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STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Deeper Learning: A Collaborative Classroom Is Key

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What's ideal when it comes to collaboration in our classrooms? Here's one coveted scenario: several children gathered at a table engaged in a high-level task, discussing, possibly debating an issue, making shared decisions, and designing a product that demonstrates all this deeper learning.

As teachers, we'd love to see this right out the gate, but this sort of sophisticated teamwork takes scaffolding. It won't just happen by placing students together with a piece of provocative text or an engaging task. (Heck, this deeper learning collaboration is challenging for most adults!)

In preparing our students for college and careers, 21st century skills call on us to develop highly collaborative citizens – it's one of the 4 Cs (<http://www.p21.org/about-us/our-mission>), after all.

So how do we begin this scaffolded journey? Once we've shared with students the task or assessment they are challenged to complete with their group, here's some suggested steps for supporting students in deep and meaningful collaboration:

Establish Group Agreements

Deciding on group norms, or agreements, right at the get go will give each student a voice and provide accountability for all. Although the Center for Adaptive Schools' Seven Norms of Collaboration (<http://www.edutopia.org/%20https%3A//sites.google.com/site/collaborationskills/Web2collaboration/working-collaboration/garmston-wellman-seven-norms>) are to be used with adult groups, use them to inspire more "kid-friendly" worded norms to offer up to your students. Children (depending on the age) might come up with things like: "one person talks at a time," "respect each other and all ideas," and "no put downs." A poster of the shared agreements can be displayed and when necessary, called attention to when a student or group needs a reminder.

Accountability is an important factor in group working agreements. Since a teacher must find creative and effective ways to monitor multiple groups working at once in the classroom, assigning roles can be incredibly helpful. For example, if students are working in a group of four reading and analyzing an article, say, on immigration reform in the United States, you may have "an investigator," "a recorder," "a

discussion director," and "a reporter." For the group to be successful, each child must complete the jobs that accompany his/her role.

Teach Them How to Listen

Good listeners are both rare and valued in our culture. I share this with students. I also share how people who really listen (make eye contact, offer empathy, restrain from cutting others off in a conversation) are easy to like and respect.

Save The Last Word (<http://www.facinghistory.org/resources/strategies/save-last-word-me>) is a great activity that allows students to practice listening. Provide several rounds of this structured activity followed by time for students to reflect on the experience and evaluate their own listening skills.

Children also need opportunities to restrain themselves from speaking in order to keep their attention on listening. Consider adding "Three then Me" to the class norms/agreements. This simply means that before one can speak again, they need to wait for three others to share first.

Teach Them the Art of Asking Good Questions

Have the class generate questions on any given topic, writing each one on the board. Decide on the most pressing and interesting questions of the bunch and discuss with students what makes these particular ones stand out. Talk about the types of questions that more often yield the best responses -- those that are open-ended, thoughtful and sometimes even daring.

Describe how well-received questions are neutral and don't sound as if someone is being interrogated. Introduce them to invitational questions stems such as, "When you think about _____, what comes to mind?" and, "Considering what we already know about _____, how will we ____?" As a scaffold, provide a handout with question starters for students to use during group discussions.

Students also need to know about wait time. Explain -- better yet, demonstrate -- that once someone in the group poses a question, there needs to be a few seconds of silence, giving everyone time to think.

Teach Them How To Negotiate

A group member who speaks the loudest and frequently asserts may get the most said but that doesn't mean they'll convince a group of anything. A good negotiator listens well, shows patience and flexibility, points out shared ideas and areas of group agreement, and thinks under pressure.

After sharing this list with students, generate together more characteristics to add to it. Indulge them in a brief activity called "Build a Consensus." In this activity, set the timer and give mere minutes to group plan a mock birthday party, fieldtrip, or a lunchtime meal so they can practice their negotiation skills.

Model What We Expect

When it comes to creating a highly collaborative classroom, teachers need to model listening, paraphrasing, artful questioning and negotiation any and every chance they get. In a student-centered classroom, we really do very little actual teaching (in the traditional sense of the word). What we find ourselves mostly doing is facilitating learning experiences for whole and smaller groups. Sending our students out in the world with the incredible ability to effectively facilitate a group is a 21st century skill crucial to success in the university and the work world.

This reminds me of the design company IDEO. An employee there was promoted to guide a team in redesigning the shopping cart (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M66ZU2PC1cM>) not because of seniority but because "he's good with groups." Ultimately, this guy was highly skilled at creating a space for all ideas to be heard, respected, and built on.

Group Brain Power

Learning, and higher-level learning such as synthesizing information from several documents or analyzing scientific data, can hit much deeper when done collaboratively. Let's not forget Lev Vygotsky (<http://www.edutopia.org/%20http%3A//www.muskingum.edu/~psych/psycweb/history/vygotsky.htm>) and his educational theory that proposes learning as a social process. And if he were alive today, he would most likely agree with the saying, *Two minds are better than one*. He might even add, "Better yet, how about three or four?"

What strategies and activities help you develop student groups? In what ways has collaboration driven deeper learning in your classroom? Please share with us your successes.

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