COLLABORATIVE LEARNING is an umbrella term for a variety of educational approaches involving joint intellectual effort by students, or students and professors together. Usually, students are working in groups of two or more, mutually searching for understanding, solutions, or meanings, or creating a product. Collaborative learning activities vary widely, but most center on students' exploration or application of the course material, not simply the teacher's presentation or explication of it.

The following list includes a variety of Collaborative Learning examples:

Think-pair-share

> Give students a discussion prompt, question, short problem, or issue to consider.
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> Individuals work briefly on a response.
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> Peers report their responses to each other in pairs.
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> Some (or all) pairs summarize their discussion for the large group.
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> Think-pair-share is a low-stakes, low-effort strategy for active learning and abbreviated collaboration. Students must work independently, communicate their ideas to peers, consider peer responses, and share that discussion in a way that begins to synthesize an exchange. While it is unlikely that all pairs in a class will have the opportunity for the last step, calling on random pairs means that most should be prepared. Think-pair-share requires that students act, instead of passively listening.

Problem Based learning (PBL)

> Problem-based learning (or PBL) introduces a specific problem to students, usually in groups, over an extended period, and requires that they understand the problem and begin to propose a response or solution. PBL begins to approximate the sort of work scholars do (think of the "problem" as a sort of research question), as well as the way students may need to approach problems in their lives after higher education.

Guided Design

> Guided Design, a type of PBL, leads students through steps as they work on a problem. So, for instance, groups might do preliminary research and report back simultaneously, identify stakeholders and report back simultaneously, propose compromises and report back simultaneously, etc.

Case Study

> Case studies provide students with sample problems from experience. So, for instance, students in microbiology might propose a response to a waterborne viral outbreak.

Simulations

> Simulations ask students to adopt roles as they perform the work of a problem-solving group. Students of government and politics, for example, might take on the roles of business owners, city council members, and neighborhood advocates in a zoning dispute.

Peer Teaching

> Peer teaching is a very effective means for both the student-as-teacher and student-as-learner to learn new concepts. One example of peer teaching is tutoring, which means guiding the learning of a newer student. This can be as informal as a brief discussion in which a student explains a concept or clarifies a misunderstanding. Supplemental instruction is the extended guidance students receive over an entire course from a secondary source (e.g., a tutor). Presentations ask students to communicate course material to their peers effectively. This requires more than restating content or paraphrasing the day's readings.

Small group discussion

> Small group discussion offers students the chance to interact with peers, to listen, and to teach. Effective small group discussion is guided by clear directions and asks students to share a product (a summary of discussion, a consensus view with minority report, or even a critique of the discussion prompt).

Peer Editing

> Peer editing guides students as they review each others' drafts of written work. This foundation of the craft of academic writing serves to teach both editor (who must learn to read critically and communicate criticism) and writer (who must learn to consume, evaluate, and incorporate feedback). When requiring peer editing, articulate clear expectations, instead of simply asking students to read and evaluate writing (e.g., have them identify a thesis statement and assess the strength of the writer's evidence).

Jigsaw strategy

> The jigsaw strategy breaks problems into small parts and assigns parts to groups who report back, contributing a piece of the puzzle's solution. For example, each student in a group might be assigned a distinct article to read on a shared topic or issue; each would present that article to the group to synthesize all articles.

As you develop collaborative approaches, bear in mind the following:

Do not simply put students in groups with vague directions to discuss a topic. Instead, focus the discussions with a question or topical conflict.

Organize groups with a purpose. Have a learning objective in mind: Would it make more sense to assign groups randomly, to allow peers to organize themselves into groups, to place students together with those whose performance has been similar? There are rationales for each of the preceding; just be sure your strategy is not arbitrary.

Always require a product of groups' work, even if it is as informal as a brief summary of their discussion. Accountability will motivate students put in their full effort and the product will serve as a means of assessing their understanding.

Consider ways for assigning roles, but resist appointing a "leader," upon whom more responsibility will fall than his or her peers. Instead, think about roles that share work (e.g., facilitator, recording secretary, spokesperson).

For long-term collaborative projects, require regular interim reports.

Be attentive to student schedules. If requiring regular collaboration that demands face-to-face meetings, allow those meetings to take place during class.

As with any method, be wary of overuse. If each class meeting relies on group work learning may be no more lasting than if each class relied exclusively on uninterrupted lectures.

Always prepare and distribute a grading rubric for collaborative projects that will be graded.

References

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