BUILDING STUDENT ACCOUNTABILITY IN GROUP WORK THROUGH STUDENT-GENERATED CRITERIA

For assessment to become transparent, where students are clearly aware and knowledgeable of the outcomes and criteria against which their performances are assessed, they need to be included in the process that determines what they are.

When I began work at Cascadia Community College, I solicited group work rubrics from my peers to see how faculty graded collaborative assignments, and then I created my own rubrics. My frustration with this approach was twofold. First, I wrote the rubrics to help evaluate student performance, but they failed to serve as models for student performance; regrettably, students did not understand them. Second, inevitably, each quarter I heard from students (group members) who felt they did too much work because all members did not contribute equally.

In spring 2000, I asked students to grade their group members in one project. My goal was to give students power in the grading process since they can observe their group members in collaboration far better than I. Therefore, I asked each student to grade the other members of his or her group for 10 out of the total 100 points. Unfortunately, every student in the class gave all of their group members the full 10 points, even members of the group who later complained about one member not doing any work! Clearly, we needed a better framework for this type of assessment.

After attending an Alverno College (WI) seminar, I taught a developmental English class; it served as a testing ground for several assessment ideas I had taken back to the college. I added a substantial group portfolio project to my original design; as well, I added an outcome that each student "demonstrates effective group collaboration." However, instead of building the criteria myself, I gave this assignment to my students.

Before the project began, I explained the additional outcome to the class, told them that each group would have to develop criteria for the outcome, and asked them to answer these questions: "How will you know your group members are demonstrating effective group collaboration? What do you need from each group member to get this project completed? What will each of you have to do in order to achieve the outcome?" I made it clear that once the criteria were set, members of the group would be making a contract with each other to fulfill all of the criteria and to work toward accumulating the full 40 points.

After the project, students assessed each group member's performance anonymously, based on the criteria the group had established. I asked for a grade and for evidence that these points had been earned. Each student assessed every other member of the group. I averaged the scores for each student and added that average to my assessment scores of the project's other outcomes.

Students appreciated the opportunity to have a voice in assessing their group. They also understood that each member ultimately had the power to decide her or his own grade. I agreed that I could not have written criteria that would have ensured the level of accountability and clarity that the students had written for themselves. They knew exactly what they needed to do to achieve the collaboration outcome for this project.

I have included this approach to group work in all of my classes. And while I still need to work on helping students understand the benefits of collaboration and the aspects of the activity that make collaboration more effective, I am never disappointed in the accountability that is ensured through this exercise. Students must take responsibility for their learning and actions, and this is one way I help my classes achieve this learning outcome.

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EFFECTIVE COLLABORATIVE WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

Most faculty can agree that students' writing skills need work. Yet, in an era of decreasing resources and increasing class sizes, how can we manage the paper load while still providing quality feedback and instruction? For several terms, I've used a collaborative writing methodology that has helped me do just that.

First, students form groups of three or four members. Normally, I allow my students to select their own groups, although I have created groups myself from time to time. Since many of my introductory students have had little exposure to group work, I normally provide some suggestions about ways to pick good group members—e.g., similar schedules or shared majors.

Next, each student in the group prepares an individual response to the writing assignment. In most situations, I assign writing based on questions, cases, or problems in the text; but this methodology would work well with almost any assignment.

After preparing individual drafts, students meet as a group. They look over each individual's work and combine the best parts of each paper to create a first collaborative rough draft. The group then develops a list of suggestions for improvement, and one group member incorporates the suggestions, yielding a second rough draft. This process continues for at least one more iteration—sometimes two or three. Until this point, students are free to ask questions about their drafts, but they are not required to do so.

Once the final rough draft is complete, students must either bring it to me for feedback or take it to the writing center. If a writing center is available on campus, I send the assignment, along with my evaluation criteria, to its director at the beginning of the term. Then, the writing center staff knows what I expect and can provide the best feedback to students.

Using my comments and/or those of the writing center staff, students prepare a final draft of the paper, normally no longer than three single-spaced pages. Students then submit all of their working materials and the final draft on the assignment due date. I check to make sure that all the working materials are present (individual rough drafts, lists of suggestions for improvement, and collaborative rough drafts) and then grade the final draft only.

I use three criteria to evaluate their writing: organization, writing style and mechanics, and content. "A" papers meet my expectations in all three areas, "B" papers meet my expectations in two areas, and "C" papers meet my expectations in one area. Because of the student work that is required in the extensive revisions and collaboration, I rarely read final drafts that deserve less than a "C." Using this methodology, I can read all of the papers produced in an individual class (of 35 to 50 students) in no more than an hour. I use a simple grade sheet that helps me evaluate each paper quickly and easily, and I encourage students to visit with me for more extensive feedback if they have questions.

We cannot underestimate the importance of improving our students' writing skills, nor can we relegate all writing instruction to our colleagues in the English department. Using this collaborative methodology, students become better writers; and they develop their critical thinking and oral communication skills through the draft development process.

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