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Strategies for Designing More Effective Group Work Assignments

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Group work is one of those areas that some business and engineering faculty think is essential because that's what those students will be doing in the workplace. I don't want to undermine that view, but I do want to say that there is more to group work than just getting ready for the working world. We learn better when we share our ideas with others. When we have to articulate those ideas, have others bounce those ideas back to us, and try to justify claims or statements that we're making, even in the hard sciences, there are many benefits that arise from working in a group.

If one student doesn't understand something, another student may be able to help the struggling student look at a concept in a slightly different way. Hearing different ways of thinking about information, in each of our courses, is critically important. Group work can completely change the dynamic of your class. Without spending a lot of time on the theory, I do want to encourage you to try group work.

The teacher in a group class is no longer the central person. Students will still look to you for guidance and grades, but they will start to build up positive interdependence. In other words, they start to trust each other and they start to rely on each other to help learn the information. When their gaze focuses on classmates instead of you, it can be a little discouraging because the students seem to learn without your direct assistance. But what you're doing is facilitating the effective functioning of groups. If you're teaching groups, one of the best ways to know whether you've created a great assignment is to see what happens when the students get to work. If the volume level rises, you know that students are starting to learn from each other and you've done a great job.

When we ask students about group work, they often say they enjoy learning from each other because they have to talk—because they have to share. This is active learning. Group work does not occur without activities, and activities are so named because students have to be actively engaged, wrestling with the content. It's essential that your group activities get everyone involved. It's not an easy skill to develop, but the more you work with groups, the better you'll be at finding ways to get everyone in the group working.

In some classes, working with groups is a great way to get immediate feedback. If you're doing problems in a math class, students can help each other. "Is this the right answer?" "No, that's not what I got." Have them check each other and look through to see what work is being done. The students can often help each other. You're there as a backup if the students say, "We can't figure out the difference." Now your role as a teacher is to help those students.

When I walk by classrooms where there is group work going on, there is a level of energy that is not present in a classroom where the teacher is at the board, lecturing with chalk and blackboard or a PowerPoint. The students seem much more passive in these lecture classes; they're not in control of their learning. That energy is missing. Group work can energize your students, and I think you'll find it can energize you as a teacher.

Why shift to group-based learning?

The workplace is changing. The business folks and the engineers who say, "Hey, students need to learn to work in groups," are right. Working in groups is an important skill for students to learn.

The student population is changing. Students are not coming to class anymore with the ability to sit for hours while you lecture at them. Students want to be actively engaged. I know we complain about the video generation, but the fact is that the more that you actively engage students, getting them to wrestle with concepts in your course, the better their learning is going to be. They're rehearsing while they're doing it. They need to challenge themselves to get a better sense of where their limitations are and where they have to work outside of class.

The teaching paradigm is changing. The shift from being teacher-centered to learner-centered is critically important in all this. We know from the pedagogical research that teachers who find ways of engaging students are the ones who have students who perform better on exams, writing assignments, and group presentations. These are students who are learning more. In a learner-centered classroom, the student learns more.

Types of groups

There are "completely cooperative" groups where students get graded together—they have to do everything together, and they turn in one assignment. A "cooperative" assignment is usually on in which students work together but they turn in graded material individually. An example is a laboratory setting where students have to set up and do the lab together but write individual reports.

"Helping permitted" refers to when students take individual exams but work on them in a group during class; if one of them doesn't understand something, they are allowed to help each other. "Peer mentoring," then, is where more experienced students in a class work with other students in a mentoring relationship. In these cases, the students are really working with each other within a group.

Decision points

Do you want to facilitate heterogeneous or homogeneous grouping? Do you want students with similar majors, similar interests, or similar grade points to be grouped together? Do you want to do the grouping? Do you want to allow students to group themselves? And if you do group, do you want your groups to be random, or do you want to assign them? Obviously, if it's random, it's likely going to be heterogeneous grouping, but you run the risk of getting a homogeneous group as well. If you don't care about heterogeneity verses homogeneity, maybe you want to group randomly. If you assign groups, you need to think about how you want to assign them.

Do you want students to do work outside of class, or do you want it all done in class? Or do you not want to do any in class and only outside of class? The clearer you are about your expectations for groups, the better the students will be able to understand.

Do you plan formal or informal groups? A formal group is a stable group, one that is either assigned or self-selected. These students meet with that group throughout the semester. An informal group is better when you have lots of different students in a given class. These groups are chosen randomly, but the groups only work together for one class period or so before disbanding. Informal groups provide a lot of benefits, and you can accomplish different goals with informal groups than you can with formal groups.

Grading

Do you want to assign one grade? Do you want completely cooperative learning, or do you want something more collaborative where you assign individual grades but the students still work together? You have to answer questions like these before getting into group work.

Low-stakes grading can work well with informal groups. You can work with a pass/fail system, or you can assign a low number of points to the assignments informal groups tackle. You just want to make sure the students have some incentive to actually get together and do the work. In a formal group, though, I can't emphasize enough the need for rubrics. You also need to think about giving students a chance to assess one another. Get some ideas together for how to let students assess each other. Students want to know that if they're in a group, fair grading criteria will apply, and you want to relieve some of the anxiety students have with groups.

I hope I've convinced you to at least try assigning group work. Please read some of the additional resources that I've provided below, and use some of these ideas. Try groups. Make sure you have clear goals so that you know what you want the groups to do. And make your grading policies as clear as possible.

Additional resources:

Bruffee, K. A. (1993). *Collaborative learning: Higher education, interdependence, and the authority of knowledge*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press.

Johnson, D. W., Johnson, R. T., & Holubec, E. J. (1994). *The new circles of learning: Cooperation in the classroom and school*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision of Curriculum and Development.

Millis, B. J. and Cottell, P. G. (1998). Cooperative learning for higher education faculty. Phoenix, AZ: Oryx Press.

Stodolsky, S. S. (1984). In the social context of interaction: Group organization and group processes. Peterson, P. L., Wilkinson, L. C., and Hallinan, M. (Eds.), *The Social Context of Instruction* (pp. 107–124). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

Ivan A. Shibley, Jr. (Ike) is associate professor of chemistry at Penn State Berks.

Adapted from the Magna 20-Minute Mentor presentation, *How Do I Assign Students to Groups?*

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