

Step-by-Step Teaching, Part Three: Collaborative Learning

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This article is part 3 of 3 in a series from George Washington University on teaching workshops.

How do you know students are learning when you are teaching? What are **you** learning when you teach? How do students and teachers create knowledge in the library classroom? At George Washington University's Gelman Library, we investigated these questions in the third workshop of a series on instructional design.

At Gelman, the Education and Instruction Group (EIG), part of the Reference and Instruction Department, teaches the majority of instruction sessions, while other reference librarians do additional subject-specific instruction. To share insights about teaching, EIG librarians have conducted three, 90-minute workshops for the rest of the department.

The workshop series was based on the five questions for instructional design from the 1999 and 2002 Institute for Information Literacy Immersion Program:

- What do you want the student to be able to do? (Outcome)
- What does the student need to know in order to do this well? (Curriculum)
- What activity will facilitate the learning? (Pedagogy)
- How will the student demonstrate the learning? (Assessment)

How will I know the student has done this well? (Criteria)

We designed the workshops to give librarians a better understanding of how instructional design can shape library sessions as well as ideas to use in one-on-one instruction to facilitate learning.

This third workshop addressed the theoretical un-

derpinnings of collaborative learning and how to fulfill learning outcomes in the classroom through group work. We had found in discussion with teaching librarians that many of them did not use group work for fear of losing control of the class and losing authority, or they felt that "teaching" means talking.

We spent the first part of the workshop discussing how learning is a function of social interaction and knowledge is created through conversation—both orally and in writing. In a teacher-centered classroom, where the instructor speaks, demonstrates, questions, and guides, the students listen, watch, answer, and follow. In this model, as critiqued by educational philosopher Paulo Freire, the teacher owns knowledge as she owns money and makes deposits into the students—Freire terms this the "banking concept of education."

In a collaborative model, students become teachers, asking questions of each other, discussing, and drawing conclusions that they may then demonstrate to the class. By the same token, teachers become students—we learn from our students' questions and their ways of thinking, which differ from our own. We also listen to them articulate their ideas to group members and negotiate meaning as we circulate to answer questions and observe. They learn aloud, and we can hear them creating knowledge together, rather than hoping they are learning as we stand at the front of the room and speak. With group work, we know quickly when students are confused or off-task, which allows us to change course. In a teacher-centered classroom, we can only guess or assess after the fact. And most important, students must take responsibility for their own learning.

To accomplish this kind of learning, librarians must understand the logistics of group work, which seem simple but require planning and insight. In the workshop, we explained the basics: that the instructor must first determine the learning outcomes for the class, which referred back to the first instructional-design workshop in this se-

ries. Based on desired outcomes, the facilitator can then create an assignment or task put in the context of the course.

During the class, the instructor breaks students into groups and assigns the task, preferably in writing so students have a reference point. Groups then work together to complete the task, whether that means solving a problem, or discussing an idea and drawing conclusions about it.

The benefits of collaborative learning for students and instructors are many. Working groups emulate workplace models in which participants solve problems by committee. This also appeals to the millennial generation, who tend to engage more during group activities, and thus learn, retain, and achieve more. Such engagement fosters a positive attitude toward learning while reducing instructor tedium and burnout.

Of course, there are drawbacks to group work. It limits the amount of material we can cover, it involves a loss of control and risk on the instructor's part, and its success depends on group dynamics and willingness of students to take responsibility for their own learning. The benefits, however, far outweigh the potential drawbacks.

After this general overview of collaborative learning, we practiced what we preached by putting librarians into groups and giving each group a written assignment. For example, a group might get the task "catalog searching," and then have to, as a group, develop a learning outcome for a library instruction session and a group activity to achieve that outcome.

The librarians discussed and developed these exercises and presented them to the rest of the groups, who critiqued them. This led to our brainstorming qualities of good group work assignments. They should be:

- written down for reference during the class;
- conducive to collaboration;
- time limited;
- require a product, whether oral or written;
- further the goals of the class; and
- encourage critical thinking and discussion.

By the end of the workshop, librarians had created group exercises as a basis for discussion and for

further development, and they had also informally shared group work they were already doing. At least one Education and Instruction member in each group of librarians helped to guide them in determining how to approach the problem of crafting a group exercise.

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