2021

Learning in Teams During a Pandemic

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Honors in Practice 17 (2021)

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Abstract: As the COVID-19 crisis disrupts students' sense of community and appreciation for in-person instruction, the author presents a pedagogical experiment involving several collaborative, team-based learning strategies to engage all learners, regardless of location. Students in a sophomore-level required seminar are tasked with various team-based assignments, including notetaking, critical essays, interviews, and reflective writing exercises. Outcomes suggest a framework for the creative use of teams and out-of-classroom collaboration, even in challenging contexts where disruption and displacement complicate both teaching and learning. Curricular objectives are described, and student feedback is summarized.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic; collaborative learning; student engagement; Slack, Inc. (software); Auburn University at Montgomery (AL)—Honors Program

Citation: *Honors in Practice*, 2021, Vol. 17:217–21

One of the frustrations my students felt most deeply in the pivot to remote instruction in spring 2020 was the loss of community. They reported missing the normal rhythms of conversation during class; they told me that these regular forms of engagement were crucial to their learning. Many noted that previous experiences in online courses did not provide the interpersonal connections they valued about in-person courses. My students were not alone in these feelings. In a survey of over 15,000 students during spring 2020, Blankenstein, Frederick, and Wolff-Eisenberg (2020) found that students lacked "a sense of belonging and connection to others at their institution. While they felt somewhat connected to their instructors, few reported feeling very connected to other students" (p. 4).

This loss was most salient in my mind as I prepared to teach Honors 2757: Seeing the Unseen, a required sophomore-level seminar that satisfies a core humanities requirement. In a pre-semester survey, my students expressed an

overwhelming desire for face-to-face instruction; they worried about a transition to remote instruction. The university implemented policies to mitigate risks that created unique challenges for teaching and learning: our classroom space would require social-distancing, and the entire class would not be able to meet simultaneously in the same physical space. I needed to create a backbone of online instructional materials and activities to ensure that all students would be able to achieve learning objectives even if they were participating across distinct modalities. Convinced by Quintana and DeVaney's (2020) reflections about the need to create a resilient pedagogy, I wanted to ensure that the course would be flexible in the face of possible disruptions. Most importantly, I hoped to facilitate a sense of belonging and community.

Facing these challenges moved me to experiment with some collaborative and team-based learning strategies discussed in Barkley, Cross, and Major (2014), strategies that might elicit student anxiety or resistance. Blankenstein, Frederick, and Wolff-Eisenberg (2020) observed that students found collaborative assignments to be among the most difficult to complete during remote instruction. Although independent learning activities would have been easier for students to complete in contexts of displacement, I decided that the positive structures of interdependence would promote a type of learning difficult to achieve through atomized, individual assignments.

A description of the seminar will help show some of the distinctive dimensions of the strategies I employed. The course description begins with this observation: "Much of what we believe, from the mundane to the cosmically significant, is based on considerations not immediately accessible by our senses: memories, the testimony of others, logical inferences, and scientific methods and inferences (among others)." The course is intended to address the merits and implications of these varied sources of belief. Every iteration of the course uses Darwin's *Origin of Species* as an anchor text, but individual faculty have the latitude to develop the course thematically. I focused on scientific inquiry as a knowledge-generating and justifying practice, framing our study in terms of three target questions: (1) What is distinctive about scientific inquiry? (2) What does it mean to think and reason like a scientist? and (3) What does it mean for us (as individuals and as a society) to be guided in our thinking and action by scientific understanding?

Prior to the start of the semester, I assigned each student to a small learning team with three to four other students, dividing the teams so that a range of majors was represented in each group. I constructed a schedule for in-person class sessions, rotating student attendance each class. At any given

session, two or three students from each learning team would act as representatives for their team. After the session, representatives would upload their notes through a shared Google document. I drew inspiration for this component of the assignment from Supiano (2020), who summarizes some of the key findings in Harbin (2020). Team members who did not participate in this class session were responsible for reading and annotating the notes prior to the next tutorial, when they would take their turn representing the team. All students engaged in supplemental online activities through our learning management system and through Slack, a channel-based communication platform. Slack enabled us to extend classroom discussions and encouraged informal social engagement among students.

These team-based structures were supplemented by two other collaborative assignments. First, students completed a team-based essay exam following our four-week study of Darwin's *Origin of Species*. Each student completed the exam individually first, and I assessed their work, providing extensive feedback about their essays. The following week, each team completed a team-based version of the same exam. To facilitate their efforts, I hosted a Zoom session in which teams worked together in breakout rooms to consider my feedback and begin drafting their team's exam. As they worked together to display their collective understanding, I hoped each individual would develop a deeper understanding of the material. Their final grade on this assignment was an average of the individual and team-based score. Without exception, their grades were higher than they would have been with the individual score alone.

Second, students conducted formal interviews of faculty with disciplinary expertise in the natural, behavioral, and social sciences. We also hosted Zoom panel discussions with additional faculty to ask questions about scientific practices and their implications for policy. The interviews and panels provided an additional source of reflection for students as they completed a final essay on the semester's target questions. Nearly every student described how these conversations augmented their understanding of scientific inquiry.

Students completed weekly reflection journals throughout the semester. Reading the reflections helped me see how collaborative learning structures can enhance learning, especially in times of displacement. Important themes emerged from these reflections. First, all of the students expressed some initial skepticism about the team-based structures, but nearly all commented that their views had changed over the course of the semester. One student observed, "I was hesitant about it at first, but realizing that we all

had different strengths in certain assignments was actually very helpful and resulted in deeper learning for everyone." Another wrote, "I am not much of a team-player, but this class has helped me to listen to my classmates' ideas and thoughts about weekly material. Doing the collaborative [note-taking] with my classmates has improved my writing skills."

Second, students saw clearly that distinct perspectives and constructive disagreement can enhance their learning. They described how their teams altered their approach to the readings, filled in gaps in their learning, addressed limitations in their understanding of the material, and helped correct misinterpretations. Many noted that the team-based exam helped them to understand Darwin's work better because they could talk through the essays and the instructor's feedback on each of their exams. They were able to negotiate conflicting viewpoints. They were able to draw from their essays to teach each other the material.

Third, students valued their teams because of the ways they enhanced accountability and motivation. One student wrote, "Being responsible for not just my notes but also, in essence, the notes of my team was great motivation to keep me focused because I [didn't] want to let down my team." Multiple students observed that this assignment required deeper learning because they had to explain the material to their teammates.

Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, team-based structures helped to facilitate a sense of belonging and community. One student summed it up this way: "I could not have gotten by without my classmates and teammates because I hit a wall more than once this semester. We all kind of carried each other as if we were battle-worn soldiers because this has been the hardest year many of us have faced and it has in turn been one of the hardest semesters for many of us." As I reflect on the semester, I am convinced that collaborative, team-based strategies are a fruitful pedagogy for enhancing learning and scaffolding community even in times of disruption and displacement.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I would like to thank the students in this seminar for their diligent efforts during a difficult semester. Their commitment to learning in community was admirable.

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