

A Guide to Classroom Group Dynamics for Teachers

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As a teacher you are in the business of running a gang. If you don't learn how to run your gang, someone else will run it for you- and you may not like that. So let's get into the interesting business of gang leadership for teachers.

Students generally do what they see other people doing. When students interact their behaviour changes. This is called group dynamics. Every group influences, to a great extent, the behaviour of its members.

When teachers know how to run their gang and are aware of group dynamics they are in a powerful position to create dynamic learning.

The Life Cycle of Classrooms

In 1965 Bruce Tuckman outlined the 5 stages of group process: **Forming** -> **Storming** -> **Norming** -> **Performing** -> **Ending**. This applies to sports teams, work teams and also to schools and classrooms.

Forming

The year begins with excitement & uncertainty as students work out the culture of the class & their place in it.

While forming, students look to the teacher for guidance, support and direction. Teachers need to lead & set the tone for the year ahead.

The teacher's aim is to create a kind, calm classroom culture with clear

structure, goals, direction & roles so that students begin to trust each other as well as their teacher.

Students may need a lot of reassurance & may ask lots of questions at this time.

Some key aims are to:

Early on, get everyone to speak & contribute.

Give everyone a sense of success.

Use everyone's name at least once in the first few days.

Minimise differences between students- we are a team.

Positive risk taking is applauded.

Mistakes are seen as necessary for learning rather than as measures of competence.

Build up expectations for the year.

Develop agreements about how conflicts will be resolved

Time spent on building positive relationships now will be rewarded in greater performance later. Have every student feel valued. What is appreciated, appreciates.

By the end of forming, students start to think of themselves as valued members of the class.

Storming

Just when it was all going so well the class hits the stage of storming. Students may become less polite and with frustration or disagreements being openly expressed.

Cliques form within the class as students jostle for control. The group seems divided and embroiled in conflict and confusion.

As students share their contributions, a collision of experiences & preferences occurs. The class struggles, not only with conflicts but also with how to resolve conflicts.

Storming appears as regressing but it's actually progressing- students are sharing opinions, disagreeing & caring about outcomes.

Storming is how groups become more powerful than their individual parts. Learning how to have, and express, strong differences and to learn to respectfully disagree with one another is a powerful lesson.

The key to managing storming is to do develop a system for disagreements in the forming stage.

Moving from storming to norming requires the class to actively choose to be a group. Teachers who are prepared for it and have worked through their agreements in advance will find storming to be an important growth point. Teachers who arrive in storming unprepared will typically get stuck, take it personally & struggle.

Classrooms that get stuck in storming are terrible places to learn, with unresolved blame and shame. Students stuck in storming either act out or zone out.

Norming

The calm after the storm. The class becomes cohesive. There is now a sense of belonging & camaraderie.

Agreement & consensus largely forms among the class who respond well to facilitation by teacher. Roles and responsibilities are clear and accepted. Big decisions are made by group agreement. Smaller decisions may be delegated to individuals or small teams within group. Commitment and unity is strong.

There is general respect for the teacher & some of leadership is shared by the team. The teacher enables learning.

Delegation, small groupwork and power sharing are indicative of an effective teaching style. Teaching is more relational.

Students become involved in decision-making & conflict resolution as well as looking for new learning opportunities.

During norming, there is an increase in productivity, in both individual and collective work.

Norming is completed who the group is clear about the expectations & has resolved most of the big conflicts it has faced.

Performing

The bickering and jostling for position is over and the teacher is able to delegate & rely on students. The class performs at a high level.

Ideally the class has a high degree of autonomy. Disagreements occur but now they are resolved within the class positively.

The class is able to work towards achieving the goal, & also to attend to relationship, style & process issues along the way. Students care. They look out for & after each other. They are no longer by-standers but become upstanders.

Students expect delegated tasks & projects from the teacher

Teachers delegate more. They continue to monitor class processes, keeping alert for signs of regression, & continue to build relationships & get resources the class needs.

Students take on responsibilities & are actively pursuing group goals. Things mostly run smoothly.

A key challenge in this stage is to keep students motivated & engaged.

Students feel attached to the class as something 'greater than the sum of its parts' & feel satisfaction in the classes' effectiveness. Students feel confident in their individual abilities and those of their teammates.

A Resilient Mindset is visible as are offers to assist one another. Roles in the class become more fluid, with students taking on various roles and responsibilities as needed. Differences among members are appreciated.

In the Performing stage, the class makes significant progress. The competence of students is high.

Ending

Ending involves the break-up of the class at the end of the year. Everyone can move on to new things, feeling good about what's been achieved.

Recognition of & sensitivity to student's vulnerabilities is helpful, particularly if students have been closely bonded & feel a sense of insecurity or threat from this change.

Students may feel sadness or a sense of loss about the changes coming to their class as well as pleasure in their achievements. Given these conflicting feelings, class morale may rise or fall throughout the ending stage.

While ending, some class members may become less focused on tasks and their productivity may drop.

During this stage, the class should focus on three tasks:

- Ending well by completing any final work
- Evaluation of the classes' process, with a particular focus on identifying 'lessons learned'.
- Creating a closing celebration that acknowledges the contributions of individuals and the accomplishments of the class.

Effective ending assists students to take away the best of their experiences to apply in the future.

Stage of the Class	Common Student actions	Desired Teacher actions
Forming	<p>Uncertainty Looking for guidance Asking questions Seeking reassurance and a sense of belonging Where do my loyaties lay? To the teacher? To class mates? If I am loyal to the teacher will my classmates accept me. Can I be successful here?</p>	<p>Set a kind culture where everyone connects, protects & respects each other. Have everyone speak & contribute. Invite students to help out. Set guidelines for future issues to be resolved. Personally greeting each student as they enter the class. Icebreakers, learning games, brain teasers or puzzles to get students to start working together. Discuss the question: "How we could make sure we all fail and have an awful year?" Then go through the ideas, asking: "If that's how we would miserable, how can we make sure we succeed?"</p>
Storming	<p>Belonging is disrupted. Cliques form & compete. Hierachies arise and conflict occurs. Students want more independence but may not be ready for it.</p>	<p>Calm compassionate Know that they aren't regressing they are progressing- lead through caring Some heatedness= caring so allow students to express strong differences as long as they do so respectfully Helps the class to refocus on its goals, break larger goals down into smaller, achievable steps. The teacher needs the group to learn to 'agree to disagree' Use debates. Change seating and room arrangements.</p>
Norming	<p>Cohesion & consensus May begin to develop nick-names or inside jokes.</p>	<p>Ecourage diversity of styles, opinions & learning strengths Allow 'experts' & nautrsal leaders to emerge. Discourage comparison Team problem solving= team success.</p>
Perform-ing	<p>Autonomy Belonging is being part of the group. Confidence in each other</p>	<p>Delegation of roles and tasks Value everyone's different contributions. Look at problems and conflicts as learning opportunities Find time for fun.</p>
Ending	<p>Recognition of accomplishments.</p>	<p>Change means completion but also loss. Celebration of successes.</p>