Question:

How can we get livelier students on-task in small group work?

How to get students work together well in small groups when some students aren’t on-task in small group work:

Possible alternatives:

First provide all-class clear directions for how to work together in small groups, so that the off-task student hears these directions, that can then be referred back to later.

Keep timing brief, to maintain focus on the task assigned. Use projected timer clock)

As students are working in small groups, monitor each group to see when off task.

Can talk closely with a student, or use non-verbal cues to get the unreliable student back on-focus.

If the student continues to be off-task, call the student aside to confer, using Rich Lavoie’s conferencing technique of starting and ending with positives, and including the change of behavior needed.

Pair in the groups off-task students with the more reliable on-focus students. Depending on the situation, individually let the on-focus reliable student know in advance to bring the off-task student to the group discussion.

To get small group work working well, begin with just brief timed focused small activities, then have students report out on their group’s work. You’ll learn when the full class is able to move to gradually longer and more complex activities as you monitor the groups’ work. It may take longer teaching time from the teacher on how small groups must work with some classes to get them to work well in small groups, but this is time well spent because students learn well working together in small groups rather than just teacher explication. Plus when small group work is well planned and monitored for focused work, when the teacher takes the time to plan small group work well, it makes it easier for the teacher! The teacher simply monitors.

I observed one class where the teacher assigned small group discussion. As she moved around the groups to hear the discussions, using Fred Jones’ “Work the crowd” technique, she then stopped the discussions. She told the class, “This is what I’m hearing, but this is what the topic to discuss is.” She noted they were slightly off-focus, and re-directed the discussion successfully by monitoring the content of what was being discussed.

Depending on the class, especially with initial attempts at small group work, the teacher decides the make-up of the group, and can assign a group leader, who’s a responsible, reliable student. By monitoring how the groups go, the make-up of each group can re-arranged, so that as an example an especially strong, effective student group leader is with the most off-task student. The teacher will see which students work best together, and rearrange as needed. It can work well that once the teacher sees that the groups don’t need changing in who’s where, these groups are set for the remainder of the school year; they know who they are and they can get right to work, and stay focused on the task and are adept at how to report out.

Since small group work is social, in addition to being content focused, students ideally may enjoy this, and will work to make the small group discussions focused and on-task so the teacher will continue with this learning activity. What otherwise is presented by the teacher then becomes investigation by the students; kids learn, our goal.

Caution: New less experienced teachers find that having students work together in groups, when well planned and directed and within the capability of the group work well. However, with a new teacher, many have found that when students work together in groups, it’s best to end the class period on that note, as it can be “challenging” to bring a class back together and sit quietly and listen to the teacher once they’ve been talking in the small group. The class ends on the small group and perhaps reporting back note to avoid this difficulty.

Option:

While it’s often best to have mixed achievement level and mixed task-oriented ability groups for all students to learn, an option also is “levelled” groups. In this situation, higher achieving students are in one group working on a more challenging assignment. This group doesn’t need monitoring and is empowering for these students and self-directed. There can be a couple other groups with a task appropriate for them who the teacher keeps an eye on. The teacher brings together the most struggling students and works with them on more basic skills and understandings appropriate for their needs. The teacher stays with this group. Behavior may work well because the student is getting more personalized attention.