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ABSTRACT

This document provides a rationale and suggestions for the use of small-group instruction in the classroom. It is argued that participatory education, in general, places the teacher in a position of being a coordinator of learning rather than a dispenser of knowledge. The following benefits to be gained from this are noted: a) by relating his ideas to others in a small group, the student clarifies and internalizes concepts; b) the student can exchange views and ideas about material that was covered in some other learning phase; c) by observing the small groups, the teacher gets a rare opportunity to see and hear many students in action at one time; d) students can gain experience in arriving at group decisions through compromise. The following strategies for small-group instruction are also listed and described: task groups, brainstorming groups, discursive groups, and Socratic groups. Suggestions are made as to teaching group discussion skills, arranging seating, and emphasizing the personal dimension. (JA)

WHY SMALL-GROUP INSTRUCTION?

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Why Small-Group Instruction?

There is little question that environment is important in learning. Moreover, it is the social dimension of the environment that is most important. People learn from one another, reinforce one another, motivate one another and collectively move towards goals within a social framework. This is the way of learning whether it transpires under the direct attention of a teacher or not.

Arthur Combs[1] has described this as the "meaning" half of the learning equation. The other half of Combs' equation has to do with information or facts to which the "meaning" is attached through some internalization process. The social dimension of relating to others with the information at hand is basic to establishing the "meaning" Combs describes.

There are many opportunities for social interaction now present in schools, but it is our contention that more such opportunities should be organized. Interaction is difficult in a classroom of 25 or 30 students where the teacher dominates and controls the talk patterns, yet studies of U.S. classrooms reveal this as being the most typical setting. There is no way all or even most of the students in such a setting can have meaningful interaction during the course of a normal class hour.

There are times when learning is best done alone, by listening in a group or by watching, smelling, feeling or otherwise experiencing. However, most typically, learning is best done in a group small enough to allow all students a chance to relate but large enough to allow for diverse opinions and knowledge.

Small-Group Instruction Nourishes Talent

For too long education has been largely geared to the development of a single talent --academic talent. Little attention has been given to the theory of "multiple talents." Taylor,[2] in an article entitled "Be Talent Developers. . .as well as Knowledge Dispensers," suggests other talents the education system should be cultivating.

He names such talent as: creativity, decision making, plannin and forecasting. They are highly "world-of-work" oriented and should therefore be an integral part of any educational program designed to prepare people for that world! Many educators, however, have mistakenly associated academic talent with one's ability to cope successfully with the demands that lie outside of the classroom. Their reasoning is that if a person does well in school, he will be a success in life. There is mounting evidence that academic talent may only relate to an individual insofar as his ability to acquire good school marks or to perform well on standardized achievement tests.

Guilford's[3] studies on productive thinking and the human intellect, Getzel and Jackson's[4] comparison study between highly creative and academically talented students, and MacKinnon's[5] research on nationally-prominent architects indicate that educational programs must provide for the development of an individual's "talent profile."

If teachers are to be talent developers then small-group instruction must become an important part of their repertoire of teaching-learning strategy. Small-group instruction can provide the learning climate in which student talent emerges, is recognized and provided for.

Passive vs. Participatory Education

Traditionally, education has placed students in a passive role. This passive role assumes that all students learn in similar ways, that student interest is collective rather than individual and that the task of education is to mold students to predetermined standards rather than to develop the unique talents of individuals.

"Participative education," according to Wright,[6] focuses on the process of learning which encourages the development of student attitudes that continue to serve the individual beyond the school experience. Also, participative education is characterized by involving the student in the determination of education goals, the identification of individual interests and needs, and in experiences that deal with problems of the world beyond the classroom.

Participatory education places the teacher in a position of being a "coordinator of learning" rather than the dispenser of knowledge. Small-group instruction then becomes an important process whereby the individual is given the opportunity to become involved and to express his unique talents, interests, and learning style.

Purpose of Small-Group Instruction

When new organizational patterns such as large-group instruction, small-group instruction, and independent study are mentioned, one can

get the idea that the purpose of the organization is to either teach groups of different sizes or allow for the student to study alone. These are emphatically not the primary purposes of variable student grouping. Rather the primary purpose of varying group sizes is to individualize learning. The primary purpose of small-group instruction is to provide each individual a chance to relate his knowledge to and with others in a meaningful way.

There are many good things that can be best accomplished when student groups are kept small. By relating his ideas to others in a small group, the student clarifies and internalizes concepts. Teachers have long held the notion of "learning-by-teaching" and in fact reflect this in the typical comment heard from first-year teachers that, "I've learned more this first year of teaching than in four years of training." The students do the "teaching" in small groups and learn by taking a stand and defending it.

The student can exchange ideas and views about material that was covered in some other learning phase. A common mode of operation is to have the teacher give factual data or other input in a large group and then to follow this input with a small group session. Clarity and integration of material and concepts result. Such a sequence can be extended to include some further individual study of the matter which may, in turn, be followed by another small group sharing session, etc.

By observing the small groups the teacher gets a rare opportunity to see and hear many students in action at one time. From this opportunity he can gain valuable feedback concerning the effectiveness of the initial lesson. He can see, too, potential learning difficulties and based on this insight set the goal for future individual and group activities.

Peer interaction is considered very influential in the establishment of individual attitudes and values. We know that professionals tend more to trust respected colleagues than outsiders and the same holds true for students. More change or reinforcement does come from fellow students so why not structure for this through small-group instruction in an overall design? This is especially meaningful for the social sciences. The students get an opportunity for group leadership, for open discussion, for development of mutual respect, to practice listening and to grow in sensitivity to others.

Lastly, students can gain experience in arriving at group decisions through compromise. We expect our students to learn of the democratic process in schools, and arriving at group decision can be nurtured to this end through small-group experiences.

Basic Classroom Discussion Groups

Stanford and Stanford[7] point to four major patterns of group discussion which most teachers recognize. These discussion groups are: (1) simple recitation, (2) inductive questioning, (3) open-ended questions, and (4) problem-solving group.

Simple recitation is oriented to large-group instruction and serves the same function as a teacher-made test. The emphasis is on fact questions, review of material, and diagnoses in terms of helping the teacher find areas of instruction needing further explanation.

Inductive questioning focuses on concept development with the teacher leading students to "right" answers. Students are expected to draw conclusions from information they have previously been exposed to.

Open-ended questions differ from recitation and inductive questioning in that the teacher asks general questions that have no "right" or "wrong" answers. The nature of the discussion deals with more "unknowns" than "knowns."

Students are encouraged to use their intellects in various capacities, and student opinion and feelings are shared. The role of the teacher is that of a catalyst rather than a source of information.

The goal of this sort of discussion is often upsetting to people. The goal is the thinking and expression elicited from the students. Admittedly, this goal is less tangible and more ambiguous than other goals in education. However, the importance of the goal of a group discussion should not hinge on its concreteness, tangibility, or measurability.

The problem-solving group works in a manner similar to that of a committee. In the school setting, the teacher states the problem to be solved. The students are provided the freedom to produce their own answers or solutions.

A goal such as producing a committee report or carrying out specific delegated responsibilities is the end result of the problem-solving discussion.

Strategies in Small-Group Instruction

Too often the phrase "small group" brings to mind a group of people sitting around having a "buzz session." Although this is one good form of small-group instruction there are many others. The form should depend on purpose.

Allan A. Glatthorn[8] presented a classic treatment of this topic during a conference at his school in Abington, Pennsylvania. Glatthorn presented seven distinctly different grouping patterns and of course there are more.

The first pattern cited was called the task group and was described as being much like ordinary committee work. The teacher is not normally part of the group and a student leader helps focus the attention of the group on some specific task to be accomplished. This group is goal-oriented rather than student-oriented.

Another goal-oriented group is the brainstorming group. The group members focus on some problem or goal. Open discussion of the problem is encouraged and many possible solutions are offered. Judgment as to the relative worth of the possible solutions is suspended to encourage a large number of different possibilities. The teacher may or may not be part of the group and eventually the group must trim the list of potential solutions down to one or two they believe are feasible.

Similar to the brainstorming group is the discursive group. Here the focus is on the student and on his opinion and discourse on a topic of prime importanct to him. No solution is sought but rather the goal is free and open discussion on the topic at hand.

While the teacher is not normally a part of the above groups, he is very much a part of the inquiry and Socratic groups. In the inquiry group he serves as the responder, answering only "yes" or "no" to student questions that must, by necessity, be carefully phrased and to the point. When he plays the role of Socrates the teacher reverses this role and stimulates search and discussion by asking carefully phrased, provocative questions of the students.

The teacher remains the central focus of the group when he "retells" something in a didactic group. There are times when saying something to a small group is more meaningful than saying the same thing to a large group. Likewise the small group can be a valuable opportunity for one-on-one tutoring and this opportunity should be used for student/student work as well as teacher/student work.

Other patterns of grouping can be designed for other purposes. Special designs for student evaluation, program evaluation, student feedback, projects, role playing, reflective listening, and research would be of value, for example.

The teacher may or may not be the center of the group. He often must take on new roles such as being an observer, informer, harmonizer, reinforcer, energizer, supporter, regulator, initiator, evaluator, a tension reducer, questioner, or listener to accomplish his purpose.

Teaching Group Discussion Skills

Often small-group discussions fall short of teacher expectation due to the participants' lack of discussion skills. Stanford and Stanford's book entitled, Learning Discussion Skills, offers specific suggestions on how teachers might approach the teaching of discussion skills.

Specific skills identified by Stanford and Stanford are: maintaining order within a group, recognizing the value of individual contribution, taking individual responsibility to contribute, taking responsibility to respond to the contributions of others, listening

in order to perceive differences and agreement, encouraging contribution rather than argument, recognizing individual roles within groups, and arriving at consensus.

A teacher's role in helping students acquire skill in discussion is crucial. Group feedback which deals specifically with how the group functions is needed in order for students to develop functioning groups.

Miles'[9] work, Learning to Work in Groups, can be helpful to teachers in observing individual roles within groups. Such roles as harmonizer, energizer, clarifier, deserter, dominator, and vetoer are recognizable behavior displayed by group members. These roles need to be observed and reported to the group as being either positive or negative influences which contribute to the productivity of the group.

In observing the group, it should be remembered that the teacher doesn't always have to be the one to give the feedback. There are times when observation and feedback from a student may be more helpful.

Points to Remember

It is easy to overlook some significant factors that facilitate group discussion. For example, the seating arrangement can make or break the productivity of a group. A circle arrangement, where all group members can see and hear each other, has been used with much success. If the physical arrangement does not maximize, for participants, the opportunity to see and hear, the discussion degenerates into several "two-way conversations."

Small-group instruction needs to develop the concept of shared leadership. Shared leadership, however, does not mean a leaderless

group. A common practice is to appoint a group facilitator, but of more importance is how the facilitator perceives his role.

The facilitator need not necessarily be the most knowledgeable or articulate concerning the issues to be discussed. The facilitator ought to be concerned about some of the following factors: (1) Did the group understand its task? (2) Did all members share responsibility of leadership? (3) Did all the members exhibit some degree of trust of one another? (4) Were feelings and emotions frankly expressed or was the discussion a stilted intellectual exercise?

Groups need to emphasize the personal dimension of the learning equation. Individual values need to emerge for clarification. Small-group instruction can provide the learning climate whereby subject-matter content takes on personal meaning.

An individual's belief system, prejudices, and experiences serve as perceptual screens. Individuals need feedback on how these perceptual screens influence attitude, behavior, and learning of themselves and others.

The principle of suspended judgment needs to be frequently practiced in small-group discussion. Simply stated, this principle means withholding evaluation. The contributions of group members are apt to be quickly squelched if the teacher or group members busy themselves in making evaluative statements.

Evaluation is necessary but should be applied after the group has had an opportunity to explore and hear the contributions of the entire group.

Don't overdo content--but don't underdo either. A frequent question to be asked in any small-group discussion is: "Is this remark or

question relevant to the group's task?" Small-group instruction can easily become a "bull session" wherein little new information is dealt with. Proper spacing of content input is vital to the effectiveness small-group instruction has on learning. Too much content input might be better done through a lecture. On the other hand, too little content may cause the group to falter and deteriorate into uninteresting dialogues among group members.

Summary

Small-group instruction seems to be a necessary step in changing instruction from that which is vastly large-group oriented to an ideal which calls for more student participation. However, one should not therefore assume there is no place for large-group instruction. Large-group instruction is most appropriate for dissemination of information, showing of films, teaching of certain skill subjects, etc.

Small-group instructional techniques should broaden a teacher's repertoire of instructional approaches and not replace those strategies she or he has found to be effective.

Neither should teachers feel that their leadership function is relinquished when employing small-group instruction. However, teacher leadership in many cases may be less direct and more facilitating rather than controlling.

The purpose of small-group instruction determines the role of the teacher. If the purpose is to elicit student thinking, opinions, and feelings, the teacher's role should be less visible than if the purpose were remedial or one of direct instruction.

Some arguments for small-group instruction are: (1) individuals become the primary focus of instruction, (2) student "productive thinking" is given an opportunity to flourish, (3) individual talent has a chance to emerge, (4) teachers have more opportunity to assess learning problems which may be either collective or individual in nature, (5) students practice communication skills which are essential in adult life and the world of work, (6) students are given time to discuss what is important to them, and consequently education becomes more relevant, and (7) more individuals become involved in learning when the formality of the large-group instruction disappears.

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