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ABSTRACT

Research has shown that in the small group setting, students develop well articulated understandings and better recall of their readings. One study, however, showed negative results in terms of recall, understanding, and personal response for small group work in eighth-grade literature classes. Those findings led to follow-up research on the ninth-grade level. In an examination of 54 ninth-grade English classes, small group activities occurred in only 29 of 216 classes observed, for an average of only 15 minutes at a time. As in the eighth-grade study, the ninth-grade research showed that overall, small group work actually led to lower student achievement. However, regression analysis demonstrated that in the group setting, the greater the degree of student autonomy, the greater was the production of knowledge and the greater the likelihood that group time would contribute to achievement. The apparent ineffectiveness of small group work overall suggests, therefore, that groups are sometimes used ineffectively. When small group time allows students to interact over a problem, they benefit. For group work to succeed, teachers must carefully design collaborative tasks that are interesting to students, and not just to the teacher. (One figure is included; 26 references are attached.) (SG)

Using Small Groups for Response to and Thinking About Literature

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Introduction

If English teachers listen to researchers, they may easily wonder whether or not small groups are a good idea for their classrooms. On the one hand, considerable research on instruction shows that students learn more when they interact directly with the teacher than when they are left to work on their own (for review, see Brophy & Good, 1986). On the other hand, another school of thought documents the effectiveness of cooperative learning in small groups, especially when compared to competitive and individualistic learning (Slavin, 1980; for review, see Johnson & Johnson, 1991). In this article, we present our research findings on using small groups to help students think and reason about literature.

Small Groups in Writing Instruction

Small groups used in writing instruction have long been of special interest to English teachers, and here, too, research reports mixed results. Moffett (1968) first recommended groupwork to high school teachers on the grounds that, given large teaching loads, it is the only practical way teachers can arrange for their students to get adequately frequent feedback on their writing. Since Moffett's recommendation, much research has been undertaken. Almost all of this research has examined postsecondary instruction, but the results are nonetheless useful for high school teachers since they bring into focus issues which are germane to the effectiveness of small groups in English, in both writing and literature instruction.

In a synthesis of 29 experimental studies, Hillocks (1986) concluded that small groups are more effective when the teacher carefully structures group activities than when the teacher allows students total control over the agenda of their interactions with one another. Berkenkotter (1984) warned that "bad chemistry" between students can poison the working environment of groups, and Newkirk (1984a, 1984b) found groupwork problematic, noting that students tend to be more tolerant of poorly developed writing than teachers. By contrast, Nystrand (1986, chapter 8; Nystrand & Brandt, 1989) found that college composition instruction involving peer groups can be superior to conventional instruction in which students write only for their teacher. He discovered that, over a semester, students who wrote and regularly discussed their writing with each other in groups of four or five became more effective writers than their counterparts who wrote only for teachers.[1] Other studies examining groupwork in composition have reported: (a) gains in critical thinking, organization, and appropriateness (Lagana, 1973); (b) improved revision skills (Benson, 1979); (c) more attention to prewriting and increased awareness of students' own writing processes (Nystrand, 1983); and (d) improved writer confidence (Fox, 1980). For review, see DiPardo & Freedman (1988).

Recently, Daiute & Dalton (1991) have shown that, in the absence of a knowledgeable adult, peer collaboration can promote learning when, in working together on tasks of mutual interest, each conversant stretches to realize the potential of the joint project. In their study of the collaboration of third graders working in pairs to compose narratives, they found, expertise is relative: Some students provided support on such technical matters as spelling and punctuation,

[1] In this study of 250 college freshmen in 13 classes comparing classes working in groups with other classes, Nystrand discovered that when peers respond to each other's papers, they tend to respond to the purpose of the authors and deal with unclear and ineffective passages in terms of their own difficulties as readers. By contrast, the teachers who responded to students' papers tended to evaluate the student texts less in terms of the author's purpose and more to compare them to some arbitrary standard of excellence.

and others contributed ideas on narrative structure. Key to the success of these collaborations was the possibility of joint ownership for the participants.

Small Groups in Literature and Reading Instruction

Small groups have also been used in English classes to teach literature. Before British scholars James Britton and Nancy Martin introduced the idea of "writing to learn," known well to English teachers, Britton (1969) wrote at length about "talking to learn" in conjunction with literature instruction. Britton and Martin believe that uninterrupted student talk in small groups can help students develop well articulated understandings of their readings. In a recent empirical study of writing about nonfiction designed to test some of these ideas, Sweigart (in press) shows that student-led small-group discussions of nonfiction are superior to both lecture and whole-class discussion in helping students recall and understand essays they read. The small-group discussions he studied were also superior in preparing students to write analytic, opinion essays, which were scored for clear thesis and elaboration of ideas.

Factors Distinguishing Small-Group Practice in English

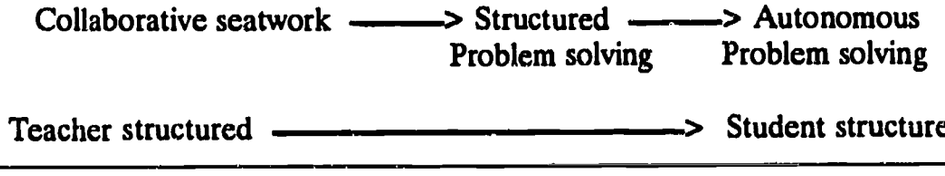
In our research, we were surprised to find negative results for small-group work in eighth-grade literature classes (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991a). In this study we had examined patterns of interaction among teachers and students, and we had predicted that small-group work and discussion would enhance achievement by engaging students substantively, especially compared to lecture, drillwork, and recitation which, like short-answer study questions, typically involve abbreviated responses from students. We found after a year of instruction, however, that increased time spent in small-group work seemed to result in *lower* achievement in literature (we assessed achievement by asking students a series of questions about several of their readings designed to gauge the extent of their recall, indepth understanding, and personal response; see

below). We decided to examine this finding in more detail in a follow-up study of ninth-grade literature classes. We were particularly interested in distinguishing various kinds of small-group work and to see if some were more effective than others.

In the ninth-grade study, unlike the eighth-grade study, we had audiotaped the classes we observed, and though we had not placed microphones in small groups, the tapes provided records of how each class proceeded. For classes involving small-group work, we were able to determine: (a) what preceded and what followed this work, (b) the kinds of tasks undertaken in groups, (c) the instructions the teachers gave to the groups, and (d) the roles teachers played vis-à-vis the groups.

We learned that small-group work involved a great range of activities. Some small-group work was so highly structured by the teacher — involving, for example, students completing worksheets together — that it might best be called "collaborative seatwork." Other groups, which we call problem-solving groups, required students to come to consensus concerning some issue or question which the teacher defined. Yet other small-group work, which we describe as "autonomous," was even more open ended, with the groups themselves defining as well as resolving the problems and issues they discuss. Figure 1 shows the continuum described by these categories.

Figure 1. Continuum of Small-Group Work



Our earlier work indicated that students respond to literature to the extent that instruction promotes ownership by helping students relate personally to the stories and dramas they read.

One way teachers do this is by asking "authentic" questions, which are questions without prespecified answers, such as questions of opinion or open-ended questions (When teachers are not asking authentic questions, they usually are asking test questions to see what students know, for example, during recitation). Authentic teacher questions promote ownership because they show that the teacher takes student ideas seriously.

Another of our findings from the eighth-grade study was that literature achievement is related to the coherence of instruction. Classes involving extensive recitation are geared to covering essential points of information which the teacher carefully identifies before class. The structure of classroom discourse is therefore predetermined and is not significantly affected by student responses: from class to class, the teacher tends to ask the same questions in the same order regardless of who's in the class or how they respond. As a result, recitation tends to be choppy and less coherent than discussion. By contrast, during discussion and classroom discourse involving authentic questions and follow-up questions, what the teacher says is partly shaped by what students say and their prior knowledge, and the resulting discourse consequently displays a coherence approximating conversation-like interaction (Nystrand and Gamoran, 1991b). The coherence of classroom discourse is important because it helps students think about their readings in depth and on their own terms. Rather than requiring students merely to remember someone else's ideas, coherent classroom talk helps students develop a train of thought. In short, it promotes active production and not merely the recitation of knowledge.

Many studies in cognitive psychology demonstrate that learning is promoted when students can relate what they must learn to things they have already learned. Cognitively, this coherence benefits students because it increases the degree to which information is thematized and thereby promotes "chunking" of information (cf. Miller, 1957), which, in recitation, too often tends to

remain disparate and unrelated. Wittrock (1990; Wittrock & Alesandrini, 1991) show that students' retention of new information is enhanced when they are able to relate it to their personal experience and especially when they do so in their own words. Pressley and his colleagues[2] show that understanding and retention are also promoted by opportunities for self-generated elaborations. Discussion and interactive discourse promote learning because they elicit relatively sustained responses from students and thereby promote retention and in-depth processing associated with cognitive manipulation of information. The benefits of increased processing and sustained response are explained largely by the fact that interactive instruction cultivates student ownership and engagement; this occurs because the teacher validates students not just as remembers but also as thinkers.

Our study looked exclusively at the features of small-group work that promote thinking. Given our findings that ownership, coherence of discourse, and student production of knowledge are important features of effective instruction, we reasoned that to promote response to and thinking about literature, small-groups should also manifest these traits. More specifically, we predicted that collaborative seatwork, which is essentially written recitation done by students working together, would be less effective than problem-solving and autonomous groups, which allow ownership and thereby maximize the possibility of coherent discussion. It may be that collaborative seatwork is effective for teaching facts and grammar, but our research did not examine this possibility.

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[2] Pressley, McDaniel, Turnure, Wood, & Ahmad, 1987; Pressley, Woloshyn, Wood, Martin, & Menke, 1992.

Small-Group Work in Ninth-Grade English

As we examined the range of activities that we had coded as small-group work, we confirmed our initial impression that "small-group time" was a misleading category because of important differences among the activities that occurred in small groups. We can illustrate these contrasting activities by focusing on two dimensions of work in small groups: student autonomy and student production of knowledge. The following illustrations are drawn from data on 54 ninth-grade English classes in 9 midwestern high schools. The schools varied in community types (5 were urban, 3 were small-town or rural, and 1 was suburban), and they were in the same communities as the junior high schools from which we had drawn our eighth-grade data. We visited each class four times, using laptop computers to record time spent in different activities (we also noted other aspects of instructional interaction).

Small-group activities occurred in only 29 of the 216 class sessions we observed. The small-group sessions averaged about 15 minutes when they occurred, but because they were so infrequent, small-group time accounted for less than two minutes of the average fifty-minute period among all the classes. The group work we observed was usually closer to collaborative seatwork than to student problem-solving and autonomous group work.

Student Autonomy in Groups. Teachers shape group work by assigning tasks and establishing parameters of interaction. In highly "prescripted" groupwork, the parameters are defined entirely by the teacher, and the task could just as easily be done without interaction among students. The group setting is gratuitous, used perhaps more for the teacher's convenience. Here is an example from a ninth-grade English class:

> *Today while you are working in groups you will keep the same groups that you had yesterday. The same rules will apply, and those are: You must, as a group, form a*

> *tight circle; you must bring all of your materials with you to that group and you may NOT get up from your seat; your voice must stay at a whisper —if I can hear you above anyone else's, that means you are too loud and your name will go up on the board. You may do one of two things in your group. You may continue to work on your paper —there are 5 probably 6 people I have to see yet in conference. If you are as far as you can go in your groups with your papers —that is, editing, proofreading, all of those —then as a group, I would like you to see if you can fill in the blanks on this handout on 5 basic sentence patterns: how to find them, what questions to ask. And we will go over this. Remember one section of your binders should be sentence patterns* (Teacher structured, prescripted groupwork)

This groupwork, so completely structured by the teacher, promotes neither ownership nor coherent discussion.

In more autonomous groups, the teacher gives students some latitude in their interactions with each other, and though students may remain on a "short leash," the groupwork nonetheless displays spontaneous student interactions concerning the substance of the lesson. In the most autonomous groups, the teacher clearly defines group tasks but without prescripting the group work. Typically the teacher (a) defines the goal of the group, e.g., arriving at a consensus concerning some controversial issue; (b) outlines the tasks to be accomplished, e.g., the group composition of a letter outlining their views to a public official; and/or (c) assigns roles to group members, e.g., two group members argue one side of the issue while two others argue the other side and one student acts as the recorder. In a ninth-grade remedial English class, for example, Nystrand and his students first brainstormed what they considered "the most important problem in America today" (Nystrand, 1974). These turned out to be inflation, corrupt public officials

(Watergate), pollution, crime, and population control. In groups concerning their particular problems, students' assigned tasks involved collaborative writing a script for a brief skit, a transcript from a mock interview, a news stories, and a letter to the editor of a local paper. Each group also wrote (typed, and mailed) a letter to some public official who could do something about their problem. Each of these tasks is clearly structured but affords considerable intellectual freedom. The outcome of autonomous group work is largely shaped by the interactions of students and direction the group takes; the results of the interactions cannot be predicted before class.

In the following transcript, for example, the teacher initiates groupwork after students have written some original verse. Referring to the students' poems, the teacher says:

> *If yours is the best it can be —instead of counting off, because we'll run out of time —will you just group together with the 3 or 4 —3 or 4 maximum —people around you. Read them over, and choose the one that ... looks the most specific to you —see that person that they're talking about.*

A little later, this teacher reminds students that she wants

> *to hear what you've picked out in your groups so that you're hearing some of the real strong images of these people. . . . I'm asking you to brag; I want to hear the 3 or 4 REAL good ones, so people who are having difficulty get a good sample before they go home* (autonomous groupwork)

This skillfully organized groupwork starts with expressive student writing, thus promoting ownership. Because students must work together not only to find good examples but also because they are encouraged to articulate what "good" means in this context, the ensuing group talk is more likely to be coherent conversation than the first session where students must "fill in the

blanks on this handout on 5 basic sentence patterns." Such discussions were rare in our study: 11.1% of all small-group work was judged either to be wholly autonomous or to display significant student interaction in producing the outcome of group work. By contrast 70.4% of all small-group work was prestructured by the teacher.

Student Production of Knowledge. In addition to promoting coherent conversation, the second example also encourages students to generate insights and understandings far more than the first session. In activities such as completing worksheets and answering study questions, students are required mainly to manipulate and master information provided by the teacher or a textbook. This work calls only for lower order cognitive activity, characterized by questions with prespecified right and wrong answers, tends not to be very coherent because it does not build on student responses. It consequently fails to result in student production of knowledge. Here is an example:

> *Everyone put their name in the upper right. Put your name and your period and the group number in the upper right hand corner. Now I've gone over two or three times your group number so you should remember it —when you get into your groups, if you have forgotten it, maybe somebody in there will remember it. Now you are to combine eight sentences to form the kind of sentence shown in parentheses, ok? And I mean that ... when I say a simple sentence, that's what I mean: a simple sentence that has one subject and one predicate. When I say compound sentence, I mean two sentences of equal value and equal importance, put together with a conjunction or a semi-colon or a transitive adverb, ok? Complex sentences: you will be asked to either write one with an adjective clause or an adverb clause. And because there were no noun clauses, I have given you a task down below here to write two sentences with noun clauses. Now, all of the sentences up above —the first eight —are*

all about Niagara Falls and the river and stuff like that, and though it isn't absolutely important that you focus on the Niagara River, it would be kind of nice if you did it, all right? (Groupwork involving little or no production of knowledge)

In another example from another class, the teacher puts students to work in groups on a worksheet concerning Greek gods:

I know you won't finish the entire chart, but we will be starting ... sharing, because what we want to be sure is that everyone has the same items on the chart. So I will give you the next 15 minutes ... to just work on what you have. Be sure if you haven't —some of you maybe start from the back; we won't get them all checked today so that you have the chart. This is the chart that you will have to memorize, you will be tested on it ... I want to make sure you all have the same information ....

(Groupwork involving little or no production of knowledge)

In other groups, by contrast, students must sustain a coherent discussion in order to work out problems that generate new understandings. Typically, this groupwork proceeds in response to open-ended questions with more than one acceptable answer and involves higher order cognitive activity. In the following transcript, for example, the teacher asks students to predict the ending of an Agatha Christie novel. To get them thinking, she first asks them to write a brief plot summary:

In a paragraph, write out what happened, what you think happened —and talk it out first, because there are a lot of lights going on in your eyes, and some of you are still saying, "I have no idea." Get together in your group, and on a sheet of loose-leaf tell me what happened.

As students work, the teachers then says:

> *As I came around, a lot of you picked up a lot of the clues as to how she might have been killed and, so then, who would have done it. Whoever you're accusing, think about a motive —so some of you are saying, "Oh, the inspector did it" or "The colonel did it" or "Pollet did it" or "Ted did it," and that's all you're writing down. What I came around and asked you for was a motive, right? Miss Marple's got that down. So in your paragraph: who did it and a motive.*

In another lesson from another class, the teacher asks her students to analyze the characterization of Mr. Morrison in *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry.*

> *Here's what you need to do ... First of all, you want to name three outstanding character traits. Now, remember traits refer to personality, not physical characteristics. ... Give supporting quotations for your ideas, one quote for each trait will be fine, and then give a warrant —that is, explain how the quote sets up that trait or how it establishes that trait, and then tell me what technique [the author] is using. Does she use a character's language, a character's actions, or do you see the character through the eyes of another character, or the reaction of another character?*

In each of these latter two examples, students must not only identify some underlying principle — a motive for murder, a character trait — but also find supporting evidence for the interpretation. Once again, we discovered that such group work is infrequent: We judged only about a quarter of the group work we observed to be involve discussion of open-ended questions with students actively constructing interpretations. By contrast, two thirds was a version of collaborative seatwork.

Effective and Ineffective Small-Group Work

Does the quality of time spent in small groups affect the contribution of group work to achievement? We addressed this question through a statistical technique called regression analysis. Regression allows us to examine the effects of one condition — for example, the amount of time spent in small groups — while statistically holding constant other important conditions — for example, characteristics of students in different classes. In our analysis, we held constant students' sex, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and fall reading and writing skills.[3] We also took into account teachers' uses of authentic and follow-up questions, the amount of discussion time outside of small groups, as well as rates of student off-task behavior and homework completion.[4]

To measure effects on achievement, we administered a literature test in the spring in each class. The test required students to answer a series of questions about five stories they had read during the year. The questions ranged from simple recall (e.g., "Who were the main characters in

[3] Information on student characteristics came from questionnaires. Race/ethnicity indicates whether students identified themselves as black or Hispanic. Socioeconomic status is a composite variable including mother' education, father's education, father's occupation, and home resources.

Fall reading skills were measured with a test of reading power taken from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which posed multiple-choice questions about a series of poems and narrative passages. This test also included a brief writing sample, which was scored using NAEP (1979) criteria for the identification and substantiation of personal emotions and feelings elicited by a short story. Fall writing skills were indicated by a writing sample which was scored by two readers, whose marks were averaged, for (a) level of abstraction, based on Britton et al.'s (1975) categories of transactional-informative prose; and (b) coherence and elaborateness of argumentation, based on the 1979/1984 NAEP criteria for informative writing (in Applebee, Langer, & Mullis, 1985). Each student's writing score was the sum of these two measures. Interrater reliability of scoring this test was .68.

[4] As noted earlier, time spent in small groups (and other activities) was recorded by classroom observers. These observers also noted and tabulated the proportion of follow-up questions and the proportion of teacher questions that were authentic. In addition, observers marked the proportion of students who were visibly off-task during question-answer sessions. Homework completion was indicated by students' responses to questionnaire items about the proportion of writing and reading assignments they completed.

Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry?") to ones requiring in-depth understanding ("Relate the ending of *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* to the main conflict and to the ending"). The same types of questions were asked of each class, but the stories they concerned varied, depending on what students actually read during the year.[5]

Did small-group work affect achievement, holding other conditions constant? We first discovered that overall, classes spending more time in small groups produced *lower* achievement, a finding that replicated the surprising conclusion of our eighth-grade study. Unlike the previous study, however, we were now prepared to go beyond simply asking how much time was spent in small groups. Now we could ask whether the effectiveness of small-group time depended on what was going on in the small groups. To do this, we employed two measures of the quality of group time: student autonomy and student production of knowledge. Although these measures differ in theory — students could be given autonomy but not take the opportunity to produce knowledge — in practice the two tended to occur together: the more student autonomy, the more production of knowledge (the correlation was .78).[6]

Analysis of student autonomy showed that the higher the degree of autonomy, the more likely group time was to contribute positively to achievement.[7] For example, a class that

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[5] The literature tests were scored holistically on a variety of dimensions such as recall, depth of understanding, understanding of character motivations, and ability to relate conflict and theme to the ending. Each test was scored by two readers and the scores were averaged. The two readers' scores correlated at .82.

[6] The relationship between student autonomy and knowledge production has been found in many studies, including studies examining small groups; see King (1992) and Palinscar, David, Winn, Stevens, & Brown (1990).

[7] Student autonomy in groups was coded by listening to audiotapes, attending mainly to the teacher's directions to students, according to the following scale:

1 =Teacher-structured groupwork: Task parameters entirely defined, or "prescripted," by teacher. Task can be done without student interaction (e.g., worksheets); group setting is gratuitous.

averaged five minutes per day of highly "prescripted," rigidly structured group time, with little autonomy for students, would actually score about one point lower on the test than a class with no group time at all. By contrast, a class that averaged five minutes of highly autonomous group work, in which students worked together to define the task, would *gain* almost two points on the test over a similar class with no group work. This is a significant effect: it could move a student from the 50th to the 58th percentile on the 32-point test. We found similar results for student production of knowledge: Collaborative seatwork actually reduces achievement, but group work in which students actively construct interpretations promotes achievement.[8]

By replicating our eighth-grade study and moving beyond it, we accounted for the unexpected results. Small-group work appeared ineffective because the groups were being used ineffectively; much of the assignments could just as well have been done individually. The follow-up study shows that when small-group time allows students to interact over the substance of their

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2 =Prescripted task with obligatory student interaction.
3 =Teacher gives students some latitude in their interactions with each other, and groupwork involves spontaneous student interaction concerning substance; students are on "short leash." For example, the teacher might define some general principle which students in groups must then apply.
4 =Significant student interaction defining shape of task and outcome though teacher might have been able to predict results before class.
5 =Autonomous groupwork: Teacher sets up groupwork without prescripting activities; significant student interaction defining shape of task and outcome. Results of groupwork cannot be predicted before class.

[8] Student production of knowledge was coded, also from audiotapes, according to the following scale:

1 =Collaborative seatwork. Students receive only prespecified information; student activities in small groups are tightly controlled. Worksheets are an example.
2 =Students primarily receive prespecified information; occasionally their tasks involve open-ended questions. Student activities are highly orchestrated with topic coverage defined by the teacher.
3 =Teacher identifies issue or problem; students find examples and explore applications. Teacher provides time and encouragement for exploring new meanings and implications.
4 =Students receive some information; much of groupwork involves students using information with open-ended questions or with teacher-provided questions.
5 =Students identify both problems and applications. Discussing open-ended questions, students actively construct interpretations. Teacher sets the parameters of groupwork, but it is mainly the students who work out ways to address issues and answer questions.

problem, defining tasks as well as solutions and constructing interpretations, students benefit from the opportunity to work in small groups.[9]

Conclusions

Our findings are consistent with the view that effective small-group work requires coherent activities that result in the sustained production of student knowledge. To promote such activities, the teacher must not overly specify group tasks. In other words, effective teachers clearly define the general parameters of the tasks, of course, but not the precise character of the activities themselves. Teachers who promote thinking about literature may present clear objectives to students for group work — for example, identifying the best poems written by students in each group, articulating character traits and finding supporting quotations — but avoid telling groups exactly how to proceed; they do not, for example, specify a list of questions and topics students must answer in a particular order.

When teachers put groups of students together to work on some problem, they send students an important message that developing their own thoughts, and not just remembering some else's, is important. The teacher above who told her students "There are a lot of lights ... in your eyes" as she prepares them for groupwork sends exactly this message.

The benefits of direct instruction presumably result from higher on-task behavior when the teacher works directly with students. One could argue that this occurs when the instructional task is the same for both whole-class and small-group settings. For example, students may be more on-task when they answer recitation questions as a whole class, than when the recitation questions

[9] Some small-group work rated lowest on autonomy and student production of knowledge concerned grammar and sentence errors, not literature. All of the highest rated small groups concerned literature. We are unable to rule out, for the lowest rated small-group sessions, that their focus on grammar and sentence correction rather than literature, accounted for the negative impact of collaborative seatwork on literature achievement.

are assigned to small groups for written responses. Learning, in this example, may not differ or may be greater in the whole-class format. But this example does not take advantage of the opportunities for intellectual collaboration that are made possible by the small-group setting. If the tasks are the same, one should expect little difference in achievement. But the point of small-group instruction should not be to assign the same tasks, but to design work that draws on the potential for cooperation and collaboration in the small group.

If successful small-group work depends upon the teacher setting up open-ended rather than prescripted tasks and upon the students having coherent conversations generating insights, then teachers must carefully match small-group work to suitable tasks. For example, if the objective for a given day requires presenting a lot of new information, a lecture is probably better than small-group work. Or if teachers want students to practice some particular skill, recitation and seatwork may be better than small-group work. On the other hand, if teachers want students to compare ideas, develop a train of thought, air differences, or arrive at a consensus on some controversial issue, then the forum of small groups may be just the right setting for most students to carry on intensive conversation and discussion, especially for students too shy to say much in the larger setting of the whole class. Teachers must always remember, however, that they cannot just put students in groups and expect them "go to it" with positive results. For group work to succeed, teachers must carefully design collaborative tasks that are interesting to students (and not just the teacher).[10]

[10] They must also be prepared to help students develop effective group skills; an excellent guide for teachers is Cohen's *Designing Groupwork* (1986).

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