



NO MORE GROUP WORK - PLEASE!

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Group work is giving cooperative learning a bad name. That's not good, because cooperative learning, properly conceived and implemented, produces wonderful improvements in student content learning and a whole host of desirable by-products (self-esteem, social skills, communication skills, etc.). Many of you probably enjoy Professor Marianne Jennings' newspaper column in the Sunday Arizona Republic, as do I. Yet, I winced when she dinged the "cooperative learning" her daughter was experiencing in public school, just as I gritted my teeth when called to the President's office some time ago in response to a complaint from an irate student about his "cooperative learning" experience in one professor's class here at ASU.

Yes, cooperative learning does employ groups (actually teams). No, group work is not necessarily cooperative learning. Let me enumerate the three most common complaints (legitimate ones in my eyes) students have about group work, and then let me encourage you to drop group work and think about adopting cooperative learning in its place.

1. **"We have to do a group project, but we can never get our group together."**

Times have changed from when many of us were in college. This is not a residential college of single students whose lives revolve around campus life. It is both unrealistic and unfair to expect students to be able to arrange four or more busy schedule times, often involving people who live 20-30 miles apart, work, have family responsibilities, etc., to work in a meaningful and productive group environment. That doesn't emulate any real world work experience with which I am familiar. The classroom is our equivalent of the workplace. Group work should occur during class time, not outside of class.

2. **"I always end up doing all of the work; others just leech off of me." "Members of my group just don't care." "Others wait until the last minute to do the work." "I don't get along with members in my group."**

Cooperative learning turns groups into teams. Groups are selected purposively or genuinely randomly (not self-selected). Groups stay together for an extended period of time. Team building exercises help create a team and help students to know how to function effectively within a team and what to expect from team members. Explicit roles and responsibilities are often assigned to team members, and members rotate through various role assignments. Teams are characterized by a positive interdependence, individual accountability, an equal sharing of the workload, and simultaneous or concurrent work activity.

3. **"Group grades aren't fair." "My grade is pulled down." "I pull the others up."**

While I have heard faculty justify and express content with group grades, I am in closer agreement with Spencer Kagan, who says that group grades are never justified. It is easy to retain individual accountability in group work, and some of that may include the use of peer evaluations. If you are committed to a group grade, why not allow that simply to be a portion of the grade coming out of the team activity, while still retaining a significant degree of individual accountability? (This point begs a number of questions involving grades, but it still applies to most of us.)

So, if you are committed to involving students in work groups, by all means do, but don't subject your students to these negative group settings. Come over to us and learn some of the basics of creating teams. If you are unwilling to do that, at least don't claim to be doing cooperative learning. Pretty please?