

Collaborative Learning

The Writing Center at North Park University

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The benefits of teaching students how to learn together have been demonstrated many times over, both by academic research and by student testimony. It makes very good practical sense; teachers familiar with their discipline easily forget how foreign the conventions and structures of that discipline once were and can become deaf to questions students are really asking or blind to gaps in their knowledge. Moreover, by putting learning into a social setting, students may loosen up, ask “dumb” questions or play imaginatively with the information they’re studying. Alongside of this, they may begin to see that learning, besides being “work,” can also be “fun” and satisfying. [See the student-authored essay, “Don’t Wait: Collaborate!”] They may begin to learn important social skills needed for the rest of their lives, both personally and politically; they may be freer to discuss spiritual dimensions of the ideas and information they’re encountering; they may expand their cultural experience and understanding. But it would be naïve to pretend that collaborative assignments produce these results automatically; in fact, good collaborative assignments can be quite difficult to design.

Andrea Lunsford, who spent six years collaboratively researching and writing a highly-respected book on collaborative writing, suggests that, first of all, collaborative tasks should in fact require collaboration—they should not be simple busywork. All participants, students, teachers, and whoever else may be involved, should be needed in order to arrive at their common goal. She identifies three sorts of tasks which seem well-suited for collaboration: “high-order problem defining and solving; division of labor tasks, in which the job is simply too big for any one person; and division of expertise tasks.” Goals and assignments need to be clear, and all participants need to be approximately equally engaged and challenged, and teachers need to monitor these dynamics.

The attached PowerPoint presentation, researched and compiled by the 2005 Tutoring Writing class of new Writing Advisors, singles out some of the theories behind the pedagogy and compares them with their own experiences with collaborative learning. They are some of our most engaged students, giving us some useful insights into our classroom practices. The two pieces of advice they most strongly advocate? Make sure that the tasks are not dumped on the “good writers,” who then have to work harder than usual to earn a good grade for themselves (as well as everyone else), and evaluate student work individually.

Andrea Lunsford, “Collaboration, Control, and the Idea of a Writing Center,” *Writing Center Journal* 12.1 (1991): 3-10. Anyone interested in seeing the full article may request one from the Writing Center via cmartin@northpark.edu or x4918.