



5-1998

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Recommended Citation

Sanford, Kathy (1998) "Developing Sensitivity When Assigning Groupwork," *Teaching and Learning: The Journal of Natural Inquiry & Reflective Practice*: Vol. 12: Iss. 3, Article 5.

Available at: <https://commons.und.edu/tl-nirp-journal/vol12/iss3/5>

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Developing Sensitivity When Assigning Group Work

by

Kathy Sanford

Having been a teacher for many years, I have regularly employed group work in my classes. I began using groups because it seemed like a reasonable alternative to lecturing to my students for forty minutes, and I knew that students liked opportunities to work with their classmates. As I continued with group work I came to believe that it was a valuable way for students to work because it gave them opportunities to talk with each other, hear points of view other than the teacher's, and to articulate their ideas clearly. In addition, working in small groups encouraged the students to be actively involved in their own learning.

Certainly there are some problems with expecting students to work in groups.

Sometimes they are distracted by outside interests when they are in groups:

-- during one group activity where the students were to research an issue for an upcoming debate, they regularly got off on tangents interspersed with personal anecdotes and bits of gossip that did not help them in focusing their arguments for the debate but rather scattered their thoughts.

Sometimes they cannot agree among themselves:

-- the grade eight students had the assignment of mapping the school. Working in groups of three, they had to determine what tools they would need, the best way to take measurements, and then how to represent those to others reading their map. All groups but one had finished and they announced that there was no way they could work together to complete the project. I arranged a lunch-time meeting with the group so that we could determine the problem and how best to accomplish the task. After some initial glaring at each other, they began to talk about why they were not able to work together—"she wouldn't listen to the rest of us and only wanted to do it her way!" "But your way wouldn't work!" "Well, we wanted to measure the outside first, and then do the rooms ..." As the students talked through their problems, they also determined a way to work together, and a plan for each of them contributing time to completing the map.

And sometimes they ostracize one member of the group:

-- two students came to me and quietly told me that they couldn't work with the third member of their group because she always promised to get her tasks completed, but never followed through. The project wouldn't be very good if only parts of it were finished. Talking individually with the third student, I realized that she had had a difficult time fitting in with her partners and they hadn't really made much of an effort to include her in the planning. At that point we decided that the group would be more successful if they worked independent of each other initially and then fit the pieces of the project together later.

We have probably all been in groups where we felt we did all of the work and the other group members got the credit. We have also probably been in groups where someone else insisted on doing all the work and we got very little say in how anything went. Frustrating experiences, to be sure.

However, just as I was weighing the merits of group activities as opposed to quiet, orderly individual activities, I discovered cooperative learning. Not that I actually discovered it, but I read articles and attended inservices that spoke glowingly of this new approach to group learning. I was eager to learn about this approach and made careful notes about the process of cooperative learning. I came to understand how the members of the group could divide their responsibilities (sharing tasks among the group members), could be accountable for their individual as well as their group achievements (each individual contributing necessary components for successful completion of the group project), and how they could come to see helping their group members as an advantage to themselves as well (students learning concepts more fully themselves by teaching others).

There were, however, drawbacks to cooperative learning activities. The activities tended to become quite routinized and formal, with every member of the group having a specific duty. Although each duty was important, the students came to focus on the specific tasks rather than on the whole process of learning. They began to complain and lose interest when I mentioned cooperative learning (*"Do I have to be the timer again?"*, *"I need my own copy of the assignment,"* *"Can't we work on our own?"*), so I began to look for ways to deformatize and adapt the process. I attempted to focus both on the processes and the products of the students' learning, as opposed to one or the other. Rather than assigning specific duties (timer, encourager, note-taker, etc.), I initially discussed with my students all of the roles that they needed to take into account in completing the task as well as a product in which all members of the group were able to contribute and take pride.

It became clear to me as I worked with group learning situations in my classes that students do not come into the class with many of the skills needed to work collaboratively, nor with attitudes that value collaborative work. In our society, competition is valued and emphasized over collaboration—students do know how to compete, but not how to cooperate. Parents of the students often comment that "group work" is not very productive because in the "real world" people have to learn to work on their own. They see group work as opportunities for exploitation of some students and inequality of workload. Parents often requested that their child *not* be involved in working collaboratively but be allowed to work independently. Rather than setting up a situation where students and their parents opposed the activities in the class or creating a situation for which the students were not prepared, requiring them to work in situations for which I had not prepared them, I first needed to help the students understand the importance of learning together and sharing. I needed to introduce a variety of skills and attitudes to them—skills in listening, questioning, and negotiating; attitudes about accepting responses from all group members; and how to positively work with and accept all suggestions in order that they would be successful in their group activities. I also learned that students need a great deal of practice in order to become proficient in using these skills and adopting these attitudes—it is important to trust that students are able to learn these skills and not to "give up" the first time there is a problem when the students are put into groups. By enabling a more flexible approach to collaborative learning, the students themselves decided who was best suited to each task while at the same time taking ownership of the entire project.

Another dilemma that often occurred for me was the way groups of students are selected. Should students be allowed to select their own groups; should groups be selected randomly; should groups be selected because of students' strengths and weaknesses? There are disadvantages and advantages to all methods of grouping, so perhaps the answer is to vary the approaches used to

develop the groups. Students can be allowed to select their own groups some of the time (perhaps where it is appropriate to the activity) and groups may be selected based on criteria established by the teacher at other times. For example, when students are sharing personal writing they may be more comfortable and productive when they are working with trusted friends; when they are completing a lab activity more random groupings may be appropriate. Many chaotic moments in classrooms could have been avoided by more carefully considering the selection of groups and the reasons for the groupings. Comments such as *"We should pick our own groups," "We work better with our friends," "He won't work with us," "She's always fooling around"* could have more easily been dealt with by a teacher who had thoughtfully considered appropriate grouping choices and was prepared to support his/her decisions to the students.

As I stated at the beginning of this article, I have always strongly believed in enabling students to work together (although I have perhaps not always prepared them for successful experiences). It wasn't until I was compelled to work in group situations myself, however, that I fully realized the difficulty of what I was asking my students to do. Recently in a graduate class, I was placed in a group with three other students (relative strangers) and asked to write a collaborative article with them. The experience, while being a valuable learning experience, was fraught with frustration and uselessly-expended energy. I had a negative attitude about the assignment from the outset because I had no say in the situation and was not interested in working collaboratively with members of the class whose interests, values, and approaches to writing were different from my own. Although I felt bound by the unwritten social code of politeness and said nothing, I was annoyed at the situation which in turn affected my work in the group. Each of us in the group had to expend considerable energy learning how to talk to each other in ways that were productive and not confrontational, how to negotiate changes to our own and to the other group members' work, and how to deal with differences of values and understandings as well as different writing styles. The result was an article that was completed for the course requirement but which none of us in the group had any interest in developing further. Although the learning from this experience was valuable, the memory of it was not as positive as it could have been given other conditions. As I was working through this situation, I thought of all the times I had subjected my own students to similar experiences, to similar frustrations, without giving them the tools with which to work effectively or the choices by which they could feel a part of their learning experiences.

Not all meaningful learning is easy, nor is it always enjoyable. I still believe that working in groups, learning how to collaborate and negotiate, is a valuable part of our education. If we cannot talk to each other, discuss ideas, and come to some common grounds, then we are missing the richness of living in a community. However, I am now much more sensitive to the differences—of gender, culture, values, and abilities—embodied by my students, and to the difficulties that students may encounter when they are asked to apply these skills. Hopefully, I will be able to facilitate their group learning situations more effectively in future experiences.