



Picking Teams for Group Work/Projects: Pulling a Rabbit Student's Name Out of a Hat



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Often in business education, students are required to work in groups. The rationale is that many times in an actual workplace setting workers are required to work in groups and, therefore, practice in working in such a setting will be beneficial to students later in their careers. However, there is little or no consensus as to how these student groups should be formed. Several options exist, such as allowing students to self-select their groups or the instructor assigning students into groups to meet certain criteria (e.g., making sure that students have different backgrounds with respect to majors, geographic considerations, etc.). Certainly each of these options has its advocates and its rationales, and depending on an instructor's particular situation, each probably works work quite well.

For several years, I've used a somewhat different method to place students into groups, and it seems not only to work reasonably well but to be very acceptable to students. Virtually everyone has heard the expression to "pull something – usually a rabbit - out of a hat," and I use this method to form student groups when no other overriding requirements exist. The students seem to find the method to be sufficiently random so as to appear free of obvious bias, and the "ceremony" I use in class makes the process fun for them as well.

Prior to class, I take the existing student roster and cut out each student's name, folding the resulting small slips of paper so that the names are not visible. All the names are placed into a hat which I keep in my office (a top hat works well for this), and I bring the hat full of names into class when I first arrive. Since I have a projector in the room, I display a spreadsheet so that students can see it easily, and I've predetermined the appropriate number of groups for the class. I personally pull the first student name from the hat, and assign this student to the first group. The first student comes up to the front of the classroom and picks out another student's name, and this student is assigned to the second group. The process is repeated, until each group has one student, and then I change things up just a bit.

Student names are still drawn in the same manner – the last student whose name was selected drawing the next student’s name - but the assignment of names to groups is determined by the instructor in a semi-random manner. By this, I mean that I may assign the next student picked to group #4, and the one after that to group #1; I may even assign two successive students to the same group. The reason for this change in how students are assigned to groups is below.

One week before the group assignment drawing, students may, if they wish, select up to 2 students’ names that they would prefer NOT to have in their group, and e-mail me these names. It is not necessary for any student to provide a reason why he/she doesn’t want to work with certain other students, although students who choose to provide a rationale for their selection usually state that they have previously worked in a group with the individual(s) on their list and found the experience to be “less than satisfying”. Students may not select more than 2 other students with whom they prefer not to work, as the more names on a particular student’s list, the more the likelihood that this student is in fact trying to “preselect” the members of his/her group by exclusion. All students are assured that the names of students with whom they prefer not to work will not be shared with anyone else in the class.

The rationale for changing up the order of group assignment of students whose names are drawn after each group should now be obvious. The first students are each assigned to a different group so,

by definition, if one of these students has sent me names of other students with whom he/she doesn’t want to work there is no way that this will occur. Because I select the group to which students are assigned (but not the order of student selection), I need only remember the few “non-compatible” names so that I can deliberately place them in different groups. By using this method, I can be sure that no student would be embarrassed by having it be obvious that he/she didn’t want to work with another student, while assuring the students who find themselves in this situation that their wishes, within reason, will be honored.



This method of assigning students to groups is easy to implement, and is fun for the class. Students seem to really enjoy the ceremony of each selectee going up to the front of the room to select the next student’s name. It may take 20 minutes of class time, but it looks much less authoritative to the class than the announcement of instructor-selected groups. Having students participate in the selection process is also a great way for students (and perhaps even the instructor!) to begin to learn the names of students with whom they are unfamiliar.
