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Facilitating Learning in Small Groups

For all Pedagoggles: http://staff.georgianc.on.ca/ctl/pub/pedagoggles.htm

Lens on Learning Principles

Research claims that when students work effectively in small groups, they achieve a better understanding of the material and tend to be more satisfied with their classes (Davis, 2001).

That said, small group learning experiences, which are not effectively structured and monitored, often result in very negative learning experiences for both teachers and students. In small group learning, the teacher's energy shifts from presenting knowledge (sage on the stage), to structuring and facilitating knowledge creation (guide on the side).

Effective small group learning involves the following:

- A **meaningful, achievable task** that is clearly **articulated** and **evaluated**
- Planning and facilitation of the **organizational logistics** of group learning
- **Instruction in collaboration skills** (active listening, disagreement, synthesis of ideas, task management, conflict resolution, clarifying, offering feedback, probing)
- **Monitoring of progress** and intervention when necessary.

Reflection on Practice

1. How might formal and informal group learning enhance your current delivery and facilitate the achievement of particular course goals?
2. In which areas of the course are you comfortable enough with ambiguity and the complexity of the topic to encourage student exploration?
3. What are your learning goals for students and what type of task structure (activity, grading criteria) would facilitate achievement of those goals?

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Expanding Your Teaching Toolkit

Ideas for Learning Tasks

- Questions in the subject area that are real questions for practitioners in the field
- College issues that relate to the concepts of the course
- Pro/Con, Compare/Contrast, or Advantage/Disadvantage activities
- Design, "What If?", Research, or Information Management activities
- Tasks that require application of theories or concepts (i.e. case studies, real problems)
- Task requiring the exploration and articulation of multiple perspectives
- Reading response activity
- Policy development activity

Ideas for Group Organization

- Committees, Task forces, Design teams, Research teams, Expert groups
- Self-selected, assigned, pulled from a hat, based on surveys or questionnaires (Note: There are pros and cons to each strategy)

Ideas for Individual Accountability

- Assign individual roles (i.e. manager/leader, note-taker, reporter, devils advocate, researcher, writer, integrator, technician), with individual responsibilities
- Test students individually on key aspects of the learning
- Require individual submissions (i.e worksheets, summary, part of assignment)
- Monitor individuals and help groups deal with delinquent members (i.e. address delinquency, facilitate group discussion to address problems, brainstorm strategies for dealing with delinquents, allow students to vote people out of group)
- Conduct spot progress reporting
- Establish group rules, policies, and procedures up front

Ideas for Group Accountability

- Progress Reports
- Group writing activities in class
- Sharing of final results (product) with the class (i.e. oral presentation, written document submitted or posted in Blackboard, display, simple reporting of ideas using flip chart paper, overheads
- Competitions or Group tests

Structuring for Success

- Start small. When just beginning to use small groups, keep tasks short (part of a class) and very well defined. Work up slowly to larger and more ambiguous tasks
- Design tasks that will be relevant and interesting to students and that require interaction, discussion, and exploration
- Provide structure (i.e. planning outlines, sample questions for discussion, charts, checklists, step by step instructions, breakdown of large tasks into smaller steps)
- Define, model, and teach collaboration skills
- Define roles, responsibilities, expectations, and grading criteria in explicit terms
- Provide students with examples of what you are expecting from them
- Provide class time for group work so you can monitor progress
- Debrief and discuss group process and the challenges faced by students.
- Evaluate the process as well as the final product using very explicit criteria (i.e. rubrics, checklists). Explain evaluation clearly before students begin.

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More Information

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Michaelsen, L. K., Fink, L. D., and Knight, A. (n.d.). *Designing effective group activities: Lessons for classroom teaching and faculty development*. Retrieved October 17, 2002 from http://www.ou.edu/idp/teamlearning/docs/TLassignments.pdf

Stanford University. (1999). *Cooperative Learning: Students working in small groups* (Speaking of Teaching series). Retrieved October 17, 2002 from http://ctl.stanford.edu/teach/speakmenu.html