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Improving the Small Group Approach to Learning

As an educator who has embraced her share of novel approaches in the classroom, I am constantly on the alert for new and effective techniques. Although lecturing has its place in the process, too much lecture makes the process too teacher-centered. Many students seem satisfied to stare passively and jot down the occasional note triggered by the vocal calisthenics of the performer at the podium. Later these same students may recall little of the content since they have not grappled with it or manipulated it into a useful form.

To supplement introducing new material in lecture, I have tried to use methods which force students to participate. When small group work became "the rage" years ago, I jumped in to experiment. I envisioned non-threatening learning. This vision splintered as small groups disintegrated into exchanges about the "ultimate date" or "hot places for action" on Friday night. Only when the "small-group enforcer" was approaching did the conversation drift back to the assigned task with a weak, "Joe, what was it that you thought?"

Although disappointed and frustrated by the results of my good intentions, I was not willing to abandon group work. I knew that I had to figure out how to tap its potential. I struggled with ways to make the groups real vehicles for learning, without my constant patrolling. After some years of refining, I have discovered two keys to small group effectiveness.

First, I have learned that directions to the groups must be explicit, so explicit that each group could be held accountable for completing the assigned tasks. Instead of saying, "I would like for you to discuss the article that you read for class today," I have substituted specific tasks. Now these groups are likely to receive a list of tasks that might include, "Identify the thesis of the article you read last night" and "List the three main arguments that the author presents." The groups become task-driven and do not easily stray from the focus of the discussion. Furthermore, groups could be assigned writing tasks to be shared with the larger group. If the focus of instruction had been on writing an effective conclusion in a short literary analysis, I could have assigned the task of writing such a conclusion. But one problem remained—how to make the groups accountable for accomplishing assigned tasks without my becoming the visiting taskmaster.

Second, the key to group effectiveness and the answer to my policing was the overhead projector. By using a simple procedure, I found that I could avoid my dizzying circling around the room. After each group formed, I distributed a blank overhead transparency and a water-soluble pen to the designated leader of each group. This leader appointed a secretary to record the group's responses on the transparency. Then, I explained the magic of placing a sheet of lined paper beneath the transparency to create straight, more readable lines. If all groups were assigned the revision of the same thesis statement, a different color marker quickly ensured group identity. It also helped me to identify which group's response had been projected.

This process works very well. It allows the students to collaborate while writing, to review the works of other groups, and to discuss their differences. Students respond more critically to the class-generated writing if they have struggled with the same assignment. They are more willing to labor with writing since their audience is their classmates. Finally, they seem to remain "on task" because the transparency is collected and reviewed by their peers.

These steps have relieved me of constantly monitoring groups, provided an atmosphere for student interaction, and made students accountable for using class time to really learn. With a little twist on an old technique, I have achieved some obvious improvements and feel much better about using small groups for classroom instruction.

Jo Ann Buck, *Department Chair, English/Humanities*

For further information, contact the author at Guilford Technical Community College, Jamestown Main Campus, P.O. Box 309, Jamestown, NC 27282.

I Should Have Been Fired— For the Best Course I Ever Taught!

When I first began teaching many years ago, I quickly learned about how a conscientious teacher should prepare for a class. Before the class I should create a lesson plan and make well-researched, reasonably clear notes to guide me as I filled the blackboards with explanations for the students to copy. I should have solved all assigned homework problems and put the solutions on the blackboard, and the students should compare their work to mine and make corrections. I should have a list of fresh problems to assign for homework. A pocket full of chalk, maybe a wooden stick pointer, and away I would go to the classroom, as prepared as any professional teacher should be.

Anyone could tell by looking through the doorway of a class in session that I was a "good" teacher. I would be standing at the front of the classroom, chalk in hand, chalk dust all over both hands, chalk dust on my right sleeve, and a big yellow chalk dust smear just above my right jacket pocket. Homework problem solutions would be filling the boards, and the well-behaved students would be copying these solutions down into their colorfully divided three-ring binders. A verbal question from a student, preceded by a raised hand, would be enough to convince any viewer that this was an exemplary class, conducted in the most ideal manner possible. In those days, I would have agreed that this learning situation was ideal, but my experience in 1984 changed my outlook completely.

If someone had seen me teaching Fluid Mechanics in April 1984, he or she might have wanted to have me fired. When the students would come into my classroom, they would put their books down; some would sit, and some would head for the blackboard. There would be noise and even some laughing and teasing as the students at the board negotiated who would put which homework problem solution onto the board; for some it would be their first look at the assigned problems, but they would get a friend to help, and together they would dig in. When I would come into the room (several minutes late), I would squeeze into a seat in the middle of the students' seating area. I would sit there and do nothing unless those around me leaned over with an attempted solution and asked, "Why didn't this work?" Sometimes the students at the board would ask me what to do next. I would pass the questions on to the others: "Can anyone make a helpful suggestion to David?" Obviously, I was getting them to do my work, although I did have to help them out from time to time—sometimes I would even get up out of my comfortable seat.

After the homework problems were solved, I would go to the front, thank the presenters, and make them laugh if I could. Then briefly I would describe the bare-bones principle of the next topic, perhaps even solve a short example problem using this next topic. All of this "lecture" would take about 12 minutes, fill less than one blackboard, and be mostly off-the-cuff. The content of the discussions would vary with the content of the student input. For homework I would suggest that they read certain pages in their texts and attempt to solve certain problems. For the rest of the period, some students would work at beginning their homework, some of us would discuss the lab experiments or experiences related to the topics, and some would just chat.

It amazed me that they continued to arrive so promptly and seem so happy, even though I was doing a pretty miserable job as a teacher. It made me wonder. If I saw me doing this, would I fire me?

It is important for all of us to remember that organized patterns of teaching formats and normal lesson preparation methods are worthless if they don't lead to the desired result. And the desired result is a happy, productive, and stimulating environment where students, and even we teachers, make good use of our time and learn from each other. None of us in a classroom can produce as good a learning environment as all of us can. Because we all have different personalities, styles, energy levels, experiences, and priorities, classroom operations will look different. However, while collectively striving for the desired results, we can enjoy each other's individual methods of achieving them.

Bill Klaas, *Dean, Mechanical Welding and Skills*

For further information, contact the author at Northern College of Applied Arts & Technology, 140 Government Road E., Kirkland Lake, Ontario P2N 3L8, CANADA.

Suanne D. Roueche, Editor

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