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Managing Groupwork in the Heterogeneous Classroom

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INTRODUCTION

Academically and linguistically heterogeneous classrooms are a widespread phenomenon in the U.S. and in other countries. In such classrooms, students have a wide range of previous academic achievement or significant differences in their proficiency in the language of instruction. Often, heterogeneous classrooms are the result of educators’ intentions and efforts to offer equal access to rigorous curricula, high-quality teaching, and productive interactions with peers. These educators advocate detracking the schools and curtailing traditional ability groupings to create equal opportunities to learn for all students. However, many teachers, students, and parents have had inconsistent or even contradictory experiences with the implementation of these attempts at educational reform. Parents object to watered-down curricula. Students complain about boredom or, conversely, about falling too many classes. Teachers are frustrated by their inability to address the needs of their students at either end of the achievement continuum. For example, in a heterogeneous 10th-grade biology class, about a quarter of the students cannot use the textbook or submit satisfactory lab reports because they read and write at a 5th-grade level. In an 8th-grade social studies class, several newly arrived immigrant students have little or no prior knowledge of momentous events or important figures in U.S. history. In an untracked 9th-grade algebra class, about half the students find it difficult to express their mathematical thinking orally or in writing using conventional and appropriate academic language, although they can solve the problem correctly. In a mainstream 6th-grade classroom where students have nine different home languages, many are bilingual and some are trilingual, some are designated as “limited English proficient,” and six students have just joined the class from the pullout English Language Development program.

Groupwork and various models of cooperative or collaborative learning have been promoted as useful pedagogical strategies for such academically and linguistically heterogeneous classrooms. Indeed, there is considerable evidence for the academic, social, and affective benefits of this instructional approach. Students who work collaboratively in small groups have
opportunities to grapple with important ideas of the discipline, discuss and debate substantive questions, and practice socially beneficial skills (Slavin, 1995; Johnson & Johnson, 1989, 1990; Sharan, 1995). Most importantly, groupwork has the potential of helping teachers build equitable classrooms (Cohen, 1994; Cohen & Lotan, 1997). How would we recognize an equitable classroom if we saw one? How are equitable learning environments different from nonequitable ones? Are some classrooms more equitable than others? What would be the distinctive and observable features of an equitable classroom?

Equitable classrooms are reflections of a pedagogical, political, and moral vision—a vision that includes a particular conception of learning and teaching, an unapologetic design for the goals of public educational institutions, and a consistent commitment to care for all children and adolescents. In pedagogical terms, equitable classrooms are environments where “being smart” is defined broadly to reflect authentic undertakings in the real world, where students frequently and successfully demonstrate their “smarts” and where they are recognized publicly for their competence and accomplishments. In equitable classrooms, all students have access to intellectually challenging curricula and grade-appropriate learning tasks. In these classrooms, students interact with equal status; they are engaged, they participate actively, and their voices are heard by the teacher and by their peers. The teacher plans the learning environment, orchestrates productive interactions, and treats all students fairly. In political terms, equitable classrooms result in narrowing the achievement gap, allowing advancement to higher levels of education for more students. In equitable classrooms, teachers and students practice democracy (Oakes & Lipton, 1999). In moral terms, an ethic of care pervades equitable classrooms (Noddings, 1992). Rather than imposing rigid control, teachers model and instill a sense of responsibility towards self and others. Students serve as academic, linguistic, and social resources for one another and are accountable to each other individually and as members of a group. In this chapter, I describe how teachers can manage groupwork productively to build equitable classrooms and to practice equitable pedagogy.

MANAGING GROUPWORK—A SOCIOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Traditionally, strategies for classroom management have been derived from an individualistic, psychological orientation. As such, classroom management is about correcting and preventing disruptions caused by the “difficult” students and about reinforcing positive comportment of the well-adjusted ones. Such defensive reactions reflect a conception of classroom relations as single and frequently unidirectional interactions between the teacher and individual students. Classroom rules and routines deal with how to support the teacher in controlling the students when she is lecturing or how to ensure that students are attentive and ready to complete in-class or homework assignments in a timely manner. In such cases, rules and routines are lengthy lists of a few do’s and many don’ts, sanctioned by unpleasant consequences such as referrals or detention. Furthermore, when troublesome behaviors are attributed to severe psychological impediments, teachers are expected to act as professional therapists, to diagnose and to counsel youngsters on how to deal with stressful and emotionally taxing tasks.

Groupwork can create many difficult and unpleasant situations for both teacher and students. The following is an excerpt from a teacher-authored case (Shulman, Lotan, & Whitcomb, 1998) entitled “Poor Period 3!”:

I stand at my classroom door to greet my students. Soon period 3 will begin. “Good morning, Latisha, how are you?”

“What are we doing today?” she responds.
I try not to sound too mechanical. "I'll explain to everyone in class at once, Latisha." She plops into her seat and stares; her need for nurturing goes unmet.

"Hi, Jose, what's up?"

"I hate my group," he says. "Let me sit near Donny."

Period 3 is one of the six eighth grade social studies classes I teach each day. We cover US history, government, and geography. Our school draws from what is largely a lower-middle-class neighborhood with an ethnically diverse population, and the majority are Latino. Two-and-a-half years ago, I became an advocate of cooperative group learning. Especially for our large "sheltered" population (i.e., English language learners), it seemed to me group interaction would be preferable to students' struggling in silence. During my conversion to groupwork, I was trained never to give up—if things aren't working out, keep discussing it with the class until they cooperate. Because of my relative success with instruction in cooperative groups, I'd been selected to be a peer coach, observing and helping other teachers to plan, manage, and evaluate their groupwork.

Thus, feeling a little smug, I entered into group instruction this year with a good deal of confidence. I met my match with period 3. In my mind, I call them "poor period 3." This is one class in the district that merits a full-time Resource Specialist Program teaching aide because we have nine—yes, nine—special education students. We also have 10 sheltered students who have recently left bilingual classes and are now making the transition to full-time English instruction. The makeup of this class creates a disturbing chemistry that is felt within 30 seconds of the starting bell. I usually place them in groups of four or five, then invariably watch in frozen amazement as they torment each other. I persist, as I was trained to do, but find myself wondering whether groupwork is appropriate for this uncooperative class of 28 students, skewed with a disproportionate number of emotionally needy individuals. . . .

To sum it up, after 42 minutes with period 3, I feel like a giant, emotion-filled ball being slammed from one side of the room to the other. There are just too many emotions flying around the room and rebounding off the walls. Whether it's because they lack experience in small group interaction or they lack self-esteem, or some combination of the two, creating a cooperative atmosphere is not something the students of period 3 seem to be able to accomplish.

At the end of the day I find myself wondering why I don't switch to the more traditional teacher-controlled setting with which these students are more familiar. Perhaps groupwork is not meant for every class. "It's okay to give up," I tell myself. Yet deep down I tell myself, "It's not okay. I know I need to do something. (pp. 21–23)

Framing the issue of classroom management in sociological terms allows us to move away from "fixing" the individual—be it the student or the teacher. It allows us to capitalize on the principle that structural features of the environment affect patterns of interaction as well as participants' willingness to engage and to put out effort (what psychologists would call "being motivated"). In other words, a sociological argument states that in addition to unique personal characteristics, dispositions, and attitudes, students' and teachers' behavior and performances are influenced by structural features of the situation in which they operate. Viewing the classroom as a social system rather than a collection of thirty-odd youngsters led and supervised by an adult allows us to explore, first, the ways in which teachers can use the authority of their role to empower students to manage themselves. Second, this view will lead us to analyze the relationship between features of the learning task and the nature of peer interactions. Third, it makes us recognize the potential of sound evaluation of group and individual products and of social processes for enhancing learning. Finally, it alerts us to the detrimental educational consequences of unequal participation and helps us devise effective interventions.

Recognizing and understanding this systemic view can be useful, even energizing for many teachers. Rather than trying to control behavior by manipulating or attempting to change a
student’s personality, teachers come to understand that they can define, shape, and adjust the parameters of the classroom situation. In other words, by designing productive and safe learning environments and by crafting conceptually challenging and intellectually rich learning tasks, teachers can create optimal conditions for on-task, productive interactions between and among teachers and students. Thus, the maxim of many veteran teachers that classroom management is all about design and planning is no mere cliche.

TEACHER ROLE AND AUTHORITY

In the classroom, the teacher’s authority derives from her institutional position. Given her role, the teacher assigns tasks, monitors students’ activities, and evaluates their performances. She explains, provides instructions, and waits for (correct) answers to her questions. She helps, admonishes, supports, approves, and disapproves. When students work on tasks that have right or wrong answers, the teacher gives clear directions and expects that they be closely followed. She supervises students’ work to prevent mistakes and to minimize wasting valuable instructional time. She manages.

When the goal of instruction is the development of conceptual understanding, critical thinking, and creative problem solving, face-to-face social interaction becomes a necessary condition. These cognitive functions require that students get involved in promoting each other’s learning by discussing the material, helping one another understand it, and holding each other accountable (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubek, 1993). Following earlier theorists (see, e.g., Lewin, 1951, and Deutch, 1949), educators recognized that such interdependence results in more productive groups. Subsequently, Ben-Ari (1997) argued that the link between social interaction and cognitive development is particularly relevant in heterogeneous classrooms where peer interaction is encouraged and adult supervision minimized.

Deriving her argument from organizational sociology, Cohen (1994) claims that when the teacher chooses to use groupwork to set the stage for increased peer interaction, direct supervision becomes unrealistic. Rather than supervising directly, the teacher needs to delegate authority to the students. She explains:

Groupwork changes a teacher’s role dramatically. No longer are you a direct supervisor of students, responsible for insuring that they do their work exactly as you direct. No longer is it your responsibility to watch for every mistake and correct it on the spot. Instead authority is delegated to students and to groups of students. They are in charge of insuring that the job gets done, and that classmates get the help they need. They are empowered to make mistakes, to find out what went wrong, and what might be done about it. . . .

When groupwork is underway, and groups are working and talking together using the instructions you have prepared, then your authority has been delegated. The teacher cannot possibly be everywhere at once trying to help six different groups. Moreover, having students talk with each other is essential as a method of managing heterogeneous classes. When they are trained to help each other, perhaps by reading or by translating into the student’s native language, students use each other as resources to understand the assignments. (pp. 103–104)

Thus, when the teacher delegates authority to the students, she shares her power as well as her responsibilities. Activities in the classroom are no longer the sole responsibility of the teacher. Students become responsible for their own and their groupmates’ engagement and productivity. Students make the groups work by serving as intellectual, academic, or linguistic resources for one another and by holding each other accountable. They solve open-ended problems and devise solutions to problems posed. They report on their group’s work and assess each others’
products. Thus, authority is delegated to students in several ways: in managing the groups, in defining the intellectual content of their work, and in enforcing accountability by evaluating their products.

Delegation of Authority for Managing Groups

Successful delegation of authority reflected in smoothly running groups, high student engagement, productive interactions, quality group products, and significant individual accomplishments does not happen by magic.

Cohen (1994) emphasizes that teachers need to teach social skills explicitly so students can learn how to work cooperatively and how to serve as intellectual resources for one another. Students need to know how to address interpersonal conflicts that impede the group’s productivity and how to use helping behaviors that enhance its functioning. Students need to become accountable to and for each other. Clearly, they need to learn new rules and new norms for behavior in this new situation.

“You have the right to ask for help. You have the duty to assist” is one of these new norms. When tasks are intellectually challenging and students work in groups for relatively limited periods of time, there is and should be a sense of urgency. Students will need to rely on each others’ expertise, previous knowledge, and active contributions. They will need to take advantage of what each one of them brings to the successful completion of the task. Furthermore, they need to take responsibility for engaging all members of the group and supporting them in completing the group task as well as the individual assignments that might follow the work in groups. “No one is done until everyone is done” is another example of a general cooperative norm that, when followed, supports productive interdependence and thus learning.

Different kinds of group tasks require different kinds of cooperative behaviors. For example, designing and conducting a scientific experiment is different from analyzing and interpreting a section of dense literary text. While the former task requires that group members manipulate equipment, observe, formulate hypotheses, record results, and present their conclusions, the latter task might require extensive reading, comprehending, interpreting, visualizing, analyzing, and empathizing. Working on an experiment requires that groupmates help one another by sharing materials, by reaching consensus on the design of the experiment, and by pointing out significant findings. Comprehending a text requires that groupmates ask clarifying questions, listen carefully to others, propose competing interpretations, and justify their opinions based on close readings of the text. Mathematics educators (e.g., Yackel & Cobb, 1996) describe social norms and sociomathematical norms that govern interactions in the inquiry-oriented mathematics classroom. Engaging in mathematics requires that students explain their arguments and justify their solutions, listen to, and make sense of their groupmates’ explanations. Sociomathematical norms are the subject-specific norms that state what are the mathematically appropriate and valuable contributions as well as the mathematically acceptable and effective arguments, explanations, and justifications.

These new behaviors do not emerge automatically in small student groups. New behaviors are to be explicitly introduced, recognized, labeled, discussed, practiced, and reinforced. Using principles of social learning, Cohen (1994, 48–50) offers a collection of exercises called skill-builders to introduce the new norms and make sure students internalize them to make social interactions more productive. Particularly important is the norm that “everyone contributes” and that no single member dominates the interaction. For many students unequal opportunities for participation are among the most frustrating aspects of groupwork.

Many teachers, particularly at the secondary level, worry that given the pressures of covering expansive amounts of curriculum, an extended and exclusive focus on developing social skills is a luxury they can hardly afford. Some teachers address this problem by assigning
content-specific group tasks, and in their feedback to the students and during the debriefing of the groupwork, they focus on the students’ use of cooperative norms and group process skills. Others decide (usually after many frustrating interventions and too many dysfunctional groups) to invest time and effort in training students by using “generic” skill-builders. In any case, helping students to internalize the norms of cooperation and to develop group process skills has proven to be a solid investment of time in the long run.

When the teacher delegates authority, assigning specific roles to the different members enhances the smooth running of groups. In fulfilling these roles, students take responsibility for the practical and routine functions that are traditionally the teachers’ purview. For example, a facilitator or team captain makes sure that everybody understands the task and that all group members get a turn and the help they need. The facilitator also acts as the liaison between the group and the teacher. A resource provider or materials manager secures the manipulatives, scissors, dictionaries, and test tubes and supervises the cleanup. A peacekeeper or harmonizer identifies and addresses sources of conflict and looks out for the social and emotional well-being of the group and its members. When time is of essence, a group member can act as the timekeeper. The reporter oversees the group’s presentation and organizes the summary of the group’s activities during the final wrap-up. Depending on the task, the teacher’s priorities, and the students’ needs, additional roles can be invented and assigned.

Each student in the group plays a role and roles rotate. That way, all group members develop the skills needed to perform each role. Because some roles are perceived to be more powerful and prestigious than others, it is important that roles be assigned rather than assumed by “natural leaders” or usurped by students who have higher status in the group. The roles described here are different from “content” roles such as theorist, questioner, summarizer, or explainer—roles that reflect metacognitive functions necessary for groupwork. They are also different from “professional” roles such as artist, musician, poet, or director—roles that potentially lead to a strict division of labor and curtail interaction. The use of these “professional” roles also runs the risk of pigeonholing students and limiting their potential contributions to a narrower range.

Although time consuming like the previously described training for cooperative norms, explicitly teaching students to perform the roles seems critical. Many teachers find that in addition to explaining the roles to the students and posting descriptions of the related responsibilities on the classroom wall, it can be useful to help students figure out what roles might “sound like.” For example, facilitators can be heard saying: “Does everybody understand what we are supposed to do?” “Michael, what do you propose we do next?” Many teachers might find it useful to explain to the students that being able to act in these different roles is an important skill needed for adult jobs and greatly valued in many workplaces. Practicing what to say and how to say it as an incumbent of a certain role can also be particularly useful for students who are English learners in mainstream classrooms.

While they recognize the benefits of groupwork, some teachers have mixed reactions to the use of roles. As highly skilled and well-socialized adults, they take harmoniously functioning groups for granted. Some teachers and many students perceive the roles as artificial and limiting. Ultimately, however, many teachers recognize that without developing and assigning roles only certain students, and seemingly always the same ones, will take and are given opportunities to assume leadership roles or are ready to act as spokespersons for their groups. Conversely, certain students are permanently “stuck” with doing the cleanup—if cleanup is done at all. That is when teachers become more open to see the added value of well-implemented student roles.

Being able to provide specific and sound feedback to groups and individuals requires that teachers observe the groups very closely and listen in on the conversations. In many classrooms where groupwork is successful, teachers roam around, clipboard in hand, take notes or engage in brief but pointed interactions with the groups. Noting specific cooperative norms and well-executed roles, important contributions of individual group members and providing
feedback on the spot or during wrap-up makes students aware that the teacher is listening attentively, and also informs the teacher about students’ needs and accomplishments. This constant, precise, and formative classroom assessment of students’ work contributes to the students putting out more effort towards improved performance (Ben-Ari, 1997; Black & Wiliam, 1998).

When teachers delegate authority effectively, students are successfully managing the groups by themselves. Often teachers are surprised and worried by this redefinition of their traditional role, although they engineered it in the first place. Some teachers struggle with no longer being the focal point of the classroom, the sole provider of information and knowledge. Ms. Kepner wrote:

The groups were beginning to buzz along more productively but still testing me frequently to see if I really meant what I said about them taking control of the investigation, of the learning. They wanted to do well. No one wanted to get up in front of the class and look like a fool. And you never knew what sneaky kinds of questions Ms. Kepner or somebody else, might ask about how or why or what if. The management system began to work like a kaleidoscope, the bright bits falling into place to create an impressive, transitory pattern. But I still wanted to be that precious dot in the center of the steadily revolving wheel. (Lotan & Whitcomb, 1995, p. 341)

Other teachers worry that without their constant supervision, the classroom might deteriorate into chaos: students will not understand what needs to be done, will make mistakes, and will not complete their assignments. They fear that they might seem to have abdicated their role as teachers when they abstain from helping or rescuing the groups. They puzzle about when and how to intervene when groups are floundering or when students are reluctant, even resistant to accept the authority delegated to them.

Many teachers, novice and veteran alike, struggle with the notion of delegating authority (Shulman, Lotan, & Whitcomb, 1998; Lotan, 2004). Indeed, groupwork can exacerbate management problems. It often requires higher tolerance for purely social interactions that seem to be only tangentially, if at all, related to the task at hand and a reasonable comfort level with unexpected classroom events. Delegating authority, that is, sharing with the students the power to make decisions about how to accomplish the task, how to work together productively, how to evaluate and enhance the quality of the group product, and how to recognize the contributions of individual members of the group does not mean relinquishing authority. Indeed, I often remind teachers and teacher candidates that one cannot delegate authority if one does not have it in the first place.

With time, however, as they grow more comfortable and confident with making students responsible for their own work, and as they hover less over groups and rescue more and more infrequently, teachers find that they are free for the kind of teaching that attracted them to the profession in the first place. Relieved from the burden of direct supervision and control, teachers, through feedback and questioning, encourage the students to move beyond the procedural aspects of the task and to interact with one another at a high conceptual level, making sense of difficult intellectual problems. Strong delegation of authority, or reduced direct supervision by the teacher, leads to increased levels of student talking and working together on the challenging group tasks. Consequently, the more students talk and work together, the more they learn (Cohen, Lotan, & Holthuis, 1995; Cohen & Lotan, 1997; Ben-Ari, 1997).

**Composing Groups**

For many teachers, composing the “perfect” group can be a very time-consuming and anxiety-provoking task. One teacher documented her “struggles with the dynamics of grouping”:
When the year began, I had high expectations for groupwork—it would be an effective management tool, promote student self-esteem, and encourage collaboration. Most of all, I saw it as a vital tool to facilitate dialogue among peers, which in turn would help all students—especially second language learners like Sam—increase their verbal, written, expressive, and receptive language skills. With that in mind, my task was to effectively group 29 second graders. My second grade class consisted of 12 girls and 17 boys: 74% African American, 13% Caucasian, and 13% Asian. While a few children were from middle-class families, most were from low-income or welfare families.

The big question was how to group them. I wanted groups that were heterogeneous, nonthreatening, noncompetitive, equitable, stimulating, motivating, and most of all, cooperative. I needed to take into special account the children who were described as “at risk”—children who either were learning English as a second language or had been identified as non-readers.

Now as I look back on last year, I realize that there is no “cooperative magic”; rather, creating groups that are cooperative and collaborative is a complex, multifaceted endeavor. Sam’s involvement in group activities certainly had its ups and downs. On one hand, I am pleased with Sam’s growth. When he began the year, he was in a group where he felt rejected and insecure and that his contributions had little value. In the second group, he found teammates who recognized his skills and were willing to listen and attend to his needs. Sam’s confidence grew, and with it, his ability to communicate soared. His progress improved his status in subsequent groups. But by the end of the year, Sam became domineering and overbearing and tried to usurp control. (Shulman, Lotan, & Whitcomb, 1998, pp. 39-42)

If teachers create homogeneous groups where group members have similar levels of previous academic achievement, the benefits might outweigh the costs because they might be recreating in the classroom the tracking system they were trying to abolish. Teachers might choose to create heterogeneous groups based on narrowly defined previous academic achievement (i.e., test scores or traditional grades) or perceived academic ability. According to this scenario, a group might include one high-, one low-, and two medium-achieving students, a situation certain to activate considerable status problems.

Often teachers believe that groups need to be balanced and mixed as to its members’ prior academic achievement, gender, race, ethnicity, linguistic proficiency, being with or without close friends, or potential to act disruptively. With that many constraints, the teacher might have to spend many hours figuring out the exact group assignment for each and every student. Not only can all this effort be for naught because of an unexpected flu epidemic or a field trip, mechanically and bureaucratically planning that each group have equal number of male or female students, or equal number of students from the different ethnic or racial groups represented in the class will also quickly reveal the teacher’s explicit or hidden rationale for group assignments. As a result, students will tend to interact with their fellow group members as stereotypical representatives of their respective racial or ethnic backgrounds rather than as individual persons. In her study of an untracked 9th-grade classroom where groupwork was used consistently, Rubin (2003) provides an excellent description of the drawbacks of such efforts by the teacher to compose groups:

In spite of the teachers’ belief in a “multiple intelligences” approach, small groups in the detracked classroom were nevertheless built with an eye toward balancing “strong” and “weak” students as defined in a traditional academic sense. “I do build it from the weak kids up,” Mr. Apple told me. “I don’t build it from the strong kids down.” In this way, the markers of competence constructed in the whole class context made their way into the small group context. Students who were competent readers and writers and who kept up with their assigned work were positioned as experts, and those who were seen as having lower skills were placed with their more highly skilled peers, with academic assistance as the implicit goal.
A second feature of a balanced group was racial diversity. Groupwork fulfilled the democratizing role for the core teachers by bringing “kids who are different” into proximity with each other... Mr. Apple pointed out that constructing groups around racial and socio-economic differences could be “tricky, especially if Blacks are the racial minority, you’re always separating them... there will be one Black kid in each group.” In the Cedar High context, having one African American student in each group usually meant that that student did not have any close friends in that group, and often meant that that student was also positioned as a “weak” student. This exacerbated the correspondence between race and achievement that loomed large for both students and teachers at Cedar High. (pp. 552–553)

Students have clear preferences as to who they want to be with in a group. They know they could benefit from working with others who are perceived as academically strong. They would also choose to work with others who are socially attractive. In her study, Rubin (2003) asked the students about their priorities for group membership. With great acuity, she documents their answers:

Students wanted group members who were academically competent, fun to be with, motivating and respectful. Many of these attributes were in conflict with the criteria that the teachers used when configuring small groups. Students based their judgments about whom they would want to work in small groups on how their peers displayed themselves in the whole class context, on the stereotypes drawn from the particular school context, and on their previous experiences with individuals in small group settings.

One quality of a good group member was academic competence. Students’ definitions of academic competence in small group setting were consistent with the earlier discussion of what made a good student. Thus a good group member would be someone who is “always reading” (Grant), who “does the work” (Kiana), who does not “play around” (Mike), who “actually works” (Sasha), and who does not “like to mess around” (Tiffany)...

Some students came into the small group setting bearing reputations as “bad students”: students who “don’t really pay attention in class” and “don’t do their work” (Grant), “don’t want to learn” (Kiana, Sasha, Mike), “don’t even try” (Sasha) and who are “rude” (Kiana, Mike). This was a difficult position to hold in a group setting and often led to a reduction in responsibility for those students.

Another characteristic of a good group member was that she or he be “fun” to work with. This was consistent with the more social and intimate setting of the small group participant structure. Sasha told me that she wanted to work with “someone who could joke around. When you work really, really hard, after a while you get really, really punchy, and you just want to stop and joke around.

Some students spoke of desiring group members who were “motivators” and could keep the group moving along. These students were the “groupmakers” and they were in demand. Grant told me he would like to have in his group “somebody who’s kind of social and sort of a leader. I might pick Sasha. She’s good at that... Somebody who’ll just keep us all working on the same thing and not let us go on to something we’re not supposed to do.” (pp. 556–557)

Given students’ awareness of the intellectual importance and the social value of the different group members, I suggest that teachers make group assignments a public and open classroom event and use controlled randomness. “No hidden agendas” would be the motto of this seemingly oxymoronic method. Many teachers use pocket charts on the wall to signal to the students their group assignment and group role for the day. I suggest that before the start of a groupwork unit, the teacher take a few minutes to compose the groups in the students’ presence. After shuffling the students’ names like a deck of cards, the teacher can start placing the
cards into the different pockets. After distributing all the names, she can review the groups that emerge. Now will be the time to make well-justified changes. For example, the teacher might acknowledge that a newly arrived immigrant student will need a translator and the student who can serve as a translator needs to move to his or her group. The teacher might want to separate two close friends who tend to socialize rather than work when placed together in a group. Alternatively, she might separate two students who are known to be engaged in a drawn-out quarrel, acknowledging that for now it could be too hard to address the deeply felt animosity these students feel towards each other.

More importantly, however, an open and near-random assignment to groups symbolizes that the teacher sees students as being competent and able to contribute to the task in many different ways rather than exclusively through reading, writing, and calculating quickly. When students complete group tasks, they contribute and demonstrate many different abilities—all to be acknowledged as intellectually valued and relevant to the successful completion of the task. By ranking students on a unidimensional scale from “strong” to “weak” and by, intentionally or unintentionally, transmitting that ranking to his students as the criteria by which groups were formed, Mr. Apple in the previous description fundamentally contradicted his stated belief in the intellectual competence of all his students.

Delegation of Intellectual Authority

When the goal of instruction is conceptual learning and deep understanding of content, an often underestimated predictor for successful groupwork is a well-crafted, “group-worthy” task (Lotan, 2003). Returning to the sociological perspective presented previously, I argue that the features of the collective task affect the nature of the interaction among members of the group and their rate of success in contributing to and completing the task. Thus, group-worthy tasks have the following five features: (1) they are anchored in important disciplinary content of the subject matter; (2) they are open-ended and require complex problem solving; (3) they include multiple curricular representations (Eisner, 1994) to provide students with multiple entry points to the task and multiple opportunities to show intellectual competence; (4) they rely on positive interdependence among group members and also require individual accountability; and (5) they include clear criteria for the evaluation of the group’s product.

A card containing the instructions to the group’s task, the questions to be discussed by the group as they refer to the resource materials, and the evaluation criteria for the group’s product can be seen as the physical symbol of the teacher’s delegation of authority. As the resource providers pick up the materials to start the work in groups, students understand that they are to grapple with the task on their own, assume full responsibility for its completion, and create a group product that reflects their joint efforts. In addition to the task card and the resource materials, individual reports are part of the package prepared for each group. These individual reports, to be completed after the work in groups, are one of the main vehicles for ensuring and enforcing individual accountability through written assignments.

During groupwork, students can engage in two kinds of learning tasks: well-structured, routine tasks and open-ended, uncertain, nonroutine tasks. To complete routine tasks (individually, in pairs, or in small groups), students follow clear and detailed directions to arrive at the correct answer or the expected solution. Such tasks include finding a definition in a dictionary, recalling or summarizing information from a textbook, completing sentences, drawing or coloring maps, or practicing arithmetic algorithms. Often teachers design tasks that are crowded with details and include a myriad of directions to be followed carefully so students will not make mistakes or will be sure to “discover” what the teacher has planned for them to discover. Having delegated authority to the groups to manage themselves and as they struggle to minimize direct supervision, these teachers try to maintain or regain full control through
the tightly structured task by overspecifying the instructions or preteaching the assignment to remove much of the uncertainty.

Although beneficial to some students, particularly those who provide help to their peers by explaining, modeling, and practicing these necessary academic skills (Webb and Farivar, 1999), groupwork is not essential for these kinds of tasks. Often students resent engaging in groupwork to complete tasks they could do as easily, and at times more efficiently, complete on their own. They also might find it frustrating to always be the one group member who provides the explanations or, conversely, being the one who always needs them.

Groupwork is essential when students grapple with nonroutine, open-ended tasks that reflect real-life uncertainties and ambiguities, genuine dilemmas, and authentic problems. These tasks are radically different from the traditional, recipe-like activities designed to prevent unexpected answers as described above. Group-worthy tasks allow students to share their experiences and require that they justify their opinions and beliefs. In these tasks, students analyze, synthesize, hypothesize, interpret, imagine, and evaluate. They discuss cause and effect, explore controversial issues, they explain, and they persuade. In working on group-worthy tasks, students have the opportunity to devise different plans, and explore different paths towards a solution. They might come up with as many different solutions as there are groups in the classroom. Together with the teacher, they are empowered to make decisions that have substantial implications for the real classroom curriculum. Therefore, assigning a group-worthy task means that the teacher is ready to accept unexpected solutions and answers. Given the intellectual diversity of a group and the students’ varied repertoires of problem-solving strategies, group members can effectively use each other as intellectual resources to explore alternative solutions, to examine issues from different perspectives, and to assess their group-mates’ assertions and dissents. By assigning such tasks, teachers effectively delegate intellectual authority to the students, and support and acknowledge their intellectual autonomy.

This kind of delegation of intellectual authority often raises the teacher’s as well as the students’ level of anxiety and apprehension. Because there are no “answer keys” or end-of-the-chapter solutions for truly group-worthy tasks, teachers worry about being confronted by their students’ unexpected and sometimes uncomfortable answers or solutions. Like their teachers, students handle the task’s uncertainty with varying degrees of comfort and success. Some groups and individuals proceed cautiously at first, surprised that schoolwork has become so radically redefined. Paradoxically, more mature students seem to have greater difficulty adjusting to the possibility of more than one legitimate outcome and more than one path to a solution. Realistically, a delicate balance between uncertainty and open-endedness and adequate but not overbearing guidance makes for productive rather than frustrating intellectual engagement. While too much open-endedness is unmanageable, too many details short-circuit the problem-solving interchanges, and thus the learning process.

Delegation of Evaluation Rights

As defined by their role in the classroom, teachers are an important source of evaluation. The power to appraise, to judge, to grade—in short, to evaluate students and their work has traditionally been solely the teacher’s responsibility. However, teacher evaluations have direct consequences for students’ self-evaluations and for their evaluations of each other’s intellectual and academic competence. Teacher’s overt and covert evaluations are significant determinants in the creation of perceived academic and social rankings in the classroom.

Given group-worthy tasks, the assessment of groupwork both at the group and at the individual level raises important questions for the teacher and has implications for student learning. Increasingly, topics of assessment have gained central stage with the realization that 1) formative classroom assessment by the teacher (Black et al., 2002), 2) students active in evaluating their
own work (Shepard, 2000), and 3) clear criteria, standards, and expectations visible to the students have profound effects on the effort invested by the students, the quality of their products, and ultimately, their learning outcomes.

Cohen, Lotan, Abram, Scarloss, and Schultz (2002) have documented the positive results of using clear evaluation criteria for both self-assessment of the members of the group in group discussion and in evaluating the quality of their group product. This study showed that groups produced superior products and students wrote stronger final unit essays when they used criteria to evaluate their work and their products. As previously described, explicit and content-specific (rather than generic) criteria for evaluating the group product, the individual reports or culminating essays need to be included in the task cards presented to the groups.

When teachers use the evaluation criteria during group presentations at the end of groupwork, their feedback is more concrete and more specific (Schultz et al., 2000). The teacher and the audience of students can assess the quality of the products presented using these criteria on a regular basis. Feedback based on evidence shown during the presentation from both the teacher and the students can be a valuable tool in increasing the effort put forth by groups as they work on the task. Sharing with the teacher the power to evaluate the work of their peers openly and legitimately as well as the opportunity to practice self-evaluation contributes to a further redefinition of the traditional classroom roles of teacher and student. It indicates delegation of evaluation rights.

As argued previously, this redefinition of roles and the restructuring of the classroom environment necessitate explicit preparation and training of the students. They need to learn how to be a genuinely attentive audience, how to use evidence from their peers’ presentations to support the feedback and evaluations they give. Just as importantly, they need to become adept at using the evaluation criteria to monitor their own group process and to judge the quality of their own products. More beneficial than group grades, individual, or group points, sound feedback based on clear criteria and standards supports student engagement and learning.

UNEQUAL PARTICIPATION AND ITS EDUCATIONAL CONSEQUENCES

While groupwork is a highly recommended strategy for heterogeneous classrooms and its benefits are convincingly documented, many educators, students, and their parents complain about its all-too-familiar pitfalls. First and foremost among these is the widely recognized, unequal participation among members of a task-oriented small group. Unequal participation can be observed in two ways: on the one hand, one or two students dominate the interaction in the groups. They handle the materials, search for and provide information, solve the problem (correctly or incorrectly) and complete the task, and make the decisions that ultimately determine the group’s performance. On the other hand, unequal participation manifests itself in the complete and painful exclusion of other members of the group. These students remain silent and unobtrusive, reluctant to make suggestions or to offer their ideas. Often, they are labeled as “being shy.” Alternatively, some of these students, barred from productive interactions, become resistant and disruptive, and deliberately undermine the group’s efforts.

Elizabeth Cohen has consistently documented the detrimental consequences of unequal participation in small groups: because participation is related to learning, unequal participation translates into unequal learning outcomes. Across different subject areas and at different grade levels, the more students participate in small group interactions, the greater their learning gains (Cohen, 1994; Cohen & Lotan, 1997). Conversely, students who participate less have lower learning gains. In addition to academic shortfalls, unequal participation creates difficulties for the social-emotional well-being of group members. Hard-working and well-prepared students
who worry about their performance and their grades grudgingly invest effort but resent being “the suckers.” They blame the ones who do not participate for being “free riders” and social loafers. Furthermore, unequal participation causes teachers to worry about evaluating students’ work and performance in small groups. If unequal participation is seen as a matter of personal choice or as stemming from unequal levels of motivation, how are teachers to evaluate group products or group processes (Webb, 1995)?

Cohen relies on sociological theories to explain the phenomenon of unequal participation:

Small task groups tend to develop hierarchies where some members are more active and influential than others. This is a status ordering—an agreed-upon ranking where everyone feels it is better to have a high rank within the status order than a low rank. Group members who have high rank are seen as more competent and as having done more to guide and lead the group. (Cohen, 1994, pp. 27–28)

She continues by saying that according to Expectation State Theory, members of small, on-task groups develop expectations for self and others’ competence based on so-called “status characteristics.” Examples of status characteristics range from race, gender, socioeconomic status, and physical attractiveness to academic status and peer status in the classroom. Attached to status characteristics are perceived expectations for competence: individuals with high status are expected to be more competent than low-status individuals and thus take and are given more opportunities to exert power and influence. Unequal participation, then, is not the problem of the individual student but rather a problem created by the status ordering in small groups.

Having a theoretical model to understand this phenomenon has also allowed Cohen and her colleagues (1994) to design specific interventions that disrupt the pernicious relationship between status and participation. The first of these interventions, called the “multiple-ability orientation” rests on the premise that in multidimensional classrooms and for multidimensional tasks, previously defined as group-worthy tasks, many different intellectual abilities are needed to be successful. By convincing the students that no single group member has all the abilities to complete such tasks successfully but that everyone has some of these abilities, students will create a mixed set of expectations about themselves and others. As a result, they will take and will give more opportunities to interact to more of their groupmates. The challenge facing teachers is to present a credible analysis of the learning task as a multiple-ability task and to convince the students of the relevance of different intellectual abilities for its successful completion. Furthermore, the teacher needs to persuade students that when tasks require many different kinds of intellectual abilities, each member of the group can make valuable contributions from their repertoire of problem-solving strategies. All contributions are needed to complete the task successfully.

The second intervention designed to weaken the relationship between status and participation is called “assigning competence to low-status students.” For this intervention, the teacher pays particular attention to the performance of the low-status student in the group. The teacher watches attentively for those moments when the student shows competence on one or some of the abilities previously identified. Then the teacher tells the student and his or her groupmates what he or she did well and how this contribution is relevant to the successful completion of the task. Often, the teacher also reminds the group that the student can serve as a resource on similar multiple-ability tasks in the future.

Elizabeth Cohen and I (Cohen & Lotan, 1995) have documented the effectiveness of these interventions in elementary classrooms. In these classrooms, teachers used multiple-ability curricula and students, working in small groups, showed high rates of interaction. For our studies, we related the frequency with which teachers used the interventions to measures of status
problems both at the individual and at the classroom level. Bower (1997) documented how the use of a multiple-ability curriculum and treatment in high school social studies classrooms mitigated the relationship between status and interaction.

Delegation of authority by the teacher, high levels of student interaction in the small groups, and group-worthy tasks are necessary conditions for these interventions to be effective. First, students need to work on learning tasks that require many different intellectual abilities for their successful completion and that promote interaction. If reading silently, filling in the blanks, or applying algorithms in rote fashion are the only skills required, teachers will have a hard time convincing students of the message of the multiple-ability orientation. Second, while students need to interact constantly and around substantive content in order to demonstrate intellectual competence, low-status students in particular must have repeated opportunities to display their competence and to be recognized for it. Third, having successfully delegated authority to the groups, the teacher is free to observe and focus his or her attention on identifying and recognizing students’ intellectual competence and contributions.

CONCLUSION

Skillful management of groupwork, like management of other classroom activities, is a cornerstone of teachers’ pedagogical repertoire. It requires that they understand the connections among the fundamental components of teaching and learning: the features of the learning tasks, the relationship between the teacher role and patterns of students’ engagement and activity, and the evaluation practices in the classroom. Thus, groupwork is a costly instructional approach, demanding much thought, effort, and time. It requires not only a physical, but also a conceptual reorganization of the classroom, an added dimension to the role of the teacher, new ways for students to interact, and the intense development of group-worthy tasks. While some educators promote groupwork for its affective and social rewards, its most important benefit is its potential as equitable pedagogy. When teachers and students alike are able to recognize and value the diverse intellectual contributions of all students in heterogeneous classrooms, they show their commitment to close the achievement gap and to develop democratic and caring classrooms.

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REFERENCES


