



I and We: Group Work

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The eighth class at our school is the first step of the new education stage called lyseum. These teenagers are greenhorns among the senior students. For them, most of the teachers are new, and they may not know their classmates because classes have been merged, and there are many new students in each. Literature lessons begin with the theme “Literature and other kinds of art.” However, there is no time to lecture on each kind of art, and general lectures are not useful. I began to think about how to make my class most effective.

One answer was evident: Work in groups. However, that is not so easy in our not-at-all spacious classrooms, packed with students. Besides, my previous experience with group work was not unequivocal and not always positive for a number of subtle reasons. In *The Science to Understand* Brudnyi (1996) said the following about group work:

Medical practice shows that such an intentionally good event as a consilium—the meeting of medical experts on the diagnosis and ways of treating the patient, quite often does not produce effective results. The outstanding Russian physician V.F. Zelenin even remarked that “the more heads, the fewer minds.” Well, minds in class are abundant, as for responsibility, it often lacks as students keep shifting it on one another. (p. 24)

Perhaps these words reflect the main problem of group work:

When everyone is responsible, it turns out that no one really feels responsible. There are a lot of factors on which group work depends: structure of groups, designated time, amount of material, level of complexity, and so forth. Only careful planning ensures success.

In most cases it convenient to divide groups of 25 students into 5 small groups, so that if a presentation of each group takes 5 minutes, the 45 minutes of a standard class will be enough to include 15 minutes for group work, 5 minutes for a model lesson, and 25 minutes for presentation. It is also convenient because time for moving around and regrouping the typical space with rows of desks is reduced to the minimum: One pair of students just turns to another pair, and one more person sits at the side. Certainly, the groups should be flexible in terms of members, and 5 people in a group may be expedient when the task is given in advance and groups get together at the very beginning of the lesson.

A group may consist of students not only with a different level of preparation, but also with different temperaments, and their relations may sometimes be complicated. It often happens that one of the best prepared and more confident students takes the role of the leader, distributes the work, and accepts responsibility for decisions. This pattern can be observed not only in a children’s group, but also among adults. However, the type of situation commonly found in classical fables, when musicians play discordantly or a cart is drawn in

different directions, is not unusual either. This is not always caused by contention among the group members. Students may fail to reach consensus just because they are very different: You can’t make a swan move backwards like a crawfish, and a pike will never rise up to the sky. Each student is different, and each is looking for his or her own way and solutions. For a teacher this should not be a cause for irritation; on the contrary, please regard this as a valuable display of individuality and diversity. The teacher’s role in this case is to enable each student to express himself or herself, while at the same time enriching knowledge and correcting erroneous ideas. In fact, no one is obliged to know everything!

How can a teacher implement all of these things? Each of my colleagues probably has his or her own recipe. In my opinion, it is most effective to plan assignments in view of group composition, and certainly to make the wording precise and detailed. A good example here is the Jigsaw-2 strategy (Belosevic, 2000) in which expert sheets set a direction in analyzing the text for each group. However, depending on the goal of the work and skills of the students (note that group work itself is really a skill that needs to be formed and developed), the task may be presented in various ways. At the initial stage the group estimates its own strengths in view of the task offered and distributes the material among its members.

It is interesting to observe this stage of work. Teachers may assume that weaker students to whom problem questions will

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seem too difficult will take responsibility for answering factual questions, but it appears that distribution of work in a group does not necessarily occur according to this principle. Sometimes a strong student volunteers to state facts and, doing so, brings into focus details that guide weaker students into responding to more complicated questions.

Maybe in university it not so, but at school is very important

that everyone takes part in presentation (therefore, I plan the number of tasks or questions according to the number of group members).

The theme of my class is "Literature and other kinds of art." The students work in small groups of 4 persons (two school desks next to each other). Each group receives one of three tasks: to work with a painting, a piece of literature, or an architectural monu-

ment. All in all I had two groups independently working at each of the tasks.

Task 1

You see a reproduction of a painting by Dutch artist Peter Breigel called "Falling of Icarus." Try to recollect the myth about Icarus. How do you think the mythological character may look? Look at the picture attentively. What do you see? Who in the foreground? Where is Icarus? How is he represented? What feelings does he evoke in you? Why does the artist represent him in such way? Formulate and write down the author's idea (the main idea) of the canvas. What did the artist do so that you would understand him?

Task 2

Everyone knows the great artist Leonardo da Vinci. But he is less known as an author. Here is a fable written by the great Italian. Usually fables have a moral, but in your text it is missing. Think and write down the moral to this fable. What means of art expressiveness have helped you to understand the author?

Task 3

"Dry" gardens—a good example of which is the Peandsi monastery garden in the Japanese city of Kyoto—were made of "eternal" elements such as pebbles. . Such gardens were called "philosophical." Stones were placed very artfully. There were no two identical ones, and from a single perspective it was impossible to see all at a time, only four or five were visible out of many. It took quite a while to find a place from which more stones could be seen.



Photo: RWCT Kyrgyzstan



Try to explain the “philosophy” of such a garden. What did the author use so that the visitor understood him and made his or her own discoveries?

For the presentation, both groups that have been working on the same task come to the front of the class. If time allows, both groups offer full presentations, or else it is possible to establish a sequence of answers: from one, from another—with mutual additions. The conclusion of each group should be very distinct (if there are variants they are to be given as well), and other students may write down the generalization they like best. After all groups are done with their presentations, the students individually write down their general ideas about all kinds of art (for this purpose the teacher offers a new, smaller set of questions).

If there is a lot of material to cover, division into groups occurs beforehand and each group member receives his or her part as a home assignment. In class, the groups discuss the results of homework, choose answers for presentation, and develop the rationale.

In the ninth-grade curriculum, very little time is allocated for acquainting students with William Shakespeare’s tragedy *Hamlet*. It is necessary to help students not only to grasp the content, but also to discuss of philosophical issues touched upon in each part of the tragedy and understand the many-sided concept of the author. Here I give all groups the same task, but each group works with a different act of the play.

- Formulate and write down five factual questions about the act.
- Formulate the summary of the act.
- Think of five conceptual questions.
- Choose what you consider the main monologue of the act, give it a title, and provide evidence to support your choice.

Students come to class with the already prepared task and immediately get together in groups. The goal of their teamwork is to compare their notes and to expand and correct them; that is, once again to analyze the content of the act and comprehend all the issues it embraces. Producing a set of factual questions will take the students along the author’s narrative logic, and the summary will allow them to “compress” the dialogue. Conceptual questions will determine the basic aspects for the analysis of the act, and the choice of the key monologue will help concentrate attention on the main ideas.

Each member of the group participates in the presentation. One student may summarize the results of the team’s work; another may offer an individual interpretation of the text (in this case it is pertinent to let the other students in the group add their thoughts). Different opinions needn’t be gathered into a joint conclusion. The main goal is to prove one’s point of view. Such a format allows students to achieve depth and diversity in their understanding of the great tragedy, to make first steps in seeking answers to difficult philosophical questions. At the same time, important educational and

social skills are formed, and the student does not lose an opportunity for individual development.

One more important aspect in all this is evaluation and assessment. Surely, a joint grade may be given for joint work. But is it always fair? Is the contribution of every student really equal? Probably not. Therefore I often give my students individual grades. A teacher can easily do so if the assessment criteria are developed in advance (see Akhmedova, 2004; Kerimova, 2004). In any case, it is important to structure the work in such a way that every student would become conscious of responsibility and thus determine the reward he or she gets in the end.

We prepare our students for living in a community—in effect, group activity. This skill really should be consciously developed, keeping in mind that everyone is entitled to remain what he or she is—a valuable and unique personality.

References

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