

Group Work vs. Whole Class Activity

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Abstract

Group work has only been recently introduced in the education system of Pakistan but many primary teachers, especially in the public schools, are still not aware of how different kinds of strategies that is group work and whole class teaching facilitate learning among students. This paper aims to provide an overview of teaching strategies to determine which strategy of student organisation works best while performing different classroom tasks. As different students have different learning preferences, it is important for teachers to not only appreciate both these teaching strategies but to also distinguish between situations where each is best suited.

Group Work vs. Whole Class Activity

Introduction

As a primary school teacher I tend to use different kinds of strategies to facilitate learning among students. I often switch between whole-class activities and group work, depending on the nature of task and the availability of resources. I use whole class strategy to introduce or summarize a lesson while group work for its development and extension. My students feel comfortable with both strategies as a whole-class feedback phase after a session of group work provides a smooth transition to the learning process. Both strategies are effectual and successful at one time or the other. Teachers distribute their time between interacting with children individually, in groups and as a whole class (Maurice Galton, 1999). In this paper, I will first introduce the two strategies under discussion, and then examine their advantages and disadvantages. Afterwards, I would attempt to suggest different ways for the effective management of either strategy. The objective of this paper is to determine which teaching strategy of student organisation works best while performing different classroom tasks.

Overview of Teaching Strategies

First I would like to comment upon whole class activities. Organising the whole class as one group is a traditional teaching strategy. Using this strategy, teachers organize students in such a way so as to make all of them participate together in some kind of an activity.

On the other hand, group work requires students to work collaboratively either in pairs or in groups. As compared to whole class, group work is a relatively new teaching strategy which is used commonly in many schools in the west.

Advantages of Whole-Class and Group Activities

Moving on to the advantages of whole-class activities, an important aspect of whole-class discussion is the bonding together of the whole group. Moreover, the larger the group, more variety there is in the ideas, opinions and experiences which can contribute to the learning process. Whole class discussion generally encourages fluency and a meaningful exchange of ideas among the participants. It also ensures teacher's access to all students. It particularly works well when it is used to explain new ideas and concepts. It can also be used to play some motivating and lively games. In such games the students are required to sit together and play various language development games which are full of fun. Furthermore, it is thought of as a time efficient strategy.

Whole class activity is also widely used at the end of any lesson to summarize what has been taught or done in that particular lesson. It is especially useful and time efficient when it is used in question answer sessions to evaluate students understanding of a topic. Students learn more from whole class teaching which involves explanations and questioning techniques.

Group activities, on the other hand, increase student involvement in class activities. Students in groups talk and communicate more readily with each other. They learn how to correspond and share ideas. Secondly, group activities encourage students to learn through discussions. Students, first, weigh the pros and cons of a given situation with each other and then try to find a logical solution to the problem. Thirdly, group activities, encourage students to work in collaboration with one another. With

practice, group members realize that until and unless all put in their best, they would not be able to complete the given task proficiently. Eventually, they learn to respect and value each others' contribution. From my experience as a primary teacher, I have observed that such kinds of group activities ensure maximum participation from all group members.

Another suggested situation in which group seating arrangement can be useful is, sharing of resources. When resources have to be shared, group arrangement allows 3-5 children to easily reach and use one centrally placed set of resources, such as pens, glue, paints etc.

Similarly, if the objective of a lesson is reinforcement of lessons taught earlier, than the teachers should arrange the students in small ability groups. This would enable the teacher to help those students who need reinforcement while the rest could do an extension activity to further their understanding of the concept.

Depending on the nature of the task, in a primary classroom, if a teacher wants to work as well as move within small groups of students, then group seating should be planned. As per Nigel Hastings, there is consistency between what the teacher is trying to do, what the pupils are expected to do, the kind of interaction that is intended and the configuration of the furniture. Thus, group seating seems to be a useful way to organise primary classrooms.

Another benefit of group work is that it enables students, who are learning English as a second language, to develop their listening and speaking skills. Many teachers of English language are of the opinion that the primary benefit of group work is that it provides practice in speaking and listening.

Areas of Concern

Organising the whole class as one cluster is a useful teaching strategy but it also has its shortcomings. For instance, its efficiency and effectiveness depends on the level of attentiveness of the students. If the lesson is not interesting enough, it fails to capture the students' attention. Another disadvantage of this activity is that only a limited number of students participate when they are organised as whole class. The shy or the passive ones prefer to be quiet while the others actively participate.

Even though group work forms a fundamental part of teaching, often both teachers and students are unenthusiastic about it. On the one hand, teachers feel apprehensive about loosening their hold over the students while on the other, students have reservations because unlike whole class activity, they are expected to think and express themselves.

Discussion and Analysis

Now, this paper will attempt to discuss situations in which whole-class teaching can be used effectively. It can be of assistance in all subjects: English, Urdu, Science, Mathematics, Social Studies. Nigel Porteus, in his article "Whole Class Teaching" suggested that teachers should incorporate some amount of whole-class teaching in their delivery of lessons. According to him, whole-class instruction can be very efficient especially while teaching Mathematics because it requires less time on management functions and provides more time for developing mathematics concepts.

Similarly, teachers should also be encouraged to use this strategy while doing eliciting or brainstorming in the beginning of any lesson. For example, while doing a

whole class activity named *shared writing* in the English lesson, the teacher acts as a facilitator and writes down the students' responses on the board.

Moving on to group work, I would like to suggest that teachers should be clear about the objectives and the methodology of the lesson for which group work has been planned. They should give clear instructions to students and prepare resources well in advance. If resources are not ready then group work can not be carried out competently. Similarly, if enough resources are not available then students tend to fight over them, causing a disciplinary problem. Therefore, planning before hand and clear instructions are one of the crucial things that a teacher should keep in mind before conducting group activities.

Another thing that a teacher has to keep in mind before conducting group work is to properly train the students. Group centred classrooms tend to be noisy. Teachers should make the students aware of the need to maintain a controlled noise level. Students can be motivated by having a competition within the groups. The group that observes most of the rules would win. Similarly, students can be asked to lower their voice level while doing discussions. Otherwise the other groups would get a chance to take advantage of their ideas. This would motivate them to work quietly.

Group members should also be encouraged to support each other. They should be reminded that If they do not help each other, the quality of their work is going to be affected e.g. if one student has to do the writing then others can help with spellings and ideas. Teachers should encourage students to equally contribute within groups. To meet this purpose, group members can be assigned different roles. One can be the "encourager". The encourager could ask the others to speak clearly, remind others about turns etc. Another student could be the "reporter". His/her duty would be to ask others about ideas, introduction etc. A "manager" reminds about the time left

and makes sure that the group comes to a decision. Lastly, the “recorder” will record the results being dictated by the other members.

Keeping in view all the above mentioned points, I would like to propose that teachers should integrate whole class with group teaching strategies for a smooth delivery of lessons.

Conclusion

In the end I would like to suggest that since both strategies whole class and group work are effectual and successful at one time or the other, the final choice between them is dependent on the nature and objective of the lesson. No teaching technique can be considered the only solution for all our teaching problems and its value should be reviewed from time to time. As different students have different learning preferences, it is important for teachers to not only appreciate both these teaching strategies but to also distinguish between situations where each is best suited.

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