Categories: Group Work, Team Based Learning, Collaborative Learning, Active Learning, Student Centered Learning, Pedagogy

Summary

This article, which focuses on providing research based ideas for improving group work activities, begins with a brief discussion of scholarly literature on the benefits of group work compared to lecture. According to Hodges, the literature offers significant proof that group work and collaborative learning help students to more fully learn course content, engage in higher order thinking, and employ metacognitive processes. The use of group work, however, comes with certain challenges. Instructors who wish to use group activities as a significant aspect of their courses must consider the potential conflicts that arise of various social dynamics, the likelihood that such work will often be characterized by unequal participation, and the resistance that some students may exhibit towards collaborative learning.

In order to minimize these challenges and optimize the benefits of group work, Hodges offers a detailed list of steps that instructors can take when designing and implementing collaborative activities. The first step in this process is to clarify the goals one has for group work. According to Hodges group work is far more suited for higher order thinking objectives than it is for goals associated with foundational learning. In other words, the goals of group work should focus on getting students to share views or solutions to open-ended questions, or to conduct analysis or interpretation. Getting students to do so in an effective manner, at least initially, may require the instructor to use devices intended to train them in this form of discourse. For example, Hodges suggests the use of “Circle of Voices,” in which students sit in a circle and take turns expressing their views without interrupting each other. Another, more advanced version of this is a “Circular Response Discussion:” students take turns sharing their views without interrupting, but each subsequent student must first paraphrase the previous students comments and try to link them to their own view.

The second suggestion offered by Hodges is that instructors must be transparent about their use of group work. Instructors should explicitly explain their rationales for using group work and what they believe students will gain from it. This should be done throughout the course. Further, instructors need to explain clearly how group work will be graded, how it works into the overall grading structure of the course, and the mechanism intended to prevent it from negatively impacting individuals’ grades.

Third, instructors should be proactive in anticipating and address student resistance to group activities and learning. Hodges notes that according to the literature, student resistance to group learning stems from three main sources: previous learning experiences; the challenges of working with peers; and, instructor behaviors that tend to decrease students’ willingness to participate. Instructors can counter this resistance by doing several things. In addition to explaining the goals and benefits of the activity, instructors can also validate the student-centered nature of group work by acting as a facilitator rather than an authority during the duration of the collaboration. They can also reduce resistance by keeping
the assigned tasks and objectives manageable. Over the course of the semester group work can be scaffolded so that it moves from more casual, simple exercises to increasingly formal and complex activities. This allows students grow increasingly comfortable with group work, and more confident in their ability to successfully engage in it.

In order to optimize the impact of group work on student learning, instructors must not assume that students know how to effectively engage each other in discussion and collaboration. As such, they should prompt students in various ways that increase students’ skills. For example, instructors can remind students to not only share their views on an issue, but also explain their rationale. Similarly, students may need to be prompted to ask each other questions or challenge other group members’ positions. To ensure that students adopt these practices in a manner conducive to civil, college level discourse, instructors may want or need to offer examples of how to ask questions, express confusion, or disagree in an appropriate way.

Hodges fifth suggestion returns to issue of goals, but examines the way that they should impact the structure of group work. In explaining this, Hodges differentiates between group work and team-based learning. The former, according to Hodges, tends to involve more casual structures in which students share views or discuss ideas. In contrast, team-based learning involves more highly structured interactions, defined member roles, and should be used to engage complex or potentially contentious issues, multilayered problems or tasks that might take several weeks to complete, or producing something like a collaborative project.

Next, Hodges offers suggestions pertaining to the proper formation of effective groups. According to Hodges, the literature offers a multiplicity of views as to how properly form groups. From this research, Hodges offers the following considerations: avoid underrepresenting or isolating minority groups; base groups on the task at hand or the goal of the activity; incorporate both individual and collective responsibility into group work (one example is the use of multistage testing/ quizzes-first individual and then group); and, when employing team-based learning with complex objectives focus on maintaining stable teams.

The seventh step that Hodges counsels instructors to take is to design assignments that actually merit group work. Assignments that are too simplistic or foundational in nature will not only decrease student interest and effort, but also detract from their overall attitude towards such activities. In general, group assignments should involve a level of rigor/work that would preclude an individual student from finishing it within the allotted time. As examples, Hodges suggest tasks that ask students to apply content in novel ways, contextualize content by relating it to real-life scenarios, employ case studies, create assignment questions, or engage in critiques of writing samples based on a provided rubric.

Hodges also advises including group work into the course grading system. If group work constitutes an important fact of the course, it needs to be reflected in the grading structure or students will not invest must effort into these activities. The problem to overcome when incentivizing group work through grading revolves around the issue of “social loafing:” students who earn points through the group without contributing much to the effort. This dilemma can be minimized through the use of assigned
roles, calling randomly on specific members of groups to comment or contribute, individual and collaborative testing, and confidential participation evaluations.

In the final two steps, Hodges focuses on the utility of having students and instructors reflect on the experience and value of engaging in group work. For students, reflective practices not only bolster their appreciation and understanding of the benefits of group work, but also get them to employ metacognition. Moreover, instructors can have students do so through relatively straightforward questions: what did you learn from the group activity; how would you characterize your role or your level of effectiveness; how did the activity contribute to your learning. Similarly, instructors also need to reflect on their use group work, particularly in terms of how and to what it degree it helped them achieve their goals. This reflection should be done throughout the semester, and can be effectuated through the use of journal. Instructors will also gain clearer insight into the effectiveness of group work by gathering student feedback and by comparing the results on exam questions tied to group activities to those that were not.

Applications

Aside from the introduction, the entirety of this article lends itself to ready application in the classroom. Indeed, from a practical perspective, Hodge’s article represents the best of what the S.o.T.L literature offers the teaching professor. In particular, Hodge’s work offers not only offers suggestions about a variety of aspects of effective group work, but then also presents a number of straightforward examples of how to implement those suggestions. Anyone who either makes considerable use of group work or is thinking about doing so would do well to read the article in its entirety. Even the experienced practitioner of group work can find valuable suggestions for improving his or her activities, assignments, or structuring of group work.

Citations of Interest


