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AUTHOR Reid, Louann
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ABSTRACT

Collaborative learning (the construction of knowledge through interaction of pairs or small groups of students) is an effective tool for helping students bridge the gap between speaking and writing. To accomplish this type of learning, students must practice talking and writing in a small group structure. Concrete teaching experience has shown that small groups can be extraordinarily successful, do not always work, and sometimes do not seem to work when they really do. However, the educational value of collaborative learning makes it worth teachers' efforts. When students are in small groups, they participate, risk exploring new ideas, learn from one another, expect success because a group is tackling the task, and learn important social skills. To make these groups work, a classroom climate must be created in which students are free to explore ideas within a structure based on the following guidelines: (1) keep the groups small (3 to 5 students), (2) know each group's task in advance, (3) designate a student in each group to record events, (4) physically separate groups as much as possible, (5) do not intervene unless it is necessary to keep the discussion moving, (6) join in if asked, and (7) plan ahead. With careful structuring, the need for control is greatly minimized. (An annotated bibliography and handouts describing speaking/writing activities are appended.) (JD)

Collaborative Learning: Bridging the Gap Between Speaking and Writing

A speech presented by
Louann Reid

at
the Annual Meeting of the
National Council of Teachers of English
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Jimmy Britton has said, "We teach and teach and they learn and learn; if they didn't, we wouldn't." However, we often wonder what they have learned and, occasionally, how they could have learned something we didn't teach. When we focus on the learner, though, and not the teacher, we can discover a variety of ways in which learning occurs. Today I want to focus on one of those ways which has exciting potential for both teacher and learner.

Although collaborative learning isn't a new idea, classroom research on its effectiveness is relatively recent. Following Britton, Douglas Barnes and others in England and America have analyzed what children say and write when working in small groups. What they have found and what I have learned as I have experimented with collaborative learning in my classroom form the background for my presentation today. Through collaboration, students can indeed bridge the gap between speaking and writing.

I would like to begin by explaining three assumptions under which I am operating today. First, learning is interactive. In most cases our knowledge comes to us in two ways, according to the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky. He says that "Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: . . . first, between people . . ., and then inside the child." This applies to attention, memory, and the formation of concepts. He concludes that "All the higher functions originate as actual relations between human individuals."(p.57) I

believe that an interaction between at least two people helps internalize new knowledge. Thus, there is a need for collaboration.

I also assume that learning is a process of constructing knowledge. I believe, along with Vygotsky, James Britton, Douglas Barnes and others, that knowledge is, in Michael Polanyi's words, a "process of knowing"(Britton in Barnes, 1986: 108). Under this paradigm, teachers do not transmit knowledge in completed form as a builder would sell a prefabricated house. Instead teachers provide the tools and opportunities for practice so that students may fabricate their own knowledge. They must be allowed and encouraged to find ways to adapt their old knowledge to the new learning if this knowledge is to last.

Two of the best tools for that construction, and this is my third assumption, are speaking and writing. Through language we learn to connect what we already know with new information. Through language we organize our view of ourselves and of the world. Through language we actively participate in gaining knowledge. According to Virginia O'Keefe, a teacher in Fairfax County, Virginia, if we allow students to "meld language and life, we will build the bridges necessary for each student to create his or her own meaning to fit his or her own world"(p. 12). In other words, we will help them bridge the gap between past knowledge and new.

I believe that both talking and writing are necessary tools for discovering, exploring and shaping knowledge. For that reason I use collaborative learning to help my students use both too naturally.

Now, what do I mean by collaborative learning? Although there are many uses of the term in schools in both Britain and America, I use it to mean the construction of knowledge through interaction of pairs or small groups of students. Groups may not always produce a visible end product, but there should always be a purpose and some sort of individual or group end result. We should not assume that wherever two or more are gathered there will be an effective discussion.

In order to accomplish this type of learning, students need to practice talking and writing in a structure which may be unfamiliar to them. Some of them will be uncomfortable with the change from whole class instruction and may even ask that the teacher continue transmitting knowledge instead of asking students to "work." For the next few minutes, I'm going to give you some hints from my experience of using small groups which may help you show your students how to use this structure more effectively.

What I Absolutely Know

I have used small groups in my English, speech and drama classes with nearly 4000 students in my 12 years of teaching. Although I'm sure I haven't experienced all of the problems and benefits that may arise, I feel confident

that there aren't too many surprises left. From this experience I have distilled the following certainties:

Small groups can be extraordinarily successful.

Small groups do not always work.

Sometimes small groups don't seem to work when they actually do.

As an example of this last "certainty" I want to share a story with you. The other day I was showing my student teacher how to use small groups with sophomores. I thought I was fairly safe because a similar assignment had worked spectacularly with the previous class. I gave all of the groups separate tasks to do for The Pearl and I had them choose a recorder. I told them what they would be expected to do and when it was all due. Then Stacey and I observed them. It was awful! They claimed that they didn't understand the questions. They talked too loudly and off the subject. One group of boys threw paper at a group of girls they like, one group looked totally perplexed, and only one group did what they were supposed to. At the end of class, I told Stacey that this was what happened when groups didn't work. The next day, however, every group presented their part of the assignment and did it well. I had lost faith too early.

I think that if I were limited to one key piece of advice today, that would be it. Don't give up. The value of collaborative learning makes the effort worth the accompanying irritations.

Advantages of Small Group Work

You probably already know some of the advantages of group work so I want to focus on those which fit my three assumptions and I want to tell you what some of my students said when I asked them how they learned best. What happens when students are in groups:

They participate. Opportunities for individual participation are greatly increased in small groups. We find that reticent students especially benefit by talking more than they do in whole class discussion. In some of our classes with anywhere from 25 to 35 or 40 students, individuals are pretty limited in their chance to contribute. And, if you believe that exploratory talking is necessary for learning, you begin to question how much learning can occur.

They risk. Students are more likely to take risks in small groups. Exploratory talk involves making guesses, attempting explanations, then reconsidering. That kind of talk is not possible in whole class discussion where students feel they must compete to get the "right" answer. Competition is minimized when collaboration is increased.

They collaborate. Through collaboration, students learn from each other. Brandi said she must be allowed "to reason with things (ideas) not to reason with words on paper." In explaining a concept to another student, they are forced to understand it better. Haven't you

experienced this, too? I have often heard teachers say they never really understood grammar as well as when they began to teach it.

They expect success. The task seems less daunting because students are not expected to learn alone. Brian learns better in a comfortable atmosphere where he is not forced to keep up with everyone else. He said, "Learning environment affects us. It should be comfortable. We should not be rushed."

Finally, they learn social skills. Students learn to listen to each other and sometimes they learn ways to draw others into the discussion. In addition, they learn the importance of working together. Kathey added another point, "I would say I learn best when we can work with our friends because you enjoy yourself while you work."

How to Make Groups Work

All right, you've decided to give this a try. How do you go about setting up groups and keeping them going successfully? What do you do about your evaluator who believes a quiet classroom is a happy classroom? What do you do about students who believe a group discussion day is a free day?

Climate is the key. You need to believe, then show students and your evaluator, that group work is serious stuff, too. You will allow students the freedom to explore ideas but you need to give them a structure in which to do

that. Through your attitude and actions, you can create a climate that encourages rather than restricts exploration.

Establishing the structure is an important part of the climate. Since you are dealing with people who vary from day to day, you need to allow for flexibility in your establishment of structure. However, if I gave you all of the variations, you would be confused, not enlightened, so I will give you one set of guidelines, hoping you will remember to change them to fit your situation.

The following seven reminders will help you structure your groups. First, small groups should be small. Limit the size to 3 to 5 students. As the size of the group increases, so does the noise level. In addition, the opportunity for each student to participate diminishes.

Second, know in advance how you want groups to form. You may want students to select their own groups for some tasks. For other purposes, you may want to assign groups. There are also random methods you could use such as counting off or giving each student a colored piece of paper when he enters the room and having them form groups based on the color. Do not demonstrate confusion about group formation, though. A confused teacher begets a confused class.

Each group should have a recorder or presenter. Depending on the task, you may also want to have students choose a leader. The research seems divided on leaderless vs. leader-led groups. See what works with your students. Mine generally work best without a leader.

Physically separate groups as much as possible. This helps each group feel more like a cohesive unit and it reduces the noise level.

Do not intervene unless it is necessary to keep the discussion moving. After all, the purpose is to let the students learn through talking. If I had intervened in my seemingly unsuccessful class, I might have damaged what learning seems to have happened without me.

Do join in if asked. After all, you have valuable information to contribute. When students are ready to learn that and ask you for it, they probably remember longer than they would if you offered the same material in a lecture. Furthermore, students learn from your actions. If you show them that group work is important to you by joining in, they will take it seriously, too. You can imagine what message you would send them if you spent the period grading papers.

Plan ahead. Know what you want students to accomplish. Then, be willing to change the plan to fit the group.

With careful structuring, the need for control is greatly minimized. However, knowing why control is more difficult with small groups and being aware of ways to control chaos will also make your groups more effective.

One problem in using small group discussion is that the pupil-teacher relationship changes. The teacher no longer stands in front of the class, lecturing. He is now a collaborator. Some students find that shift initially

difficult to make--as do some teachers. Another reason that control is more difficult is that verbal and sometimes physical response is encouraged. That is a major change from the lesson where the only physical response required is taking notes. Finally, material for small group discussion may be emotionally high pitched or humorous. This is fine; in fact, some of the best discussions evolve from this sort of material. However, you should be aware that there may be more involvement/noise with that sort of material.

If you show, though, that you are serious about this and that you expect behavior that is not disruptive, students will usually comply. You should explain your objectives and demonstrate how the assignment will work. Finally, you should make it clear that everyone will be involved somehow, especially if you are doing some sort of dramatic activity.

Before I conclude, I would like to make one additional comment about control. The more you use small groups, the more comfortable you will feel with the question of control. However, I do not want you to be so concerned about control that there is no room left for the spontaneity that is such an important part of small group work. You should be prepared for talk that does not seem to be related to the subject. I believe this is necessary. When I have transcribed tapes of students

working in groups, I have found what many other researchers have found. That is, digressions seem to occur when students hit some kind of block. The most puzzling digression I remember occurred in a group of ninth grade boys. I was taping them for a research project and I wanted everything to go perfectly. Of course, it didn't. Right in the middle of their discussion of some serious poem, they began singing "You deserve a break today" and finished the rest of the commercial. Well, I guess they thought they deserved a break because afterwards the quality of their discussion had indeed improved. For those of us trained to control the knowledge available in class, group discussions are occasionally unsettling. Before assuming that students are off the task, wait a little while and see what happens.

Within a flexible structure, talking can enhance writing instruction. In the November, 1981, English Journal, Joyce Carroll Armstrong concluded that "Talking enables students to (re)discover the creativeness of language, to verbally reconstruct their reality, to practice with expansion, imitation and meaning--all attributes of writing."

(An annotated bibliography and copies of the handouts which describe activities combining speaking and writing follow.)

RESOURCES

Athanases, Steve. "Structuring Small Groups for the Secondary English Class." Structuring for Success in the English Classroom. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1982. 7-10.

This article suggests a procedure and three uses of small groups--for character analysis, for argumentation and for generating composition topics.

Barnes, Douglas. From Communication to Curriculum. Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin, 1975.

Barnes stresses that the interaction that takes place between teacher and pupil is crucial. After transcribing numerous conversations from classrooms, he advocates increased use of small groups in order to make students more responsible for their own learning.

Barnes, Douglas, James Britton and Mike Torbe. Language, the Learner and the School. 3rd ed. Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin, 1986.

This is the book to read if you only have time to read one. It is the essence of the arguments of three major figures in the field of using language to learn.

Barnes, Douglas and Frankie Todd. Communication and Learning in Small Groups. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, Ltd., 1977.

Beginning with the assumptions that language is used to construct our view of the world and that one means by which adolescents achieve higher levels of thinking is through internalization of dialogues with others, Barnes and Todd taped and transcribed discussions of 13-year-olds engaged in a variety of tasks. They then categorized the cognitive and social skills the students use. This book demonstrates that learning does occur in small groups and shows what students actually do learn.

Book, Cassandra and Kathleen Galvin. Instruction in and about Small Group Discussion. Urbana, IL: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills; Annandale, VA: Speech Communication Association, 1975.

This small book offers theory followed by exercises which help students learn group processes. Students enjoy the activities, which focus on specific group practices such as brainstorming, decision making and problem solving.

Britton, James. Language and Learning. Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin Books, 1970.

This seminal work sets forth Britton's arguments about the role language plays in the development of children. Based on theory and his teaching experience, he shows how children learn through language.

Christenbury, Leila. "Structuring the Classroom for Peer Revision of Composition." Structuring for Success in the English Classroom. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1982. 120-125.

Christenbury offers warm-up activities to help students who may be familiar with group work but unfamiliar with revision groups. She suggests methods of grouping, specific criteria for roles and tasks and methods of feedback for students' efforts.

Harnack, R. Victor, Thorrel B. Fest and Barbara Schindler Jones. Group Discussion: Theory and Technique. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1977.

The authors provide a thorough discussion of group dynamics. They offer numerous guidelines, solutions to potential problems and suggestions for evaluation of student performance of groups. This is probably more information than needed by the teacher setting up groups for the first time, but is useful later for understanding why groups work the way they do.

Knowles, Lewis. Encouraging Talk. New York: Methuen, 1983.

Knowles begins with a theoretical chapter on learning through talking followed by practical strategies for classroom use. Besides an excellent chapter on group discussions, he also deals with prepared talks, reading aloud, debates and interviews. Finally, he offers suggestions for assessment of talk.

O'Keefe, Virginia P. Affecting Critical Thinking Through Speech. Urbana, IL: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills; Annandale, VA: Speech Communication Association, 1986.

O'Keefe encourages an active approach to learning. She shows how lessons in all subjects can benefit from speech activities. In the practice section she explains structure and dynamics of small group discussion and offers activities which promote the thinking skills of reasoning, predicting and projecting.

"The Responding Reader: Nine New Approaches to Teaching Literature." Special Issue of The Kentucky English Bulletin. 32.1. 1982.

Throughout these articles about teaching literature are methods for use of small groups. Also included are suggestions for successfully structuring groups.

Stanford, Gene and Barbara Dodds Stanford. Learning Discussion Skills Through Games. New York: Citation Press, 1969.

The authors discuss discussion in general, then give activities for building skills in sequence and exercises to "solve" fifteen problems groups will encounter. Everything is clearly explained, and the ideas are excellent.

Torbe, Mike and Peter Medway. The Climate for Learning. Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook, 1981.

Torbe and Medway discuss establishment of classroom structures (climate) which encourage children's learning through using their language in speaking and writing. They offer ample examples of learning in small group discussions.

Vygotsky, L. S. Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes. Ed. Michael Cole, Vera John-Steiner, Sylvia Scribner, and Ellen Souberman. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1978.

This work sets forth Vygotsky's ideas about the development of cognitive processes such as memory, perception and attention. In addition, he details his ideas about the zone of proximal development, an area between the child's actual developmental level and the level he can reach with adult assistance. Through interaction with others, "what is in the zone of proximal development today will be the actual developmental level tomorrow" (87). This has obvious implications for the value of small group discussion.

---. Thought and Language. Ed. and trans. Eugenia Hanfmann and Gertrude Vakar. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1962.

Vygotsky believed that speech is learned through internalization of others' language. Furthermore, the language one uses shapes one's thoughts. The ideas in this book about the relationship of language to thought were influential in the thinking of Britton, Barnes, Torbe, Medway and others cited in this list of sources. It is difficult but well worth the struggle.

CHARACTER SKETCH INSTRUCTIONS

Choose a presenter or presenters and a leader who will help you stay within the time limit.

Discuss one of the characters in your novel.

Select symbols and colors which represent that character.

Arrange symbols and glue them in place.

Present your group's poster to the whole class.

FOLLOW-UP ASSIGNMENT

Now, look at all of the posters. On your own, write a description of one of the characters. You might want to follow these steps.

Prewriting. Expand the possibilities of one of the symbols. You might expand through listing, webbing or mapping, brainstorming or freewriting. Ask yourself what qualities are associated with a particular symbol or color and come up with as many as possible.

Sharing. Discuss your list with a partner. Can either of you think of more qualities? Write them down.

Focussing. Try to group the qualities. For example, do you have several words which might apply to strength? These groups may form your paragraphs.

Drafting. Write your description, concentrating on the development of ideas.

Sharing. Read your paper to your partner. What is his or her reaction? Look for places where you can expand or eliminate irrelevant details. Make sure you have an interesting beginning and a clear thesis sentence.

Revising. Rewrite your paper, incorporating your partner's suggestions and anything else you've seen as you look at your draft again.

Editing. Share your paper with your writing group for their reactions.

Finishing. Rewrite and hand this paper in for a grade or file it in your folder.

Physical Poetry

Instead of assigning poems to be read, why not assign them to be acted out? Many students enjoy doing this and all enjoy watching. Furthermore, as one of my students said, "You understand the poem better by acting it out."

CHOOSING POEMS. Depending on your students' familiarity with poems, almost any poem may be used. However, beginning students will have more success with poems which contain some action and/or dialogue. When they become more familiar with the imagery and style of poems they may be able to be raindrops and flowers opening. Some of the most successful poems for junior high students have been the following.

"Ku Klux" by Langston Hughes
"my enemy was dreaming" by Norman Russell
"Constantly Risking Absurdity" by Lawrence Perlinghetti
any poem by Shel Silverstein

PREPARING THE CLASS. Some students are understandably shy about performing in front of the class. These students may feel better if they are put in groups where they can be with their friends. Another way to reduce anxiety is to allow these students to be the readers as other students pantomime the action. Anxiety may also be reduced by not grading this presentation and by making it clear everyone is expected to do something and no one will just watch.

PROCEDURE. First, go through the poems with all of the students. You might want to read them aloud or ask if there are student volunteers to read. For a class of 30, six to ten poems from which to choose is sufficient.

Second, ask students to divide into groups of approximately three. One person in each group may be the narrator while the others pantomime the action or two people may divide up the dialogue and narration while also acting out the part.

Give groups some time to work out their presentation. With the poems above, junior high students need about 10 to 15 minutes to "rehearse."

Have the groups make their presentations. Remember to applaud after each one; it's a wonderful reinforcement.

RESULTS. Students show that they understand the action of the poem and the relationships between characters. The poem becomes a small part of them when they become actively involved, using their bodies and not just their eyes.

Louann Reid, 1986