Effective Cooperative Learning via Discussion Forums:
An Online Application of Team Principles
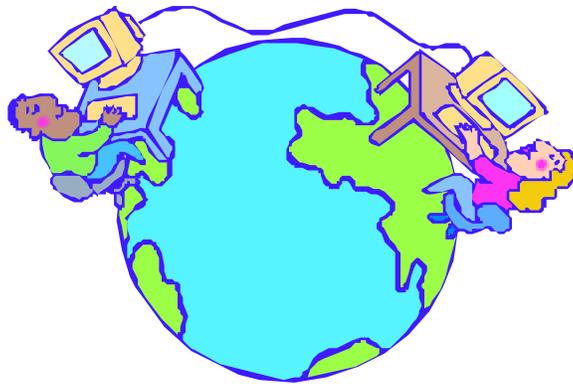
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Some things to know about team based learning and creating effective group assignments:

Each unit should have three parts: (p. 11) (Fink, 2002)
      1) preparation: individual preparation for the group activity (i.e., reading and RATS)
      2) application (practice with feedback) - group work
      3) assessment - as a team

Need accountability at each step: (p. 31-32) (Michaelson, 2002)
      1) Accountability for pre-group preparation
      2) Accountability for individual participation in the group
      3) Accountability for the team's performance

An assignment that promotes group cohesion (p. 55) (Michaelsen & Bauman Knight, 2002)
      1) promotes a high level of individual accountability;
      2) brings members into close physical proximity (Michaelson requires group interaction but Paloff and Pratt, 1999 believe you can create communities online);
      3) motivates a great deal of discussion : recommends a concrete decision based on analysis of a complex issue; i.e., problem based tasks;
      4) ensures members immediate and unambiguous feedback (preferably allowing for comparison with other teams);
      5) provides explicit rewards for teams.

Principles of designing team assignments, the Three S's (p. 62) (Michaelsen & Bauman Knight, 2002):
      1) All teams work on the same problem
      2) Teams are required to make a specific choice
      3) Teams should simultaneously report their choice

Checklist for Designing Effective Team Assignments
(p. 69, Michaelsen & Bauman Knight, 2002):

PRIOR to Group Discussion
   • Are group members working on the same assignment and required to make a specific choice, individually and in writing? (Note: This individual accountability is especially important in newly formed groups).

During Discussion WITHIN Groups
   • Are groups required to share member's individual choices and agree (i.e. reach a group consensus) on a specific choice?
   • Will the discussion focus on "Why?" (and/or "How?")
   • Will the groups' choice(s) be represented in a form that enables immediate and direct comparisons with other groups?

During Discussion BETWEEN Groups
   • Are groups' decisions reported simultaneously?
   • Do group "reports" focus attention on absolutely key issues?*
   • Are groups given the opportunity to digest and reflect on the entire set of "reports"* before total class discussion begins?
   • Will the discussion focus on "Why?" (and/or "How?")

The more "Yes" answers, the better. If the answer to all eight questions is "Yes," the assignment will effectively promote both learning and group development.

*The form in which individual and group choices are represented largely determines the dynamics of the discussions that follow. Both individual reports to groups and group reports to the class should be as absolutely succinct as possible. One-word reports are the very best (e.g., yes/no, best/worst, up/down/no change, etc.) because they invariably stimulate a discussion of why one choice is better than another.

Fink, L.D. (2002). Beyond small groups: Harnessing the extraordinary power of learning teams. In L.K. Michaelson, A. Bauman Knight & L.D. Fink (Eds). *Team -based learning: A transformative use of small groups in college teaching* (pp. 3-26). Sterling, VA: Stylus.

Michaelson, L.K. (2002). Getting started with team-based learning. In L.K. Michaelson, A. Bauman Knight & L.D. Fink (Eds). *Team -based learning: A transformative use of small groups in college teaching* (pp. 27-50). Sterling, VA: Stylus.

Michaelsen, L.K. & Bauman Knight, A. (2002). Creating effective Assignments: A key component of team-based learning. In L.K. Michaelson, A. Bauman Knight & L.D. Fink (Eds). *Team -based learning: A transformative use of small groups in college teaching* (pp. 51 - 72). Sterling, VA: Stylus.

Palloff, R.M. & Pratt, K. (1999). *Building learning communities in cyberspace: Effective strategies for the online classroom.* San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Activity:

Create a team based unit to accomplish the following objective:

Students will be able to recognize and analyze family rituals to see how they affect and reflect family values, power structures and/or identities.

Definition of family ritual from Family Communication: Cohesion and Change (Galvin, Bylund, and Brommel, 2004):

"Family ritual is 'a symbolic form of communication that, owing to the satisfaction that family members experience through its repetition, is acted out in a systematic fashion over time" (Wolin & Bennett, 1984, p. 401). The special meaning and their repetitive nature contribute significantly to the establishment and preservation of a family's identity or relational culture. Rituals are not just pleasurable routine events; rather, rituals serve central ongoing maintenance and relational functions (Bruess & Pearson, 1997). They may cluster around occasions such as dinnertime, errands, vacations, or religious celebrations or rites of passage such as birthdays, graduations, weddings, or funerals. Sometimes rituals form around less pleasurable events such as conflicts, discipline, or teasing.

Family rituals range from those tied to the overall culture to those known only to two or three members. Wolin and Bennett (1984) categorize rituals in the following manner:

1. Family celebrations, often tied to cultural norms, may include the ways holidays are celebrated or certain events are recognized.

2. Family traditions, reflecting unique family occasions, may reflect patterns passed down by family-of-origin members.

3. Patterned family interactions reflecting everyday connections emerge out of increasingly patterned interactions usually developed implicitly." (p. 112)

Information from the research about online discussions

Students tell me (in-class focus group and student evaluations) (Dixson, unpublished ms):

- Online discussions allow them more time to think, to look up information, to reflect
- Online discussions force them to be more thoughtful and reflective because people will have time to read and reread what they post, not just talk about it in passing
- Online discussion can lack the vitality and energy of face to face discussions
- They have to work harder at online discussions
- Online discussions need time to develop (they simply take longer) and it is important not to assume everyone has similar schedules (i.e., many students prefer that a discussion run over a weekend because they have more time to devote to reading, reflecting and posting than during the week)
- Like other group discussions, some students get frustrated when not everyone contributes or does so late in the conversation (why I award individual grades both for a certain number of content related posts and for participating in the discussion within the first half of the time allotted).
- Online discussions allow for/force more quiet members of the class to participate
- You cannot interrupt someone in an asynchronous online discussion forum.

Findings from the research (JALN article)*

- Having a dominant members produced better end results (results indicated that dominant members changed with each discussion for most of the groups - so it was role dominance (appointed as the facilitator for that discussion) rather than personality dominance.
- Two types of student messages led to significantly better end results: shows solidarity and gives information.
- An average of 19% of messages in the study were considered "social" messages (Shows solidarity, shows tension release, shows antagonism, shows tension).
- There were no significant differences in results based on any particular type of instructor message - further research on this forthcoming (:

  *Dixson, M.D., Kuhlhorst, M., & Reiff, A. (2006). Creating effective online discussions: Instructor and student roles. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, *10* (3). (http://www.sloan-c.org/publications/jaln/v10n4/index.asp)

The following is from the COM 310 Family Communication course website: speech.ipfw.edu: a full explanation of this assignment can be found in: Dixson, M.D. (2006, July) Teaching Family Communication Concepts through Family Stories: An Analysis of Stories and Rituals in David Bradley's Harvest Home. *Communication Teacher (http://www.natcom.org/nca/Template2.asp?bid=211)*)

Information on Unit Structure: Each unit requires a quiz, in addition to your family analysis webpage, and participation in your family discussion forum. General information about these assignments can be found below. Following that are links to specific units.

Quizzes: Quizzes are designed to be sure you understand key concepts and terms from the chapters. Each unit quiz will be available for about three days: from Monday until Wednesday at 5:00 pm. You can only take a quiz once.

Addition to family analysis webpage: This webpage is designed to help you learn to apply the concepts you are learning. You will be asked to analyze a specific family. You should choose a family you know well; one about which you have fairly indepth information. You are not required to use your own family but you may certainly do so - you can change the names, if you like :).
If you choose not to use a real family, you may use a fictional family, be sure it is a book, TV show or movie that gives you plenty of information about how the family functions.

Each time an addition to your family analysis page is required you will have two due dates. The first is when you must have your information posted. Then you will have time to comment on each other's webpages (within your own family). The second due date is when all revisions must be made and I will begin grading. Points will be deducted if you miss either due date.
Need help creating your webpage? creating a webpage
If you have trouble, email, call or come and see me. Or, you can check in with the helpdesk (481-6030). Do not wait until the day an assignment is due!

Know how to create a webpage but need help with writing for one? writing for the web

Discussion forums: Each unit requires participation in your family discussion forum. Discussion forums topics are designed to give you the opportunity to explore some of the concepts in more depth. Please take time to read the following paragraphs about how to be successful in the discussion forums.

Successfully using discussion forums: The discussion forums are graded on the depth of critical analysis each group exhibits about the topics at hand. Be sure to post in the forum for your group. You will receive both an individual grade for your contributions (quantity and quality) and a group grade over the final answer posting. You are

expected to make at least 5 content entries into the forum for each topic. Helpful hints: "content entries" include comments beyond "good job"; do not try to make all of your entries in one or two days; back to back postings count as one entry.
Each discussion forum assignment is allowed 5 - 10 days to develop. During that time you are expected to be checking the forum **daily**, keeping up with, and interacting in the conversation. Concentrate on commenting, adding examples and/or specificity and asking questions. You should also comment on the responses of other members of your group. (Hint: "I agree" does not constitute a response!) Make this, as much as possible, a conversation. You will be graded on the depth and thoughtfulness of your responses. Please check every day or so when there is a discussion going on. End dates for these mark the end of the discussion (not when you should first enter the discussion).

Remember only the person assigned should begin the discussion, the rest should comment on, improve, etc. his/her initial posting until the group reaches consensus on the answers. Final answers should be posted in the forum entitled FINAL ANSWERS for that topic. The person who begins the discussion should also facilitate the discussion and is responsible for seeing that final answers are posted on time.

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Unit Two: Creating Meaning in Families
September 11 – 22: **Chapters Four and Five**

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September 11-13: Take Quiz over Unit Two
September 13-22: **Harvest Home Discussion**:
<div align="center">An analysis of the importance of stories and rituals in
Harvest Home by David Bradley</div>

　　1) Analyze the ritual of "Harvest Home." What is the ritual? What does it say about the values of the family? the power structure?
　　2) What kind of stories does David Bradley hear from his family? What is the purpose of these stories? How do they differ from the stories he hears from Uncle John? Why are both stories important?

September 15: Add an analysis of 3-5 important rules (explicit or implicit) to your family analysis webpage. What are the rules? How did they come about (if you know)? Have they changed over time? Is that change (or lack thereof) good or bad for the functioning of the family? Explain. What affect do they have on your family (or the family you are studying)? As always, choose carefully if you are using your own family. You are, after all, putting these on a webpage! It is not necessary to talk about things that might embarrass or disturb your family.

September 15 - 22: Post comments on family websites for your family
September 22: **Final Revisions** of web additions due.
September 22, 5:00 pm: Final answers must be posted to the Final Answer for Harvest Home" discussion forum.