



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

November 29, 2018 ♦ Vol. XL, No. 39

Revising Student Group Work

Not long ago, as I typed up minutes for a college committee that I am a part of, I found myself wondering how much time the committee could save if we completed tasks by email instead of in person once a week. To be frank, I have never been a fan of group work. This likely accounts for my opinion that most of my committee's work could be completed more efficiently by conferring through email—that is, assigning one member the task of composing representative documents and getting the other committee members to review and sign them.

Like me, my students are beginning to prefer working on their own to working in peer groups. In my first-year composition class, I assign students a controlled-source group essay on the generational divide, meaning I provide the research to pull from and have students collaborate to create a single paper. Post-completion of this assignment, I have been the recipient of student feedback such as, "One person does all the work," or "I just don't want my grade on the line when the rest of the group members don't do the quality of work that I do," and once even the incisive complaint that "None of us have the same writing styles; how can we put our different paragraphs together into one essay?" It seems that, despite instructors' best intentions, community college students who have been exposed to collaborative learning assignments and group projects are not having great experiences with them. The following is an explanation of my original collaborative essay assignment's key components, a presentation of student feedback about it, some reflection on why the project does not seem to be effective anymore, and how I plan to adjust the assignment to be more successful in promoting student group work.

The Original Assignment

The generational divide group essay project requires students to work in groups of four and compose a 750-word essay. The essay must also advance a group-generated thesis with each student in the group contributing a separate paragraph in support of the thesis statement. Then, students work together to adjust paragraphs to produce a cohesive essay. Finally, I require students to incorporate in-text citations and a Works Cited page into the final draft.

I assign this project after I have introduced how to include in-text citations and creating a Works Cited page in class. As such, the generational divide assignment marks the advent of students including source-based research into an essay. I justify the project as a group assignment by pointing out that students are always in

need of some type of help when writing their first essay necessitating in-text citations, but that using each other as a resource for that help is meant to make the assignment less overwhelming. While it is difficult to blend four different writing styles into one paper, the upside is that this two-week project involves working with peers instead of alone while writing a short research paper.

Student Reactions to the Original Assignment

Initially, students were suspicious of the collaborative essay project. Though I reassured students that the project was designed to cut down on individual labor requirements, since each person only needs to compose one paragraph for the group's essay, many of my students did not perceive what they would offer each other over the course of the project as "help." Moreover, when it came time to coalesce the individual paragraphs into a single project, many students experienced anxiety and some even panicked.

I have students keep reflection journals where they log weekly personal responses related to the readings and assignments we do in class. After the generational divide group project concluded, many of the students made negative comments in their reflection journals about the ineffectiveness of the project. Here are some of the more negative comments from reflection journals:

- "I lean towards being more independent when it comes to school and working with a group terrified me. You could tell that some members cared a lot more than others."
- "If I could have done the essay by myself, I think I would have. I would not be so stressed out if my peers would do their share of the work. I did not like working in a group; I like to do the assignment and then get feedback from the professor on my own work."
- "I am so used to not working with people, and I don't like working with others too much especially when a grade or something important is on the line. Don't get me wrong, I am a team player, but the teams I normally participate in share the same vision or have the same goal."

Even though cynics made up only 15 percent of students' overall assessment of the group essay experience, that was enough negative feedback for me to re-evaluate the assignment in order to offer a revised version for the following semesters.

Revising the Assignment

To develop the generational divide assignment, I revisited some of the points Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford make in their book, *Singular Texts/Plural Authors: Perspectives on Collaborative Writing*. Ede and Lunsford identify several important characteristics of an assignment that invites collaboration: it is labor-intensive, specialized, and involves synthesis. By labor-intensive, Ede and Lunsford refer to any assignment that needs to be divided into smaller subtasks in order to be accomplished efficiently. An assignment is specialized if the tasks within the assignment call for multiple areas of expertise and skill sets. Finally, an assignment that involves synthesis requires that divergent perspectives be brought together into a solution that is acceptable to the whole, collaborating group.

After reviewing the three characteristics of an assignment that induce collaboration, I decided to improve on the “task” of executing my group essay assignment itself. I still plan to assign a controlled-source essay on generational divide where students work together in groups, but now students will only help each other with several components of the essay, the first of which will be creating the introduction. Writing an introduction collectively integrates two of Ede and Lunsford’s three collaboration characteristics: students can divide composing an introduction into subtasks, making it labor-intensive, and students can work together to make the introduction cohesive, requiring synthesis. After students generate a collaborative introduction, each student will be allowed to polish and personalize the group version on their own.

Next, I will give students two class periods to work on composing their individual essays while sitting with their groups so they can continue to use each other as compositional support systems. Over the course of these class periods, I will offer a review of in-text citations so students can help each other determine how to properly incorporate the five required sources I provide for them. I will also review how to create a Works Cited page and ask students to compile their own Works Cited page with each other’s help. Having students use in-text citations and produce a Works Cited page requires specialized knowledge. Once students have composed a complete, “best effort” rough draft, they will read their essays aloud in their student groups to give and receive feedback. After receiving feedback from their peers, students will revise the current draft and turn in a final essay for grading.

Revising the Formation of Student Groups

Another area of the generational divide group essay I would like to fine-tune for future semesters is how the student groups are formed. In the past, I have had students self-select a group role (i.e., speaking, writing, encouragement, or technology) on the first day of class. Then I created student groups composed of one self-identified member for each role. This method worked well to establish effective groups for a few years but, after receiving several complaints from students who did not

enjoy being confined to one role within a group, I have decided to let student groups form more organically. Next semester I will allow students to form groups based on who they have been sitting with during the semester. Most of the tables in my classroom are comprised of four students who have simply happened to sit together, but eventually develop friendly bonds. By assigning the collaborative project to groups at tables, students might feel like they have had some choice in how the groups form.

Conclusion

By revising my collaborative generational divide essay assignment to include tasks that are labor-intensive, specialized, and include synthesis, I am hoping students feel less stressed and more interested in participating in the group project. As much as students may not like to work in groups, group work is inevitable throughout their academic and professional careers. If the revised assignment can provide students with a more positive experience than other group projects in college, hopefully students will not be as reluctant to work with their peers in the future.

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