Using Collaboration and Teamwork

Collaboration has become commonplace in many fields of work, from the humanities to engineering and beyond. Many businesses and work teams are faced with ill-defined challenges that require creative and innovative solutions. These types of challenges call for groups of people with a range of expertise to share and create new knowledge in working together toward a solution. However, collaboration does not come naturally, as most individuals are accustomed to the competitive nature of schools and workplaces. Therefore, educators are charged with preparing students to collaborate and providing opportunities for students to understand the value of collaboration in helping them to think in new ways and become creative and effective problem-solvers.

The Association of American Colleges and Universities has identified group work as a high impact educational practice. “Collaborative learning combines two key goals: learning to work and solve problems in the company of others and sharpening one’s own understanding by listening seriously to the insights of others, especially those with different backgrounds and life experiences.” http://www.aacu.org/leap/hip.cfm

General group work strategies:
While group work assignments can be challenging and time-consuming to design and facilitate, there are strategies to ensure that you and your students get the most out of group work.

Be sure the task is worthy of a group
Carefully structured collaborative tasks require each group member to bring their best. It is often ill-defined, open-ended challenges that do this best. When designing a group work assignment, think about how you would go about the task if you were given the same amount of time as your students to complete the task. Would you assemble a team in order to complete the task? Will the task require the resources of a group versus that of an individual, whether it is time, expertise, or diverse perspectives? Lastly, make certain there are explicit connections between the group work assignment and the course learning objectives. How will the group assignment help students achieve the course objectives?

Design the assignment
As you design the group work assignment, stay focused on your intended learning objectives. What do you hope your students will learn or be able to do as a result of the assignment? Based on the learning objectives, what types of interactions (student-student, student-instructor, student-content) will help your students realize the learning goals? Again, think about how you would go about completing this assignment. Identify the tasks students will need to complete.

Provide clear expectations for each task as well as the final product. Identify the challenges students might face in completing the assignment. Finally, choose a collaborative technology that aligns with the identified interactions, tasks, and challenges.

Prepare students for collaboration
Now that your task is ready for implementation, you must prepare your students for the collaborative experience. Just as you would provide students with the necessary skills to complete an individual research project, you must provide students with strategies to engage in a collaborative assignment. First and foremost, articulate your rationale for assigning the group project, why the assignment is worthy of a group, and how the assignment will help students realize the course objectives. Then, help your students understand what makes good collaboration. For example, lead a group discussion around the research on effective teams, ask students to brainstorm qualities of effective and ineffective team players, engage in team-building exercises followed by reflection, or have students work together to develop group expectations or policies.

Do regular assessments of process and product
Students often focus their efforts on the content deemed most important by the instructor, namely the tasks and assessments that are graded. In group assignments, often the process of collaborating toward a shared goal is as important as the final product or outcome of the collaboration. Clearly articulate how you will measure success for both the collaborative process and the final product. Be sure these measures align with your learning objectives for the assignment. Provide multiple opportunities and avenues for assessment, both formative and summative. Use milestones or regular check-ins to provide feedback on
how the group and individuals are progressing. Provide students the opportunity to evaluate the group process and their group mates’ contributions to the project through peer evaluations, reflective journals, or debriefing activities. Depending on the nature of the assignment, you may also consider asking outside experts to offer feedback and guidance to students.

Selected group work techniques

Group activities can be chosen and designed to engage students at different levels of expertise with your topic, and help them progress toward course goals. Working together offers students opportunities to check understanding, apply and think critically about what they’ve learned, and create new understandings.

Examples include:

Turn to your neighbor
There are several variations of techniques in which students briefly work in pairs or small groups during class. One common form is Think-Pair-Share. The instructor asks the class a question. Each student thinks on their own briefly, then forms a pair or small group, and each shares their thoughts and/or questions. This exercise could be a warm-up for a whole-class discussion.

Variations may have more structured work for the student pairs. Some examples are:

- Taking turns summarizing what they’ve learned from reading or lecture, as a check of understanding.
- Taking turns asking and answering questions related to the course content. Questions may be provided by the instructor or generated by the students.
- Analyzing a problem. One student reads and explains a problem and their process for analyzing. The other student acts as a ‘checker,’ prompting the other student to clarify their process and understanding.
- Individually answer a moderately challenging question that requires applying conceptual understanding, not fact memorization. With a partner or small group, compare answers and explain reasoning. Follow with a review of the correct answer and reasoning behind it.

Debates
If your subject lends itself to opposing views, or pro/con positions that can be backed or refuted by evidence, debates offer a structure for class presentations. Teams can be given a position to defend, and asked to gather and analyze sources to develop arguments and evidence. You can also assign students to write post-debate reflections, giving them a chance to think critically about the topic, the assumptions made, and evidence presented. Debates take a higher level of effort than the ‘turn to your neighbor’ techniques, but can also engage students in deeper, more critical thinking and analysis.

Jigsaw method
This technique offers potential for a learning experience in which students are motivated to exercise self direction and develop a level of expertise and new knowledge they can share with peers. Students, in teams of four to eight work with an assignment that lends itself to individual students taking on different parts of an assignment. Each student develops an understanding or analysis for their portion, and presents what they’ve learned to other students in their team. For example, each student may analyze a situation according to the viewpoint of one particular role, and present this viewpoint to their group. As each student presents, the group as a whole gains a larger perspective. Variations include sharing and presenting perspectives across multiple groups or the whole class.

References:

