STRATEGIES FOR ACTIVE LEARNING: MAKING THE MOST OF GROUPWORK
8 ideas for use in small and large courses across disciplines

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BEFORE YOU BEGIN:

How will you best prepare students for the active roles you give them?

What percentage of each class will consist of group work?

How will you assign students to groups?

INTERVIEWS

Rationale: invites students to hone in on critical or controversial questions; allows shy students an opportunity to participate in a "low-stakes" performance environment; encourages meaningful interactions among students; allows students to develop their "technical vocabulary" for the field, preparing them for conferences and other professional activities.

Implementation: Break class into groups of three and have two students assume the role of journalist and the other the role of the "expert." The "expert" in question could be the author of the book (film, etc.) your class is reading or any important figure in your field or an allied field. Students imagine they are journalists interviewing these figures. They must come up with a list of four questions; then they take it one step further and role-play the interviews during class.

QUESTIONNAIRE

Rationale: Gives students an opportunity to reflect independently before articulating an idea; makes classroom knowledge more "relevant" by encouraging discussion and reflection on related issues students confront in their day-to-day lives outside of the classroom; provides students in some fields an opportunity to reflect on the instruments used for research.

Implementation: Design a questionnaire that queries students' responses to a set of questions that regard common-sense knowledge or experience. Allow students to fill out the questionnaire while they are coming into class or during the first few minutes of class. Give them a way to input their responses back to you (through a polling website, through posts on Sakai, etc.) Then allow students to share their ideas with their group. This activity can also be used as a model for an expanded group activity in which students design their own questionnaires for their classmates.

DISTILLING QUOTES

Rationale: A properly chosen quote can gain students' attention, incite their curiosity and create an increased affective response to an issue that might otherwise feel dry or un-nuanced; this activity provides an opportunity for students to paraphrase explanations of concepts using their own words; it alerts students to the importance of good writing, including use of effective rhetorical devices, in their field.

Implementation: Provide each group of students with a stack of quotes, taken from a reading done for class or from scholars or journalists who have written about topics discussed in class. In their groups, students alternate the role of the reader, who selects a quote, reads it aloud, and solicits help in interpreting it, paraphrasing it, defending its relevance, offering evidence (concrete examples) to back it up, or disputing it.

TABOO

Rationale: This "guessing-game" activity provides students with an opportunity to test or review their basic knowledge of a chapter (reading, etc.) before putting it to more creative or critical use at a later phase of the lesson. Good types of knowledge to test with such a game include names of concepts, people, places, events, processes, etc.

Implementation: Create a table of "cards" that include the names of the concepts, people, places, events, processes, etc. that you would like student to define. Cut cards up and give each group a stack. Students alternate by drawing a card and defining the term to their group members – without saying the word – until someone in the group is able to guess it.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Rationale: This activity requires that students assimilate knowledge from previous chapters and units.

Implementation: Project a question that captures the important theoretical knowledge learned in the current unit and give students 10 minutes to make connections with the theoretical and practical knowledge learned in a previous unit. Alternatively, allow students to also make connections with applications of this insight in other fields.

PREZI / BLOG / VIDEOCLIP

Rationale: Encourages students to use technology to make connections between course material and other disciplines; encourages professional development of students by allowing them opportunities to integrate textual, visual and auditory information, which may enhance the skill set for the jobs they will pursue in their fields.

Implementation: Each group is charged with creating a blog, a prezi or a video clip illustrating a phenomenon (concept, process, etc.) discussed in class. Give clear guidelines on what this project should include (min. number of words, maximum number of slides or textual information to include, etc.) Have students post their projects on Sakai and then make a follow-up assignment for the class in which each student must read at least three of their classmates' posts and then comment upon them.

WRAPPING IT UP:

How will you conclude the activity? Will you appoint a "speaker" from each group to share the most interesting insight(s) with the class? Will you synthesize a list on the whiteboard? Will you allow times for questions or for concluding "lecture" remarks in which you fill in gaps or address points of ambiguity or confusion?

How will you assess the learning outcomes for the group and/or evaluate the success of each student or each group?

DURING GROUPWORK:

How will you achieve a balance between giving students independence and making sure they stay "on task?"

When is it appropriate to redirect a group?

DEBATES

Rationale: Gives students the opportunity to think critically about an idea related to one of the readings; to collaborate when coming up with the most relevant information to back up their ideas (with supporting claims or examples); and the opportunity to engage in meaningful dialogue in which students learn from each other.

Implementation: Assign students to two different sides of a debate related to a topic brought up by your reading. Give students 10 minutes to reflect and share ideas in their group. Allow 20 minutes to carry out the debate. Be an active moderator (or give a third group of students the role of moderator).

Every student must make at least one contribution. You may also elect to declare a winner – based on pre- and post- polling on students' positions.

CASE STUDIES

Rationale: Giving students true-to-life scenarios and problems to confront and resolve allows them to make connections between classroom and experiential learning, and between theory and practice. It encourages them to appreciate nuances and also demands creative collaboration in problem-solving.

Implementation: Create scenarios relevant to your field in which students have to respond to a challenge or propose solutions to a problem. Make it clear what the dilemma consists of: a contrasting set of expectations, a failure to derive benefits from a given set of procedures – tension between individual and collective benefit, etc. Give each group a certain amount of time to discuss alternative courses of action to resolve the issue. This can work nicely if every group has a different scenario; they can then report back the problem and the solution to the class.