTICS

What are the situational factors that impact this course? For example, is it on campus or online? How many students? Is it lower division or graduate? Are there student attributes such as attitudes, prior knowledge, reasons for enrolling, and so forth that should be taken into account as you consider this technique?

*This is a graduate level research course that we offer as part of an executive EdD in higher education administration. The course has approximately 15 students enrolled each term. The program is an accelerated one, and this is one of 4 research courses they take prior to writing their dissertations. There are four class sessions as well as some online modules in between sessions.*

## STEP 1: CLARIFY YOUR TEACHING PURPOSE AND LEARNING GOALS

Why are you choosing this technique? What do you hope to accomplish?

*I choose this technique because it can be difficult for students to understand the underlying sorting process that goes into coding qualitative data. They often want to use a research package to code data, but it doesn't give them the hands on feel they need. They also sometimes don't have a good feel for creating codes and categories, and working with a team can help.*

## STEP 2: IDENTIFY THE LEARNING TASK'S UNDERLYING PROBLEM AND PROMPT

What is the question you want learners to address, or problem you want them to solve?

*I typically use qualitative data that I have gathered when implementing this technique. For example, if I've recently done a study on student engagement in an online class, I'll select a transcript and use it as the basis of the activity.*

## STEP 3: SET ASSIGNMENT PARAMETERS

What are the assignment logistics? For example, will this be assigned individually or is it group work? How long will the assignment take? Will students be submitting a product? What materials, resources, or additional information do you anticipate needing?

*Because the activity can be fairly complicated, particularly if I give a long transcript, I typically allocate 30 minutes to one hour for completing the task. Students simply report out on their group results.*

## STEP 4: DEVELOP A PLAN FOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT OR GRADING

If you decide to assess learning, how will you determine that learning has occurred? For example, will you use a simple +/check/- grading system? If you use a rubric, will you use an existing one or create one? What will be your criteria and standards?

I do this as an instructional activity, so I don't tend to use a formal summative assessment. Instead, I plan to listen in on the groups and to prompt them if I hear challenges. I also plan listen when the groups report out their findings. I can make adjustments to my teaching if I hear anything that suggests they need additional instruction.

## STEP 5: COMMUNICATE ASSIGNMENT PARAMETERS TO STUDENTS

How will you communicate assignment parameters to students? For example, through a handout? A prompt on a presentation slide? Assignment instructions in your online course?

I typically announce the activity in class, and I describe the process. I give each student a pack of sticky notes. I tell students, without using anything but the transcript, they will look for key ideas. I sort the class into groups of 3-4 students.

## STEP 6: IMPLEMENT THE TECHNIQUE

How will you adapt steps/procedures for your students? Are there any additional logistical aspects to consider?

I give each student a transcript. Then I ask students to look for key ideas or key words. They write each idea on a separate sticky note, working quickly through the transcript and generating as many ideas as possible. I ask groups to work together to sort the ideas into piles. I suggest that they do this silently but tell them they can talk if they need clarification. I then suggest they talk to come up with names for each category. I also ask them to come up with rules for what goes into each category. Then I tell them they can use these categories as codes for the transcript. I ask each student to code the transcript. Then I ask groups to compare their transcripts and talk about the differences in the way that they coded it.

## STEP 7: REFLECT UPON THE ACTIVITY AND EVALUATE ITS EFFECTIVENESS

*Note: This step will be completed after you have implemented the technique.*
Did this technique help you accomplish your goals? What worked well? What could have been improved? What might you change if you decide to implement the activity again?

To reflect on the technique, I consider the process and the products the students submitted. I try to determine whether the activity met the goals that I had for it and if so how I might improve the activity going forward.

# Technique Template

This template is intended for use when planning to implement ***Affinity Grouping*** in your class. Fill in the blanks below, and use the information provided elsewhere in the Instructor's Guide to assist you in your thinking.

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**Course Name**

## COURSE CHARACTERISTICS

What are the situational factors that impact this course? For example, is it on campus or online? How many students? Is it lower division or graduate? Are there student attributes such as attitudes, prior knowledge, reasons for enrolling, and so forth that should be taken into account as you consider this technique?

## STEP 1: CLARIFY YOUR TEACHING PURPOSE AND LEARNING GOALS

Why are you choosing this technique? What do you hope to accomplish?

## STEP 2: IDENTIFY THE LEARNING TASK'S UNDERLYING PROBLEM AND PROMPT

What is the question you want learners to address, or problem you want them to solve?

## STEP 3: SET ASSIGNMENT PARAMETERS

What are the assignment logistics? For example, will this be assigned individually or is it group work? How long will the assignment take? Will students be submitting a product? What materials, resources, or additional information do you anticipate needing?

## STEP 4: DEVELOP A PLAN FOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT OR GRADING

If you decide to assess learning, how will you determine that learning has occurred? For example, will you use a simple +/check/- grading system? If you use a rubric, will you use an existing one or create one? What will be your criteria and standards?

## STEP 5: COMMUNICATE ASSIGNMENT PARAMETERS TO STUDENTS

How will you communicate assignment parameters to students? For example, through a handout? A prompt on a presentation slide? Assignment instructions in your online course?

## STEP 6: IMPLEMENT THE TECHNIQUE

How will you adapt steps/procedures for your students? Are there any additional logistical aspects to consider?

## STEP 7: REFLECT UPON THE ACTIVITY AND EVALUATE ITS EFFECTIVENESS

*Note: This step will be completed after you have implemented the technique.*
Did this technique help you accomplish your goals? What worked well? What could have been improved? What might you change if you decide to implement the activity again?

# References and Resources

## PRIMARY SOURCE

Content for this download was drawn primarily from "Collaborative Learning Technique 19: Affinity Grouping" in *Collaborative Learning Techniques: A Handbook for College Faculty* (Barkley & Major, 2014), pp. 263–267. It includes material that was adapted or reproduced with permission. For further information about this technique, including examples in both on campus and online courses, see the primary source:

Barkley, E. F., Major, C. H., & Cross, K. P. (2014). *Collaborative Learning Techniques: A Handbook for College Faculty.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

## CITATIONS AND ADDITIONAL SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- Brassard, M. (1989). The memory jogger II. Methuen, MA: Goal/QPC, p. 12.
- King, R. (1989). Hoshin planning: The developmental approach. Methuen, MA: Goal/QPC, pp. 4–2–4–5.

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