
Categories: Pedagogy, Active Learning, Jigsaw

Summary

As part of the on-going trend in higher education to adopt pedagogical approaches that focus less on instruction and more on helping students discover knowledge in an active manner, this article discusses the use of a methodology known as a “Jigsaw” classroom. In essence, the Jigsaw approach puts students at the center of the teaching and learning process by giving them the responsibilities of preparing a body of information and sharing their knowledge with their peers. More specifically, Jigsaw classrooms break students up into groups, give each student within the group a particular section of the assigned materials, and then require each student to present his or her findings on that specific material to the rest of the group members.

In this article, the author discusses his use of a hybrid form of the Jigsaw classroom approach over the course of a semester. In the first third of the semester, the author stuck with a more traditional approach to class: lecture and discussion. In the middle third of the semester, however, he switched to a Jigsaw approach. The final third of the semester was evenly divided between Jigsaw and traditional approaches. In breaking up the semester in this manner, the author hoped to use the first third of the semester to provide background information, and focus the Jigsaw sessions on the application of concepts discussed in the first part of the semester.

During those weeks in which the Jigsaw technique was applied, the author divided the students up into base groups of four or five students. Each member of the various groups were given a portion of the assigned materials for the next class session and asked to be prepared to teach that material to their fellow group members. At the start of the next class session, the base groups met briefly, but then each of the students from the various base groups assigned a specific portion came to meet in what the author referred to as “experts groups.” In the expert groups, the students discussed their findings for their assigned section of the material, discussed the best ways to teach it, and were asked to come up with demonstration or activity that would help illustrate or explain their topic. After meeting in their expert groups, students returned to their base groups, where they proceeded to teach their fellow group members the materials that they had been assigned. The base groups then determined if they had any questions that remained unanswered or if there were elements of the assigned materials that required further clarification. Next, the author called upon one of the base groups to teach one of the demonstrations created by the expert groups to the whole class. Finally, students returned to their base groups to take a brief open-ended quiz on the day’s materials and write up an evaluation of their fellow group members.

Within the Jigsaw classroom, the instructor serves largely as a course manager. Rather than focus on imparting knowledge, the professor must ensure that there is an equitable division of labor, that groups remain on task during class sessions, and that the preparation materials given to students are clearly
articulated and closely tailored to the assigned readings. Whereas content knowledge is the key to successful lecturing, organization is the foremost requirement of the instructor in the Jigsaw classroom environment.

Conclusions

According to the author, the use of the Jigsaw methodology had significant impact on his students. Based on their end of semester evaluations, a large majority of students said that the Jigsaw approach forced them to come to class considerably more prepared than they had for lecture based class sessions. Similarly, large majorities of the students enjoyed the Jigsaw method, felt that it should be used more often, and believed that their peers had taught the assigned materials successfully. Finally, the students also gave the course very high overall marks in their end of semester evaluations.

Applications

The Jigsaw methodology discussed in this article seems like an innovative approach to active learning. While it entails considerable risks, it shifts the focus of instruction and responsibility for knowing the assigned material from the instructor to the students. In doing so, it places a considerable level of responsibility on the students themselves, as they must learn the relevant information not only for themselves, but also for their fellow group members/classmates. Questions seem to remain, however, in regards to ensuring fairness and accountability. In particular, the issue of student absences could play a considerable role in undermining the performance of both the student who fails to attend, but also his or her group members. Despite these concerns, the method seems worthy of further research and potential application.

Citations of Interest


