

NEW! Small Groups, Big Gains

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By Peggy Quill

Because the majority of the work in my 7th grade Math class is done in small groups, I make high-functioning, collaborative group work a priority in my teaching. As the teacher/facilitator, my role is to make sure that the students are working with correct strategies and each is playing an equal part in completing the work. Last year, although students generally got along well in their groups and enjoyed working together, there were ways that students consistently failed to be engaged and productive. Students occasionally got off task, lost focus, and perseverated, causing their groups to fall behind. A group's overall effort and the quality of the final work product were often inadequate or limited only to the basics they needed to get done.

I wanted all students to engage with the material, pay attention to it and to each other, and collaborate effectively. In order to attain these goals, I decided to *teach* students how to work productively in small groups rather than *assume* they could do it well without receiving instruction.

Start with modeling

In early September, two students and I used role play to model productive small-group collaboration. We identified and proposed solutions for common problems that students have while working in small groups. We then talked about the benefits of learning in small groups as opposed to working independently. Finally, we developed basic team roles that helped keep teams organized, allowing them to meet their goals.

Measure progress

To assess our small group work, I formally observed and collected student surveys three times over three months. I observed students and measured the degree to which they exhibited the following positive small group behaviors: made all group members feel included, actively listened, stayed focused, offered ideas or strategies, took turns, respected opinions, and actively participated in class. The surveys asked students to measure how effectively groups worked together, including active participation and open reception to each other's ideas. The initial survey provided me with baseline data, while the subsequent surveys allowed me to evaluate and adjust as necessary.

Baseline: problems revealed

Within the first few days of school, the students were given their first group assignment that required them to work in their teams of three to solve and share problems. My September observations revealed that several students had difficulty staying on task. The temptation for social interaction was too much for some. While most students focused on assignments, a few interrupted others, talked over their group mates, and did not actively listen to their group members' ideas.

In another class, very few students worked collaboratively. Many did the assignments individually, and a few students waited for other team members to do the work for them. It was very frustrating!

My biggest hurdle was getting dominating teammates to appreciate the value of other people's ideas and opinions. In many cases, a team would have one or more domineering student(s) who would assume all the responsibility (and credit) for an assignment. In their surveys, students indicated that their work in teams was useful and productive, but noted that teammates were not contributing equally. I began to have students come to me after

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Young people undergo more rapid and profound personal changes during the years between 10 and 15 than at any other period of their lives.
—National Middle School Association

class to ask for help in dealing with sluggish or dominating teammates.

To address these problems, I used frequent redirections, like asking students to take a break and/or removing privileges. I also held individual and group discussions about the value of multiple opinions and strategies in constructive discourse. However, my observations and the problems reported by students made it clear that I still had work to do.

Successful interventions

Consistent behavior management and changes in how students were grouped brought positive changes. My use of reminding and reinforcing language held groups to our process and helped create a safer collaborative environment. My observations reflected this as students became more confident about their ideas and internalized behavior expectations.

I switched the makeup of the groups to improve collaboration based on student recommendations and my growing knowledge of student learning styles. Previously, I had created the groups and assigned roles at random, or alphabetically. To balance our groups while allowing my students greater autonomy, I instructed my students to select group mates based on successful working relationships rather than friendships. Students listed three people they would like to work with; in addition, they were allowed to identify up to three people they did not want to work with. I used this information to create new teams.

While the quality of small-group interaction improved after I made this switch, we continued to confront flaws in our group work. On the assignments I observed, participation, active listening, and work production were much better than earlier in the year. However, the volume levels in class became overwhelming at times. I had to ask students to lower their voices five to six times in a class period. By assigning one group member the job of monitoring the active listening and voice levels within the group, we were able to get closer to the respectful, collaborative, and active group work I envisioned.

Group work needs to be taught

As I probed further into the small groups' problems, I was surprised to learn how few students had worked previously in a collaborative group structure, and yet I know that most students, if given the right supports, are capable of self-monitoring, directing, motivating others, and assessing their work in groups.

Results

After teaching group skills for two months, things were much better. The student surveys showed incremental growth. In November, the majority of students graded group work and individual work "well to extremely well;" by comparison, students graded the same categories "poor to adequate" back in September. The students themselves were noticing that their teams were more productive and that they had a better routine for organizing their work and conducting their discussions. Students also felt that their own participation had improved. After examining my observations and tallies from September and November, I noted a sizable uptick in active participation—from 23 to 32—and improvement in the quantity, quality, and organization of completed group work.

In addition, I enjoyed seeing students share ideas. By having students discuss correct mathematic strategies with each other, much of the pressure is taken off me to be the lone distributor of information in the room. I concluded that when working with peers, students may think through a concept differently than I would, but the learning that emerges can be of equal quality.

One thing that initially frightened me about doing a lot of group work was that misinformation would get around and confuse students. But by employing a process for effective group work with the students, I was actually allowed more opportunity to walk around the room and listen in on conversations. Because I was spending less time on behavior management, I was able to address misinformation and questions in a much more focused and effective way.

Through the combination of modeling, careful observations, and consistent redirections to protect our process, I was able to make student small-group work considerably more productive and valuable.

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This article first appeared in *Developmental Designs: A Middle School Newsletter*, Fall 2009

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