FACULTY FOCUS

Special Report

Effective Group Work Strategies for the College Classroom.

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A MAGNA PUBLICATION

Effective Group Work Strategies for the College Classroom

Love or hate it, group work can create powerful learning experiences for students. From understanding course content to developing problem solving, teamwork and communication skills, group work is an effective teaching strategy whose lessons may endure well beyond the end of a course. So why is it that so many students (and some faculty) hate it?

Although the students may not state their objections verbally, the nonverbal reactions are truly eloquent. They just sit there; only with much urging do they look at those sitting nearby and move minimally in the direction of getting themselves seated as a group. This lack of enthusiasm is at some level a recognition that it is so much easier to sit there and take notes rather than work in a group and take ownership. The resistance also derives from past experiences in groups where not much happened, or where some members did nothing while other did more than their fair share of the work.

Often very little happens in groups because students don't tackle the tasks with much enthusiasm, but group ineffectiveness also may be the product of poorly designed and uninteresting group tasks.

This special report features 10 insightful articles from *The Teaching Professor* that will help you create more effective group learning activities and grading strategies as well as tips for dealing with group members who are "hitchhiking" (getting a free ride from the group) or "overachieving" (dominating the group effort). Here's a sample of the articles in the report:

- Leaders with Incentives: Groups That Performed Better
- Dealing with Students Who Hate Working in Groups
- Group Work That Inspires Cooperation and Competition
- Better Understanding the Group Exam Experience
- Use the Power of Groups to Help You Teach
- Pairing vs. Small Groups: A Model for Analytical Collaboration

In short, *Effective Group Work Strategies for the College Classroom* will change the way your students think about group work.

Maryellen Weimer
Editor
The Teaching Professor

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THE Teaching PROFESSOR

Class Participation Evaluated by Peers

Most instructors opt to include class participation in their courses. Many seek to promote it. Generally, students are encouraged to participate by some sort of grading scheme. But evaluating individual contributions and promoting a substantive, intriguing discussion at the same time is no small task. Consequently, many instructors end up evaluating participation subjectively, relying on an intuitive sense of who spoke, how often, and saying what. Besides worries about the objectivity of such a system, this approach "forces the instructor to adopt two fundamentally incompatible roles simultaneously: the support role of creating learning opportunities in the classroom, and the evaluative role of grading participation every time a student verbalizes his or her thoughts." (p. 24)

Mainkar, the author of the article referenced below, uses this problem and the work of others to identify two more problems that are frequently a part of participation grading schemes. First, students contribute not because they have something to say, but because they want the points. They craft these contributions in their minds as other students are speaking. As a result, what they say rarely follows from what has just been said, thereby making the discussion disjointed rather than a series of exchanges that flow in the direction of some logical conclusion. And finally, not all students are equally ready to contribute. For some (frequently those from other cultures or of ethnic minority backgrounds), having to participate in class may cause much stress and anxiety.

Mainkar has developed (and used successfully for four years now) a system that tackles these problems. "Students are the primary evaluators of discussion participation on a daily basis." (p. 24) Here's how the system works. Every day one or two (usually two) students evaluate the contributions of the rest of class (between 20 and 30 other students). They do so using a sheet (a sample of which is included in the article's appendix) that lists all students by name and differentiates contributions into three categories: attendance (awarded for listening and not engaging in disruptive behaviors), straightforward comments (adequate contributions), and insightful comments (superior thinking). One point is awarded for attending but not participating in class, two points for one or two straightforward comments, and three points for three or more straightforward comments. Insightful comments are worth more, but students cannot earn more than three points per day. Evaluators earn three points on the day they evaluate their classmates. Each student evaluates only once during the course. Mainkar has found that the two evaluators' scores agree to a high degree. (Data documenting the extent of agreement is included in the article.) Daily participation scores are averaged and converted into a number between 0 and 100. If a student never participated but attended four of the 100 points.

Individual differences are accommodated by letting students decide whether their participation grade counts for 10, 15, or 20 percent of their total course grade. Students make this determination about halfway through the semester after they have received adequate feedback, which is provided every few weeks. The system itself is not launched until the third or fourth week of the semester, giving students a chance to feel comfortable in this particular class setting and with the participation system itself.

Mainkar admits that the system does involve more administrative work for the instructor. Students' participation is recorded daily, and those scores must be recorded, averaged, and shared with the students; but given the system's effectiveness at overcoming some fundamental problems associated with the grading of participation, the extra effort seems justified. The article also contains some useful suggestions on how the system can be streamlined and used in smaller classes. It is an interesting approach with many potential adaptations.

Reference: Mainkar, A.V. (2008). A student-empowered system for measuring and weighing participation in class discussion. *Journal of Management Education, 32* (1), 23-37.

In This Issue

A MAGNA PUBLICATION

Group Quizzes: More Positive Outcomes

By Maryellen Weimer

There often are dissenting opinions on whether it's a good idea to have students do quizzes in groups. The study referenced below adds to the growing number of evidence-based reasons for doing so. Here's how group quizzes were used in this study. In an introductory sociology course (which was compared with a control section of the same course), students took eight unannounced quizzes that covered reading assigned for that day. After answering the three to five open-ended questions, students joined a group (formed by the teacher and with similar ability levels) in which they discussed their answers. After the discussion, they could revisit their individual answers. One quiz was randomly selected from each group and the score on that quiz became a group grade assigned to everyone in the group. Individual quizzes were also scored so that students could compare their individual and group grades.

Faculty researchers used quiz, exam, and final grades along with survey data to answer questions in three different areas. First, they wanted to know whether this style of collaborative testing would improve students' learning, which they operationally defined as quizzes, exams, and final grades. Students in the experimental group did score significantly higher on the quizzes, but they did not score higher on exams or receive higher final grades than students in the control group.

Researchers think the lack of impact on tests and grades might have occurred because these quizzes only counted for 14 percent of students' grades. They also thought, based on recommendations in previous research, that perhaps these students needed some instruction in group processing issues.

"If collaborative testing motivates students to complete assignments and to develop positive attitudes about both their peers and the course material, it may also help to foster student retention."

The second pragmatic question of interest involved whether or not this approach to group quizzes would improve students' preparation for class. Would it more effectively motivate them to keep up with the reading? The answer to this question was yes. Students reported that they were more likely to come to class having already completed the assigned reading. Their comments illustrate what a powerful influence peers can have on each other's learning. Many reported not wanting to let the group down. Here's a comment that illustrates this feeling.

"I have been forced to keep up with the readings so I don't hurt others in my group with poor grades." (p. 259)

Finally, researchers were interested in the effects of this kind of collaborative quizzing on several different student attitudes. Would students be more positive about quizzing in this format? Would they think taking quizzes this way would positively influence exam scores and final grades? Would they be more positive about the field of sociology? And, would their initial skepticism about this approach to testing diminish as they experienced the process? Each of these questions was answered positively by the study's results. The researchers wonder whether these positive findings might be indicative of an even larger impact. "If collaborative testing motivates students to complete assignments and to develop positive attitudes about both their peers and the course material, it may also help to foster student retention." (p. 260)

Of their findings overall, these researchers conclude, "These results provide further empirical support to those instructors and researchers who have championed the use of collaborative learning strategies and should suggest to others that they might be well worth considering." (p. 261)

Reference: Slusser, S. R., and Erickson, R. J. 2006. Group quizzes: An extension of the collaborative learning process. *Teaching Sociology* 34: 249–62.

Pairing vs. Small Groups: A Model for Analytical Collaboration

By Denise D. Knight

Although the use of small groups can provide a welcome change to the regular classroom routine, the results are rarely all positive. Invariably, one or two students in each group, because they are shy or lack self-confidence, are reluctant to share their input. These are often the same students who have to be coaxed to participate in large class discussions. Because of group dynamics, the student who usually emerges as the group leader, either by default or proclamation, is often not sensitive to the need to engage the quieter students in the conversation. As a result, the more outspoken students may unwittingly extinguish the very dialogue that the small group is intended to promote.

I have found that paired collaboration consistently produces better results than small group discussions do. Having students engage a question in a one-on-one exchange encourages stronger participation by both parties. Rarely do small groups generate equal contributions to the dialogue or problem solving, while pairing creates an intellectual partnership that encourages teamwork.

Paired collaboration can easily be modified to work in a number of disciplines. In my literature classroom, the following model, which I use about once every three weeks, seems to be particularly effective. At the beginning of class, I ask each student to place his or her name on a sheet of paper and to write a question about the work that we will be discussing that day. I then collect all of the questions and redistribute them so that each student has someone else's question. Students then break into pairs and together formulate a response to one or both of the questions, depending on the time allotted for the exercise. They are required to cite textual evidence in support of their arguments.

I have found that paired collaboration consistently produces better results than small group discussions do.

After a period of time, usually 15 or 20 minutes, each pair reports its findings to the larger group. Even if some of the pairs end up answering similar questions, they rarely have similar answers. And, if by chance each member of the pair has radically different interpretations, they are invited to share their individual responses. The exercise can actually be helpful in illustrating the variety of critical readings that one literary work can engender. And, depending on the direction that discussion takes, it can provide the foundation for discourse on a number of theoretical approaches to the text.

Experience has convinced me that the benefits of pairing are numerous. Working together provides an opportunity for problem-solving on a more intimate scale than small groups allow. Students tend to form an alliance as they work together to compare—and share—their interpretations. They are more likely to come to class prepared to engage the reading, as they know that they might be called upon at any time to share their knowledge. Finally, a paired model not only allows quiet students to find—and use—their voices, but it also teaches mutual respect and cooperation. Paired collaboration is a small adjustment to the typical group discussion that can yield big results.

Leaders with Incentives: Groups That Performed Better

By Maryellen Weimer

Faculty who regularly use group work are always on the lookout for new and better ways of handling those behaviors that compromise group effectiveness—group members who don't carry their weight and the negative attitudes students frequently bring with them to group work. A faculty team at the U.S. Air Force Academy reports positive results from a unique approach that involved making group leaders partially accountable for their group's success while at the same time giving those leaders some power to reward or penalize individual members based on what those members contributed.

The rationale for this approach comes from how groups function in the "real world." In most professional contexts, leaders are to some extent responsible for how their groups perform, and those leaders also have some control over those who serve on teams with them.

Using a couple of different measures of academic ability, teams with four to six members were formed. In the experimental teams, members were told to choose a formal leader. The control groups had no formally designated leaders. The task involved selection of a publicly traded company and analysis of that firm's financial report. Findings were presented by the teams to a panel of three financial accounting instructors. Points on this assignment represented 25 percent of the final course grade.

In addition to the 150 points possible for the assignment, leaders received a 25-point incentive if their teams ranked in the top third of all these projects. Leaders received 15 points if their groups ranked in the middle third and 5 points if their groups ranked in the bottom third. Leaders were also given 25 points per group member to distribute to individual members based on what those individuals contributed to the group. "This structure allowed the incentivized team leader to function as a leader with limited control over team members while maintaining responsibility for the end product." (p. 793)

Scores showed that the teams with leaders who had these incentives performed significantly better than did the control groups. Results also documented a decrease in social loafing and improved attitudes about group work for those in teams with leaders with incentives. It's an approach that might be worth trying in other courses where group work is being used to prepare students for collaboration in professional contexts.

Reference: Ferrante, C. J., Green, S. G., and Forster, W. R. (2006). Getting more out of team projects: Incentivizing leadership to enhance performance. *Journal of Management Education*, 30 (6), 788-797.

Dealing with Students Who Hate Working in Groups

By Joseph F. Byrnes and MaryAnn Byrnes

Some students tell us they hate groups—as in really hate groups. Why do faculty love groups so much, they ask. I work hard, I'm smart, I can get good grades by myself, these students insist. Other students are a waste. I end up doing all the work and they get the good grade I earned for the group. Why do you, Professor Byrnes, make me work in a group. I hate groups!

Sound familiar? We call these bright, motivated, annoyed students our lone wolves. They demand learning activities where they know they can excel and are fearful that our emphasis on group work will mean lower grades for them. The least of the students will drag down the best, seems to be their constant refrain. Get me out of these groups and let me show you what I can really do.

We have developed an unusual

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way to deal with these bright, motivated lone wolves—we form groups of lone wolves! On the first day of class, we have students fill out a data sheet. Here is the question that deals with groups:

Think about your experience working in groups. Please select the one response that best suits your experience.

A. _____I enjoy working in groups because my group members usually help me understand the material and tasks and therefore I can perform better.
B. _____I question the value of group work for me, because I usually end up doing more than my fair share of the work.
C. _____I have little or no experience working in groups.
D. _____I have a different experience than the choices given above. Please describe.

When we form groups, we place the students who have selected B (our lone wolves) in the same group. There are usually sufficient numbers to form one or even two groups of these lone wolves.

The result is delightful to observe. Often for the first time, the lone wolves are challenged by groupmates. They must learn to negotiate, trust, and share with others who are equally driven and equally intelligent. Another positive outcome is that students in other groups have the opportunity to develop and demonstrate leadership capacity, without the interference of these lone wolves who tend to control others in groups.

At the end of the semester, many of our lone wolves make a point of telling us this is the best group they have ever had. They are shocked about their experience and they ask us for our secrets about forming groups. When we tell them we placed them in a group where every student hated groups, they inevitably smile and thank us.

Group Work That Inspires Cooperation and Competition

By Maryellen Weimer

Successful professionals need to be able to both cooperate and compete. Educational experiences need to help students develop both skills. Attle and Baker, authors of an article on the subject, cite survey data from employers indicating that 80 percent of all employees in America work in teams or groups. But competition continues to be the way to succeed in the global economy.

Attle and Baker have developed learning experiences that combine the two. They outline an instructional strategy that brings together "components of cooperative learning with the positive aspects of motivational competition through inter-group competition between collaborative teams" in sport management, the field in which they teach. (p. 79) Specifically, they assign students to groups; within those groups, students participate in a grant development project. The instructors work to make the project as "real-world" as possible. They contact a local organization and find out what that organization might need. The groups then develop grant proposals that seek funding for the project. Each group presents its proposal to a panel, and that panel "funds" the proposal of only one group. The article also contains other examples of courses and content where these faculty members have used this cooperative-competitive model.

The authors make a number of important points about activities that combine cooperative and competitive elements. They note that cooperation and competition are neither "inherently good or bad in supporting the learning process how instructors employ these strategies in order to enhance student learning determines their value in preparing well-educated soon-to-be professionals." (p. 77) They say that the exercises' design must be undertaken carefully, with the instructor attending to how the groups will be formed, their composition, the dynamics that affect

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how they will interact, and how work completed by the groups will be assessed. In the case of this project, the authors recommend that the instructor form the groups and that, even though the panel awards the grant, the instructor retain control over the grading process.

In an exercise like this, students can learn much about their own performance from the other groups. To level the competitive playing field, in this example each group presents to the panel privately. However, every presentation is videotaped and played back to the class as a whole. This helps students see differences between the groups and enables the class to discuss why the panel awarded the grant to a particular group.

The instructors also note that the competitive aspect of the assignment motivates student performance. Students' performances frequently exceed instructor expectations. There is a caveat here, though: "Our experience in using this type of assignment suggests that students will spend inordinate amounts of time on this type of project unless limits are set by the instructor." (p. 82) The amount of time students are given to work on the project should be commensurate with the project's value. But here as well are important lessons for students to learn—lessons about using time efficiently, delegating tasks, and asserting leadership to help a group pull it all together.

In recent years, interest in group work and learning within social contexts has been widespread in higher education. That is appropriate given the prior lack of emphasis on teamwork. But as this article wisely points out, students need to know how to cooperate and how to compete. For tomorrow's professionals, both skills are essential. This article offers some creative ways of integrating both elements in a single, carefully designed learning activity.

Reference: Attle, S., and Baker, B. (2007). Cooperative learning in a competitive environment: classroom applications. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 19 (1), 77–83. [Note: This is an online journal. Find it at www.isetl.org/ijtlhe.]

Better Understanding the Group Exam Experience

By Maryellen Weimer

The debate continues: is it fair and appropriate to give individual students a group grade based on the performance of the whole group? Experts stand on both sides of the issue. For individuals considering the use of group grades, that decision needs to take into account how students perceive the group exam experience. The study referenced below explores a number of relevant student perceptions.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to "elicit the reflections" of students (140 undergrads and 202 grads) who participated in a fairly lengthy group exam experience. Their three-member groups worked together on a variety of tasks for three weeks prior to taking a written exam in their group. Researchers used a "hermeneutic phenomenological" approach that had students respond to this query: "You have just completed your first cooperative examination. Please describe how you felt preparing for the examination, and how you feel now that you have completed the examination." (p. 84) This qualitative method also prescribes how data are to be examined and organized. In this case, comments clustered around eight different themes, which are highlighted and briefly discussed below.

- *Feeling support and or reinforcement*—Every undergraduate and almost 50 percent of the graduate students felt supported and reinforced by the experience. One undergraduate explained, "We learned how to rely upon one another to achieve a goal." (p. 85)
- *Feeling relaxed and confident*—A significant number of undergrads and graduate students reported experiencing less of the anxiety and stress usually associated with taking exams. They felt less alone, and that added to their feelings of confidence, even when they faced the exam's most difficult questions.
- *Everyone knowing the material*

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and doing his or her part—Almost 40 percent of the undergrads and 67 percent of the grads made comments about how their group members stepped up to the plate. Fellow group members prepared, contributed, and helped complete the exam.

- *Gaining a deeper understanding of the information*—Confirming what previous research has documented, a significant number of these students made comments about how working on the material in their group provided them with a deeper understanding of the content.
- *Not wanting to let the group down*—A smaller percentage (15 for the undergrads and 13 for the grads) commented on how they were motivated to study more because they didn't want to let the group down. In the words of one student, "This forced me to study. I didn't want to be a weak link." (p. 88)
- *Feeling stressed*—Only 13 percent of the undergraduates and 6 percent of the graduate students expressed that they found the group exam experience stressful.
- *Being concerned about group members' preparation*—Also surprising was the fact that only 13 percent of the undergraduates and 5 percent of the graduate students worried about how their group members would perform. And among those expressing this concern, the experience proved that their concerns were unfounded. As one student remarked, "We could have made our lives simpler by trusting each other." (p. 89)
- *Forming positive opinions about the group*—Six percent of the undergrads and 22 percent of the grad students wrote positively about their specific group. They reported that their group worked well together, that they were part of a good team, and that group members treated each other well.

Many of the feelings and experiences reported by the students in this study do not confirm some of the fears that faculty have about using group experiences: that the bright, grade-motivated students will do the work for the rest of the group and that the pressure of having to perform collectively for a grade will cause groups to implode. The reactions of these students to an open-ended query that did not direct their responses reaffirms the learning potential inherent in collaborative experiences. The analysis of their responses does not answer the question of the propriety of group grades for individuals, but what these students report certainly relates to that question.

Reference: Morgan, B. M. (2005). Cooperative learning in higher education: A comparison of undergraduate and graduate students' reflections on group exams for group grades. *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching*, 16(1), 79–95.

Use the Power of Groups to Help You Teach

By Robert Loser

Reading a textbook and listening to a lecture may be useful learning activities, but for most students, when used alone, they are insufficient for long-term retention and transfer of learning. Activities like group work, discussion, and other forms of collaboration have great potential for helping students process new information, ideas, and procedures so that learning is expedited. Here are five research-based reasons for using activities that involve students in class.

1. New knowledge must be anchored to existing knowledge for long-term retention; the more anchors, the better the chances for recall. In a discussion, ask students to compare and contrast new information or ideas with what they already know, or ask them to give examples or analogies. Each elaboration is a potential memory anchor for some learners, and, together, the class will generate many more elaborations than could be thought of individually. Chances are good that someone will suggest a viable elaboration that never crossed your mind.

2. Short-term memory can hold only about seven pieces of information at a time. New knowledge must be organized in chunks to fit through this bottleneck during

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learning and recall. Ask students to organize new information, summarize it, suggest mnemonics for it, and then share their strategies with the class. Again, the class is likely to generate more strategies collectively than individuals would on their own, and the weaker students will learn better strategies from the stronger ones.

3. Knowledge is recalled best when it is learned in the context in which it will be used. Ask students to relate what they are learning to their lives, their work, their families, and society with activities such as role-plays, case studies, and application papers. Once again, groups are going to envision more relevant contexts than individuals are likely to.

4. Skills are learned by practice with guidance and immediate feedback. Since you can't provide immediate feedback to everyone at the same time, enlist your students to help each other in the early learning stages when basic feedback is sufficient, but still vital. Offer clear examples of excellent performance, and then provide students with a rubric for critiquing each other's work. The greater the number of critiques, the greater the likelihood that the average of the critiques will be reasonably accurate. Besides benefiting from feedback, students are learning something about providing it constructively.

5. Problem-solving expertise requires relevant basic skills and conceptual knowledge, along with being able to decide which basic skills and knowledge to apply in any given situation. Assign problems to heterogeneous groups of five to seven students and facilitate collaboration to solve the problems. Members of the group will have different knowledge and skills to contribute, so the groups will tend to solve problems better than the individual members can on their own. In the process, students will learn knowledge, skills, and strategies from each other, especially if you have them discuss the processes they used.

Group strategies help you teach more efficiently by harnessing the parallel processing power of all of the minds in your classroom and open the possibility that you just might learn something from your students!

If you are interested in references that explore the research that stands behind these principles, let me recommend two sources.

References:

Clark, R., and Mayer, R. (2003). *E-Learning and the Science of Instruction: Proven Guidelines for Consumers and Designers of Multimedia Learning*. San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons.

Gagne, E., Yekovich, C., and Yekovich, F. (1993). *The Cognitive Psychology of School Learning, Second Edition*. New York: HarperCollins.

Feedback Forms for Peer Assessment in Groups

By Maryellen Weimer

Many faculty incorporate a peer-assessment component in team projects. Because faculty aren't present when the groups interact and therefore don't know who's doing what in the group, they let students provide feedback on the contributions of their groupmates. In addition to giving the teacher accurate information on which to base individual grades, the process gives students the opportunity to learn the value of constructive peer feedback. It's a skill applicable in many professional contexts.

Most faculty have discovered that the quality of peer feedback improves if students use a form that articulates assessment criteria. Otherwise, given a form that asks them to rate or describe the contributions of other members, students tend to avoid giving negative feedback and to fall back on the "everybody contributed equally" mantra.

A group of faculty (mostly in engineering) looked at the inter-rater reliability of three short peer-evaluation forms. Inter-rater reliability is a statistical measure of the extent of agreement among evaluators. It's an important feature of good assessment instruments. One of the forms used was a single-item instrument without any behavioral anchors or specific assessment criteria, similar to what's described in the previous paragraph.

The second form used a five-point

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rating scale and asked students to assess team members across 10 categories that included various behaviors, e.g., attended group meetings regularly, contributed to discussions, listened effectively, performed significant tasks, and completed tasks on time.

The final form included these kinds of behavioral anchors in its instructions and elaborated descriptions of the rating words (excellent, for example, was defined as "consistently went above and beyond, tutored teammates, carried more than his or her fair share of the load"). However, on this form group members gave peers a single rating assessment. Researchers found that both behaviorally anchored forms had about the same high inter-rater reliability when they were used by four raters in the same group.

The value, of course, is the economy of the shorter form. It considerably expedites the grading process, which benefits instructors who may have large classes and homework and other assignments to grade. Researchers also hypothesize that students will complete shorter forms more conscientiously. However, they do recommend using the longer form to accomplish formative goals. They have their students complete it at the end of a first project so that group members can use the feedback to identify areas for improvement. If the feedback indicates that a group has some members who are "hitchhiking" (as in getting a free ride from the group) or "overachieving" (as in dominating and overdirecting the group effort), the instructor meets with those groups to explore better ways to distribute the workload and leadership within the group.

Reference: Ohland, M. W., Layton, R. A., Loughry, M. L., and Yuhasz, A. G. (2005). Effects of behavioral anchors on peer evaluation reliability. *Journal of Engineering Education*, 94(3), July, 319–325

Using Collaborative Groups to Teach Literature and Theory

By Penny Dahlen

I have used collaborative groups in a graduate counseling theories class to increase dialogue on theoretical concepts, integrate current literature, and model lifelong learning. In my teaching, this learning strategy is much more than a technique. It's a systematic, coherent approach to the entire course. Groups meet for one-third of the course time, do group presentations, and participate in a variety of other class activities.

When using groups this extensively, how they are formed is essential. I let students create their own three- to four-member groups using three different criteria: random selection, common interests, or program areas. For example, in a master's-level counseling program, students pursue options in school counseling, marriage and family counseling, or mental health counseling. Students are educated about the group selection process and are encouraged to select group members only after class activities have occurred in which students learn about each other's professional interests and personal belief systems. Self-selection of group members increases peer pressure to be prepared for group dialogues and creates mutual dependence—students come to class so they don't let their group down.

Once groups have formed, students are given the assignment: review the current literature and select an article of interest to discuss in the groups. Each student does his or her own literature search and article review each week. For example, during the week that existential theory is the topic, students need to find current literature on existential theory. School-counseling students might conduct literature searches using the terms "existential theory" and "children."

Early on, groups are instructed to develop ground rules. Here are some examples of ground rules: come prepared for the group meeting; take ownership of your ideas by using "I" statements and "It is my perception…"; wait until others are finished before speaking; present reasons for disagreeing; paraphrase what you hear; ask for clarification; and provide

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constructive feedback. Groups set up written contracts that list their rules and that are signed by all members. This enhances group commitment to preparation and learning.

I believe it is essential that the instructor model effective group collaboration. I do current literature searches and join a group each week. I make sure my article has been published within the last year and join in a different group each week. Students never know which group I will be joining, so this also encourages preparation on their part. In joining the group, I talk with them. I do not take over the discussion; I listen, probe, question, hypothesize, model, and rephrase their comments just as any member committed to group analysis and understanding should do. The groups meet during the last 45 minutes of class, and I do not reconvene the entire class at the end of the period. I have noticed that many times the groups are still talking 15 to 30 minutes past class ending time.

Toward the end of the course, each group does a presentation focused on "deepening the understanding of some theoretical concept." Students are encouraged to be creative and to enjoy the presentation. One group conducted a Jeopardy game on Freud's concepts. Also each group member is required to provide a draft copy of his or her final theory paper to each other group member. Members read and edit each other's papers between group sessions and then meet to discuss content and writing processes. After this feedback session, students have a week to incorporate group feedback before turning in the final paper.

Group members grade each other's participation based on the group rules and how collaboratively the member worked on the group presentation. The final course grade also includes a variety of other assignments, such as large group participation, written case analyses, journals, and a final paper.

This collaborative group strategy could be adapted to any course in which theory and philosophy are major content components. Keeping current on research, joining groups, and modeling dialogue make the course exciting for students and for the instructor. It's also a great model for lifelong learning. It represents how we would hope people would join together at work and in their communities to learn and to solve problems.

Small Group Discussion Tasks

By Maryellen Weimer

Many students don't greet with much enthusiasm teachers' efforts to have them work in groups. They may not state their objections verbally, but the nonverbal reactions are eloquent. They just sit there; only with much urging do they look at those sitting nearby and move minimally in the direction of getting themselves seated together as a group. This lack of enthusiasm is at some level a recognition that it is so much easier to sit there and write down the teacher's answers. The resistance also derives from previous experiences in groups where nothing or very little happened.

Often very little happens in groups because students don't tackle the tasks with much enthusiasm—a kind of vicious cycle develops here—but group ineffectiveness may be the product of poorly designed group tasks as well. A carefully thought out, creative, and purposeful task can impact student passivity and engender much more positive feelings about group work.

A newly published second edition of a book on teaching beginning students, Teaching First-Year College Students, by Bette La Sere Erickson, Calvin B. Peters, and Diane Welter Stommer, contains a great list of group tasks for in-class discussions. These authors propose them for beginning students, but there is no reason they would not work with more advanced learners.

- If the goal is having small groups review content from the previous class, have students compare and discuss their notes in the group and then create a list of the most important ideas contained in them. Sharing some of the lists publicly provides an effective way of linking previous material with new content.
- Before introducing a new topic: have students break into groups, put their heads together, and list

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everything they already know about the topic. Several of these lists can be used to introduce the topic.

- To get students ready for a whole class discussion, let them start by spending a few minutes in a small group where people discuss any aspect of the reading assignment or discussion topic they wish.
- If the goal is to get students to ask more questions, let them generate those questions in groups. If the class is to discuss a reading assignment, let those groups come up with the one or two questions around which they think the whole class discussion should focus.
- To help students develop their problem-solving skills, give them a problem a bit more challenging than one they've just done. Let them work on solving that new problem in groups. If they can't come up with the solution, challenge the group to list the questions they need answered in order to solve the problem.
- If the goal is making sure that students understand a concept, put students in groups and have the groups define the concept in their own words. Also have them identify an example (not one proposed in class or the reading) and be able to explain how it illustrates the concepts.
- To encourage thinking more broadly about a topic, working in groups, have students take one position on an issue and list all the arguments they can think of that support that side. When they've completed that task, have them take a different position on the same topic and list the arguments supportive of that position.
- To help students summarize content as it is being presented, take a short break during which students compare notes with two or three people sitting near them. Have the group agree on the most important ideas presented so far. Encourage everyone to write those ideas in their notes.

Reference: Erickson, B. L., Peters, C. B., & Strommer, D. W. (2006). *Teaching first-year college students* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

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