G-R-O-U-P W-O-R-K Doesn't Spell Collaboration

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By Timothy Quinn, *Phi Delta Kappan*

Simply putting kids around a table and telling them to work together does not teach them collaboration skills.

Collaboration is included in almost every list of 21st-century skills—and for good reason. Technology now offers more people the opportunity to work together without geographical restraint, and businesses everywhere are expecting employees to collaborate on projects, both in face-to-face teams and in virtual teams.

Players of the online game Foldit provide one of the most astounding examples of the power of collaboration in the digital age. Together, the Foldit players solved a molecular puzzle that had long baffled scientists and could contribute to a cure for AIDS. In a stunning example of "citizen science"—crowdsourcing in order to generate scientific data and solve scientific problems—Foldit players did in 10 days what individual scientists had been unable to do in a decade (Peckham, 2011). Such examples suggest that enhanced collaboration may be exactly what we need to solve the world's critical problems.

If so, then collaboration should become a greater part of school curricula at all levels. Currently, collaborative work is most common in graduate schools, particularly business schools, where students work in teams on various projects, just as they will in their careers. But students in traditional K-12 schools mostly work individually. Common exceptions to this are students of teachers who assign "group work." However, group work is neither as widely used nor as effective as necessary if we wish to produce a generation of learners adept at collaborating. In fact, group work as often practiced does little to enhance collaborative skills.

In the worst cases, group work is assigned when a teacher doesn't feel like teaching. The

teacher gives students some questions and instructs them to talk them over in groups. The teacher then sits at his desk checking his email while students have a half-hearted conversation before veering off topic. This is hardly an effective way to teach collaboration. Situations like this confound the problem by leading to a perception that group work is both unproductive and a sign of laziness on the part of the teacher—a way of shirking responsibility in the name of another progressive pedagogical tactic.

Teaching Collaboration

Of course, not all teachers who assign group work are lazy, and many do it for the right reasons. A good collaborative assignment requires much more of the teacher than in the example above. Teachers must set clear expectations and devise a fair and meaningful way to assess student work. Most important, the teacher should constantly be circulating around the room, looking over shoulders, asking and answering questions, giving feedback, and taking notes on student progress.

Still, even if these efforts are made, collaboration is not being taught per se. Assigning group work is very different than teaching collaborative skills. Unlike writing—a skill in which students have been trained since elementary school—collaboration is neither systematically taught nor modeled for students. So, when giving a collaborative assignment, teachers should assume students know very little about how to collaborate. Teachers should begin by actually teaching effective collaboration strategies, including:

• Listen to others;

• Establish common goals;

• Compromise;

• Assign roles and responsibilities;

• Determine measures for accountability;

• Give constructive feedback; and

• Assess the group's progress.

Only after a teacher has talked with students about these behaviors can he or she ask them to start collaborating. The first group assignments should be short and done in

class so the teacher can observe and provide feedback as necessary.

At the outset, the teacher may actually want to give students an agenda to follow. For example:

• Discuss the problem and divide up tasks (10 minutes).

• Complete individual tasks (15 minutes).

• Reconvene to share individual work and synthesize information (15 minutes).

• Present solution to the rest of the class (5 minutes).

Depending on the nature of the task that students are asked to accomplish, the teacher may even wish to assign specific roles and responsibilities to individuals.

Only with this type of training will students be prepared to engage in long-term collaborative assignments outside class. However, just because students are ready to collaborate outside the classroom doesn't mean the teacher should stop monitoring the work of the different groups. Teachers can continue to monitor group work by having students keep a running log of their work, including who met, when they met, and what was discussed, as well as what individuals have done during their own time. This is a good way to assure that all students are pulling their own weight. Teachers should also establish check-in points along the way toward completing a certain task. Within this framework, teachers can ask students to submit the group's goals to the teacher and to submit a chart that outlines each member's role and responsibilities.

Teachers must also build in time for students to reflect on their experience working with others so they can learn from it before their next collaborative assignment. Teachers can ask students to write about successes and failures and to think about how they might do things differently next time. Students could also assess the collaborative skills of other group members so all students hear feedback from others in the group.

After completing collaborative assignments in this manner, students may be ready to complete group tasks successfully without teacher oversight, which should be the goal.

Challenges of Teaching Collaboration

Although this is a recipe for teaching collaboration effectively, teachers will still face

challenges when assigning collaborative work.

Recently, I spent hours meeting with deans, advisers, and parents because one student working in a group was constantly harassing another student whom he disliked. Less extreme but more common is the refrain, "I just don't want to work with that person. Can I please switch groups?" Dealing with these interpersonal issues adds work for the already overburdened teacher and only complicates the lives of students for whom social status and friendship are of utmost concern.

Assigning group work also raises procedural issues in an academic institution—where and when do students meet? Teachers have complained that groups have disrupted study areas (which, by the way, have generally been designed for individual study). Student groups have told me they have no time in their schedules when they can meet, and, after scoffing at them, I realized that, in fact, they were correct. I once worked at a school that even had rules prohibiting students from meeting during certain times; exceptions could be made, but they required paperwork.

And then there is the challenge of how to assess group work, and how to make sure all group members are contributing equally. These two issues will cause lots of headaches. Assessing group work fairly is complicated and outside the scope of this article. Suffice it to say that in assigning group work teachers must be transparent about what their grades reflect and have a clear rationale for why the practice is justified if they allow collaborative work to be reflected in an individual grade.

Collaboration's Value

With all of the complications and hassles, is encouraging collaboration really worth the trouble? Might all of the potential problems suggest that teachers should stick to more traditional instruction? On the contrary. All of these issues are exactly why we should assign group work. Inequality, unfairness, interpersonal conflict, bureaucratic hurdles—this is the stuff of life. Without this experience, students who spend their K-12 education career working in isolation will be ill-equipped to handle these challenges when they confront them in college and the workplace. The benefits of group work come not from a project smoothly accomplished, but from learning to deal with all of the challenges posed by working with others. As research increasingly suggests, we learn more from failure and setbacks than from success. Collaborative assignments allow students—particularly the best students who might otherwise breeze through school having nothing

but success along the way—to deal with a little adversity.

So, is assigning group work a sign of laziness? I think not! A teacher must be willing to deal with these headaches and to help students struggle with these issues if he or she wishes to prepare them for success in today's world.

References

- Peckham M. (2011, September 17). Foldit gamers solve AIDS puzzle that baffled scientists for a decade. *Time Techland*. **http://techland.time.com/2011/09/19/foldit-gamers-solve-aids-puzzle-that-baffled-scientists-for-decade/**

Timothy Quinn (tquinn@usmk12.org) is assistant head of upper school at University School of Milwaukee, Milwaukee, Wis.

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