



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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CREATING STUDENT PRESENTATION GROUPS THAT WORK

When I returned to teaching after a long hiatus, I had an opportunity to work in a K-12 school that was implementing educational reform. One of our mandates was to encourage students to work in cooperative groups; and in spite of occasional problems, I was impressed by the dynamics I observed. The students who were less motivated and skilled tended to rise to the standards set by students who were more motivated and skilled (not the dreaded *vice versa*), and all seemed to benefit from the experience, both academically and personally. So, when I left to teach in a community college, I planned to continue using this strategy.

I teach two interesting courses, Contemporary Health Issues and Human Sexuality, and assumed that topics such as nutrition, sexually transmitted diseases, and contraception would lend themselves to group research and presentation. But as the projects came due, I was stunned by the poor results. I talked with my colleagues and learned that they had encountered similar problems, even to the point of giving up on groups altogether. These problems included the groups having difficulty finding common meeting times outside class, students not showing up on the days presentations were due, and boredom, as presenters tended to read monotonously from note cards without making eye contact, interpreting information, or even looking up correct pronunciations. Instead of giving up, I decided to tailor the assignments to eliminate as many problems as possible. Since then, the groups have become one of the more enlightening and enjoyable assignments in my classes.

I form the groups the second or third time the class meets to allow for no-shows and adds and yet maximize the group's time together. I ask students to choose their groups on the basis of one variable only—when they can get together outside of class. This is a chaotic process but has never failed to shake down into workable groups, and it eliminates whined excuses later. I set

guidelines such as, in a class of 40, no more than six groups of no fewer than five and no more than eight members. Then I ask a series of questions: Can you meet during the week or on weekends? (Separate.) During the day or at night? (Separate.) Monday-Wednesday or Tuesday-Thursday? etc. I suggest that they shoot for one primary meeting and one backup meeting time per week, although they probably won't use them all. Eventually, we end up close to the original parameters.

Once the groups are formed, I ask them to share names and telephone numbers, adopt a group name (identity), agree to a code of cooperation among members, and provide a copy of all this information for me. I also suggest that they consider safety in selecting a meeting place until they know each other better. Then we go over the assignments.

Assignments may be as simple as "mini-presentations" in class—in which each group has a section of the text on which to report—or as complex as a multi-part research project (proposal, outline, scientific paper, verbal report). I always consider assignments assessments (i.e., worth points toward the student's total), and the grade is a combination of group and individual points based on what each student contributed to the project. Students describe what they did, and I write my evaluation. By far, the most interesting have been what I call the "creative groups."

In this exercise, the group is assigned or selects a topic to present. Requirements include a time limit, visual aid, reputable sources, and points of information to cover. But at the top of the list is "a creative device to engage the interest of the class." I emphasize that this is the most important part of the assignment, because bored students do not learn. Most often, students perform a skit or make a videotape of one, but I have also been informed via "game shows," "television news interviews," original song performances, poems, and interactive exercises. Needless to say, I have seen my share of "Jerry Springer shows" and simulated romantic scenes. And although some are inevitably uninspired, others showcase student abilities that would not otherwise have had a chance to emerge. One of my favorites



was a student who bemoaned his academic inadequacies but was obviously a gifted actor; encouraged to take an acting class, he later earned his first elusive “A” and plans to transfer to a performing arts college.

There are still occasional problems. Some groups remain friends after class ends, but others never fully get off the ground. Some students carry a group, and their grades reflect it, while others never pull their weight. But overall, I remain a confirmed advocate of student groups!

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“TRANSFORMATIONAL” LEARNING USING SERVICE-BASED EDUCATION

A project at Owens Community College (OCC) with physical therapist assistant (PTA) students makes learning fun and provides a transformational learning experience for students and instructor. To incorporate a sense of community service involvement, the college’s physical therapist assistant program had three second-year PTA students participate in their first clinical experience at a local Muscular Dystrophy Association camp. Each student functioned as a “counselor” for an MDA camper and lived with the camper for an entire week. Although the students had no prior clinical experience in treating children with muscular dystrophy, they became proficient entry-level clinicians with their “patients” in the matter of six days. Students had to take care of their individual camper’s every need—their feeding, bathing, dressing, grooming, transfers, and all of their daily living activities. Activities also included swimming, arts and crafts, even a dance to end the week of activity.

All three PTA students had campers who were significantly challenged physically from the effects of muscular dystrophy and mentally, as well. All three students had made a “transformation” from novice student PTA clinician at the start of camp to entry-level skills in gait and transfer training, range of motion, and therapeutic functional exercises at the end of the camp experience.

This alternative clinical education experience was an amazing educational event to witness, much like what

noted educational psychologist John Dewey described as transformational learning. The students, in giving of themselves in this service-based learning exercise, received an education that they will remember for the rest of their lives. In this unique setting, students were able to integrate both physical and spiritual treatment because of their close and prolonged interaction.

This MDA camp experience will become a permanent part of the clinical education curriculum. Educators and accreditation agencies encourage service-based learning, for good reason—it makes good educational sense. Educators must teach more than techniques and theories; they must teach the value of service and its impact on the field. All students commented, in their reflective journals, on the positive learning experiences that they had during their week at camp and observed that they will be remembered for the rest of their lives. All clinical education experiences have the potential to be transformational learning; however, this service-based learning experience was the most powerful that this clinician/educator has seen in 20 years in the physical therapy field.

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