



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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LURKING IN SMALL-GROUP ASSIGNMENTS: MAKING STUDENTS ACCOUNTABLE TO EACH OTHER

Instructors who rely on student assignments completed at home to use in an upcoming class often have some reservations. What will they do in class if students come empty-handed? This technique has motivated students to come to class prepared without the instructor becoming the “enforcer” or “punisher.” And, students agree that it is fair.

The Challenge

Many of us are still trying to conquer what seems to be one of the original instructional challenges—how can we make sure students come to class prepared? This can be a gamble, especially if we must count on what they bring for an in-class activity to be successful.

Think back. I bet this has happened to you. You are an enlightened instructor. You are committed to active learning, student engagement, and other concepts that recommend your students’ participating as learning partners. You lecture only as needed, and plan learning tasks that require students to work together—discussing, writing, analyzing, and responding.

You have assigned homework to prepare students for a collaborative learning activity. Students arrive to class. Not all of them have completed the assignment. Your lesson plan for active learning now seems hollow as you struggle to go to Plan B. Sound familiar?

A Positive Strategy

My colleagues have addressed this challenge in a number of ways: warning students of consequences if the assignment is not completed; walking around the room with a grade book to delete “participation points” if students are unprepared; standing at the door and having the required assignment presented as the admission ticket to class; sending away students who come without the required assignment. Most

of these strategies put the onus on the instructor’s “catching” unprepared students. Students usually view these techniques as evidence of instructor control or accountability. I have found a way that makes students accountable, but puts it into a context they can understand. They can learn, but they have not earned their way to active small-group participation.

Our students, even the older ones, have become adept at using the Internet. They are aware of podcasts, blogs, interactive websites, and gaming. So, this is where we begin. I introduce the concept of an electronic community. I ask how students become involved in gaming sites or blogs. The conversation exposes some basic rules of community: the members must share a common interest or commitment; the members must learn the rules and expectations of the group that want to join; the members must follow the established norms.

The next question emerges: “How do you find out what you need to know to contribute?” Some computer guru (there is always at least one in a class) introduces the concept of “lurking.” Most students are familiar with the modern definition. This concept encourages new users of a site, or potential contributors to a blog, to observe the workings of the site and its members from the sidelines before they take part. They have to learn and meet the norms of the intended group in order to be accepted and to participate.

This “getting ready to participate” translates well to the classroom environment. Like the electronic communities, the learning community in our classroom has norms and expectations. The norm established for participating in paired or group activities requires that students come with assigned materials. We expect students to arrive, having completed whatever reading or writing will be used in class to build upon their schema. I even refer the students to Wikipedia, a site with which they typically are very familiar. Wikipedia includes an entry that asserts that new arrivals to a site should “lurk for some time to get a feel for the specific culture and etiquette of the community, lest they make an inappropriate or redundant comment” and states that “to ‘de-lurk’ means to start contributing actively to a community, having been a lurker previously.”



Once we define lurking, I shift it to a classroom context. Students are to consider themselves members of a community, with common interests and expectations. When a collaborative task is assigned, the expectation is that all members of the work group will be able to contribute meaningfully because they are prepared. Groups and teams rely on the contributions of all members to maximize their effectiveness and efficiency. In order to be able to work in a designated team/ group assignment, they must come equipped with what is needed by their group members. We discuss how unfair it is to rely on one or two members to have the knowledge of four members who should be contributing. We also emphasize integrity and honesty as class behaviors that we have established previously. Lying and misrepresentation violate our class norms.

I explain that if they come unprepared, they will not be penalized; they will be able to sit with a group, but they will not be able to speak or participate. In essence, I tell them that they will be lurkers who can listen and learn from the sidelines, but they cannot contribute because they have not met the community's expectations for that day. They are informed of the rationale of the policy and procedure to follow. They know the norm. They receive assignments.

If they have not had the time to complete the assigned task to be ready to participate, I do not deduct points, meet them at the door ready to turn away the unprepared, or walk around the room with a grade book ready to catch the noncompliant. Instead, I have created lurker badges, using old plastic name tags from conferences. There are typically six available, but I rarely have to use more than one or two once the procedure is implemented the first few times.

Obviously, there are numerous ways that collaborative learning groups can be formed. During the first half of the semester, my preference is to assign students randomly to groups. I have used counting off, pulling numbered puzzle pieces, pulling colored paper, and other strategies to mix students so that they continue to become familiar with each other to reinforce a sense of their learning community. This also becomes important because it allows them to acquaint themselves with other students' work habits since they self-select their team members for a long-range team project that is completed in the second half of the semester.

As students arrive and groups are formed, any student who has not had the time to prepare for the team assignment does not participate in team formation. The student is not embarrassed, but simply takes a lurker badge to wear for that class. Unless the student is a multiple-repeat offender, classmates recognize that any student might miss an occasional assignment; they

enforce the policy, but do it non-judgmentally. Once groups are formed, lurkers can join a group to listen and learn only. The badges remind group members who are participating that the student is a guest outside of the group; so they are courteous, but reinforce the non-participation rule. Unprepared students who do not have the ability to contribute equally understand that they cannot be considered equal group members.

The Outcome

So, what is the result? All of the students who have come prepared feel they have been treated fairly. They are not carrying others or feeling penalized for being prepared. Those who are in the work group can all work, and each group has the same number of prepared members who can enhance their learning. Since there is no punishment, but only social pressure to participate, few students come unprepared more than once. Our class is a very social environment, so not being able to speak is a real reminder that the class norm requires thoughtful readiness, not just attendance.

Furthermore, students are now accountable to each other. As committed partners to each other's academic success in a learning community, they recognize that being responsible and completing quality work are their contributions to others' learning. They are ready for class, not because they will be caught or punished, but because it is a community expectation. They have to fulfill it. They become motivated to serve as worthwhile citizens of their community. They become more responsible and accountable for the right reasons.

Since students are made aware of our two class values—honesty and preparation to join a group—in advance, I have not received one complaint. No student has told me that having to act as a lurker/ observer was unfair. No one is being denied the opportunity to benefit from the discussion. But students now realize that they have to have meaningful things to say to take part, so preparation is their entrance to these discussions. Showing up is just not enough.

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