

A Method for Adding Balance to Student Groups in the Classroom

It is no secret that faculty who teach in the humanities enjoy having students participate in groups. They thrive on the collaborative process that happens when students are given the opportunity to work together to solve a problem. However, some groups are more productive than others, and I often watch my classroom groups with a mixture of awe and incredulity. How can some groups tackle a task with efficiency and effective critical thinking skills, while other groups stare at one another with wide-eyed confusion?

I eventually realized that I had to find the root of the problem to solve group issues in my class. The first problem involved how the groups were formed. I had no systematic method for creating a successful group and the process changed frequently. For instance, I might have students pick their own groups based on proximity, or if I was feeling particularly ambitious, I might have them count off. ("All the 4s get together!")

Regardless of my method, the groups were not strategically structured for successful outcomes. In order to get the productivity I desired out of all of my groups, I needed to think about what constituted a successful group. What skills should be represented in each group? To address this issue, I implemented S.W.E.T. as a more strategic way for grouping students.

S.W.E.T. Implementation

At Nash Community College, we are passionate about our First Day Matters initiative, which is designed to engage students on the first day of classes and get them to return to and remain in their classes. As part of my First Day Matters strategy, I use S.W.E.T., which stands for speaking, writing, encouragement, and technology. On the first day of class, I label the four corners of the classroom with a skill or attribute. I have the students think about these attributes for a moment, and then walk to the corner in which they feel the most proficient. For instance, the students who feel confident with public speaking move to the speaking corner; the technologically proficient students go to the technology corner; the students who are confident in their writing ability go to the writing corner; and, finally, the "cheerleaders" or self-proclaimed nurturers, go to the encouragement corner. Once students have selected a corner, I then form their groups with the goal of each skill being represented in the group. I am always hopeful that the result will be a more-balanced, productive, and supported group.

Conclusion

Forming groups using the S.W.E.T. method is not always perfect. Of course there are times when I have 14 students standing in the technology corner and only three students standing in the speaking corner, which results in some creative regrouping. However, groups as a whole are more productive when several skill sets are represented. I have found that productive and supportive groups increase retention and satisfaction in student learning experiences.

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