
**COLLABORATIVE
LEARNING
TECHNIQUE**
25
Round Table

Characteristics

Group Size	3-4
Time on Task	10-20 MINUTES
Duration of Groups	SINGLE CLASS
Online Transferability	MODERATE

DESCRIPTION AND PURPOSE Students take turns responding to a prompt by writing one or two words or phrases before passing the paper along to others who do the same. Round Table is essentially the written version of the discussion technique *Colt 2: Round Robin*. The benefits of having students write their ideas as opposed to speaking them are that writing helps students to focus their attention, gives students quiet time to think about their responses, and provides a cumulative record. Round Table also ensures equal participation among group members and exposes students to multiple viewpoints and ideas.

PREPARATION Create a prompt that students can respond to with a few words or sentences. Write this at the top of a sheet of paper, leaving the remainder blank for student writing. Copy sufficient numbers to distribute to groups of four.

- PROCEDURE**
1. Form groups of four students and tell groups the prompt or distribute the handout.
 2. Identify (or have students identify) which group member will begin and inform students that they will circulate the paper clockwise.
 3. Ask the first student to write his or her words, phrases, or sentences as rapidly as possible and then read the response aloud so that other students have an opportunity to think about and build upon each other's responses.

4. Ask the student to pass the paper to the next student, who follows the same steps.
5. Inform students when time is up, or tell them in your instructions that the process is complete when all members have participated and all ideas are on the paper.

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EXAMPLES

Introduction to Scientific Principles

Professor Al Kali was teaching an interdisciplinary science appreciation course in his institution's core curriculum. Two weeks into the semester, he noticed that the science majors in the course were dominating whole-class discussions and that non-science majors were not participating. One of the ways he decided to address the problem was by implementing Round Tables. Professor Kali assigned groups of four, gave each group one piece of paper, and asked students to brainstorm ideas responding to the prompt: *Identify important scientific discoveries of the twentieth century in the field of medicine.* The Round Table structure ensured that the non-science majors participated and also demonstrated to them that they knew more about science than they thought they did. The professor asked groups to share ideas from their lists and used these ideas as the basis for a whole class discussion. He believed that the activity improved the morale of the non-science majors and found that in the whole-class discussion that followed, non-science majors participated more than they had prior to the Round Table activity.

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Principles of Macro Economics

In this team-taught course, Professors Penny Wise and L. B. Foolish had just covered an extensive unit on the determination of national income and employment. They knew from previous semesters that many students found the unit's concepts confusing. They decided to use Round Table in combination with an adaptation of *Muddiest Point* (CAT 7, Angelo & Cross, 1993, pp. 154–158) to assess student learning and to guide them on whether or not students were prepared to move on to the next unit. They reserved fifteen minutes at the end of class, formed groups of four, and asked

students to respond to the prompt: *Write down the muddiest point or the questions you still have regarding the determination of national income and employment.* They told students that if a student had already written down a point or question that they also had, they should put a checkmark next to it. The professors found that by using the Round Table for this assessment technique, students were able to build upon each other's contributions. When students were finished, the professors collected the papers. The lists provided them with substantial feedback on which points were most difficult for students to learn and which points were still confusing. They used this information to organize a review session before moving on to the next unit, and also filed the papers so that they could refer to them when they planned the next semester's class.

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ONLINE IMPLEMENTATION

A simple adaptation of this CoLT to the online environment is to ask groups to generate responses in threaded discussions in such a way that each member posts one comment, cycling through the group until all members have posted. However, this is what often happens anyway in small group threaded discussions. The added value of imposing the Round Robin structure is that it requires all students to post, and limits some group members from posting too frequently. If this CoLT is an important component of your course, consider purchasing special "story-building" software that helps students build stories on the Web sentence by sentence with user info and time stamps.

VARIATIONS AND EXTENSIONS

- Consider using Round Table during another activity. For example, while lecturing, have students do a Round Table that responds to an idea presented in the lecture, with the whole class participating in a single Round Table. Although it diverts each student's attention for about a minute or so, it avoids potential boredom while everyone sits around waiting for the paper to pass.
- In creative writing, a variation of Round Table is used to help foster imaginative storytelling. The instructor provides an introductory sentence or paragraph or a simple opening phrase, such as, *It was a dark and stormy night. . . .* Each student contributes to the story, propelling the action forward by adding several sentences or even whole paragraphs.

When conducted in this way, students can be at their desks doing other work until the paper is passed to them, or you can have several stories going simultaneously so that all students are busy writing.

Teams can record ideas with a transparency pen on a piece of acetate. A group representative can then share the group's ideas with the class using an overhead projector.

In Davis's section on leading discussions (1993, pp. 67–69) and on writing (p. 210), she offers several ideas that are well suited for adaptation to this CoLT. For example, ask students to:

Brainstorm, writing down a range of possible causes, consequences, solutions, reasons, or contributing factors to some phenomenon. Explain that in brainstorming, the rules are that anyone can write an idea (no matter how bizarre or farfetched). Free association, creativity, and ingenuity are the goal. Therefore no idea is questioned, praised, or criticized at this point.

Complete "truth statements," finishing sentences that you have created that begin with phrases such as, "It is true that Marxism . . ." or "It is true that high-density housing . . ."

Write out a list of key points (or arguments that support a particular position). Or write down the points or questions that they have regarding that day's discussion.

Respond to a prompt based on a shared experience such as a field trip, slide show, demonstration, music or drama performance, film, or exhibit. This can stimulate an exchange that reveals students' different perceptions and reactions to the same event.

Jot down a few phrases that describe a "critical incident" in their own lives that pertains to the topic.

Construct a "storyboard." Divide a problem into several steps or subtopics, and give each group a piece of paper with one of these components written at the top. Each group circulates the paper as individuals within each group write their ideas on that topic. After ten minutes, the groups exchange papers and contribute new ideas on the next topic.

Identify evidence from either a Pro or Con position and write these ideas on a paper that has been divided in half accordingly.

Ideas such as these can guide you to create prompts to start the Round Table.

OBSERVATIONS AND ADVICE Requiring students to write in the presence of other group members who must sit quietly limits the type of question that can be asked. This exercise should be used for fairly simple tasks, such as helping students review material, making straightforward applications, or brainstorming lists. It should not be used for complex thinking and reasoning tasks, because the activity moves too slowly. Time is wasted and students will likely get bored. Consider one of the variations mentioned, in which this activity is done in conjunction with other student work, to address this problem.

Because everyone is required to contribute, Round Table can help to address problems of inequitable participation.

This CoLT encourages students to adjust their writing (in areas such as content, conventions, style, and vocabulary) as they respond and react to the comments of the writers that preceded them.

Students who have trouble expressing themselves in writing will find this activity difficult. On the other hand, students who have trouble speaking in a group or in front of their classmates may find that writing their thoughts first prepares them to express themselves orally.

Although ideally every team member should contribute, if a student cannot think of anything to write, it is better to pass than to hold up the process. Set a time limit, and allow a student to pass if he or she has nothing to write.

This technique does not allow for group interaction or discussion. Depending upon your purpose for implementing Round Table, you will most likely want to follow up this activity with either group or whole-class discussion.

- KEY RESOURCES** Foyle, H. C. (1995). *Interactive learning in the higher education classroom: Cooperative, collaborative, and active learning strategies*. West Haven, CT: Excellence in the Academy, the NEA Professional Library Higher Education Series.
- Kagan, S. (1992). *Cooperative learning*. San Juan Capistrano, CA: Resource for Teachers.
- Sharan, S. (Ed.). (1994). *Handbook of cooperative learning methods*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

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A Handbook for
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