TA Connections

Cooperative Learning: An Engaging Pedagogy

I had the pleasure this summer of attending a teaching conference that featured Dr. Barbara J. Millis, a well-known faculty developer, as one of the seminar leaders. Her topic was based on her successful use of group work. As I expected, attendance at her session was standing room only and she still managed to do a fantastic job of incorporating several strategies of Cooperative Learning into her presentation. Before she started, Dr. Millis warned us, not to do what she was about to do to us. For ideal results, she recommended teachers should begin to use cooperative/active learning in classrooms slowly.

Her agenda included a demonstration for how the technique would be used and how the afternoon session would proceed. The excitement of what was to come was heightened by the energy of the participants. I sat next to an enthusiastic administrator from South Carolina. Soon, she was joined by an adult educator from Georgia. As we began to share information with one another, I got ready for an afternoon of fun with these two diverse but like-minded colleagues.

But that was not to last. Soon after the session began, Dr. Millis assigned playing cards to everyone and directed us to go and join a new table of participants based on our matching card suits. My new friends soon disappeared among a sea of strangers. Suddenly, I felt like a student again, forced to play yet another learning game that was based on my willing cooperation to interact with strangers. I reminded myself that learning is an adventure!

Because we were such a large group, the speaker used a microphone and walked back and forth in front of the room, then up and down the aisle as she continued to give us instructions. We began with a three-step interview, which was used as an ice-breaker and enabled us to learn enough about our assigned partner to share with another pair of learners at a neighboring table. At the presenter's "Quiet Signal," we formed a roundtable designed to help us identify barriers to cooperative learning. This structured problem-solving task required us to discuss as many viable solutions as possible in order to overcome at least one of the barriers. After a short time period of brainstorming the problem, we joined a larger group and prepared to stand up and share our findings. By this time we were all energized and ready for the instructor's summary of the accelerated lesson. Using a rapid report-out method provided a sense of closure for our oversized group and validated learning that had occurred in our small groups.

This activity was valuable because it allowed the educators in the room to understand cooperative learning by placing themselves in the shoes of their students. As Millis (2002) says, cooperative learning "can transform our large, diverse lecture classes into a community of supportive teams" and it "satisfies, for students, a human desire for connection and cooperation." Cooperative learning is the instructional use of small groups so that students work together toward a shared goal to maximize their own and each other's learning. (Meyers and Jones, 1993).

The following recommendations are offered to help TAs effectively conduct Cooperative Classrooms.

- Encourage students to arrive at team-generated solutions or reach a consensus on specific solutions to problems.

- Establish a grading scheme that allows all students who work cooperatively to receive appropriate grades. For team projects, build in accountability through responsible peer and self-assessment appraisals.

- Monitor group behavior and learning by moving from group to group as teams complete cooperative tasks.

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Fall 2006: In this issue

The purpose of the TA Orientation is to introduce graduate teaching assistants to the basic principles of teaching, share information about campus support resources, and provide networking opportunities with both new and experienced TAs at NIU.

Eager TAs began arriving before the program began at 8:00 a.m. on Tuesday, August 22, 2006, and based on their cheerfulness they were ready to begin a new school year as teachers and graduate students. Each fall Faculty Development and Instructional Design Center (FDIDC) presents the orientation program for TAs from a variety of disciplines. The advanced topics that are offered will be followed up at the spring TAO. Each participant who registered and attended the daylong program received presentation and resource materials, lunch and refreshments. Also, Certificates of Participation were mailed to all the TAs who attended the event.

This year's program featured eight presenters in the general session, five breakout sessions in the afternoon, and three door prize drawings. The three lucky winners of $25 gift certificates from the University Book Store were: **Uday Kiran Kumar Gattepally, Shannon McCarragher, and Daniel McGuire**. The TA Orientation would not be possible without the support of all the presenters who volunteer their time to share their expertise and experience.

New and returning TAs enjoy a break during the fall 2006 TA Orientation

Mark your calendars and plan to attend the Spring TA Orientation on Friday, January 12, 2007!

EFFECTIVE LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Learning communities have recently become a major focus of attention on college campuses across the nation based on a movement toward student retention and a learning-centered environment. Individuals in learning communities have an explicit common purpose: to learn together. Ultimately, this will benefit our students but learning can have many results including, for example, the acquisition and generation of knowledge, the development of skill, the appreciation of sentiment, and the redevelopment of value and perspective. This fall semester Faculty Development and Instructional Design Center will begin organizing learning communities among the faculty and TAs at NIU based on goals these groups will identify and use to enhance their own teaching and learning effectiveness throughout the academic year. Some of the distinctive features of these types of learning communities are listed below:

- They are usually small units of 6-9 individuals

- They have a sense of purpose

- They encourage teachers to relate to one another both as specialists and as educators, which transforms their roles

- The encourage experimentation within the curriculum

- They help build a sense of group identity, cohesion, and engagement with one another

- They promote deeper interaction among teachers and students

- They broaden pedagogical repertoire of teachers and promote interaction between TAs and faculty

There are two types of learning communities: *cohort-focused* may address the teaching, learning, and development needs of graduate students with teaching responsibilities. For example, sessions could include opportunities for individuals to share syllabi, report on their individual projects, and activities for socializing and bonding. *Topic-focused* learning communities are usually designed to address a special campus and learning issue. The qualities that guide the design and process of an effective learning community should include a sense of **safety and trust** so that participants can feel comfortable enough to connect with each other. There should also be an atmosphere of **openness** so that participants can feel free enough to share their thoughts and feelings without a fear of retribution. **Respect** is one of the more important qualities that members will need to feel they are valued. **Collaboration** is also a valuable quality that determines the group's ability to work with and respond to each other. Finally, **relating** the subject matter to the participants' teaching, courses, scholarship, and life experiences greatly enhances the learning outcomes of the learning community.

Q: Now that I have set up my Blackboard course, posted readings and other documents on it, how do I make it available to my students?

A: After setting up your Blackboard course, complete with course documents, the final step is to make the course available to your students. You can do this by following the instructions below:
1) From the Control Panel, scroll down to the Course Options section.
2) Open the Manage Course Menu link to find Course Documents.
3) Use your mouse to click on the Modify button, which will open up the Set Area Properties page.
4) Place a check mark in the box labeled "Available for Student/Participant users."
5) Submit the OK in the next two screens.

Now when you open up your Course Documents from the Announcements page you will find everything that has been added to your course is available to your students.

Q: How do I add a "Gradebook" button for my students to my course navigation menu?

A: Click CONTROL PANEL > MANAGE COURSE MENU. Then, click on the TOOL LINK button at the top to add a link to a Blackboard Tool, such as My Grades.

Then, in the drop-down pick list on the next page, select "MY GRADES." You can then customize the name of the button to change it to "Gradebook" if you'd like. Click SUBMIT and then OK. Finally, you can reorder your list of buttons at the MANAGE COURSE MENU area.

Q: Is there any way I can see what students will see in my Blackboard course site? Does the instructor have a temporary ID to log in as a student?

A: The default view when you login to your course is that of your students. The only exception is that you will see a "Control Panel" button (that students don't see) as well as an "Edit View" in the right-hand corner of a content area (that students don't see either). Anytime you want to preview a certain portion of your course to see it as your students see it, just click on that link in the course navigation menu.

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GTA Listserv! Are you receiving our Graduate Teaching Assistant Listserv messages with program announcements and other useful information? If not, please send an email to tadev@niu.edu to subscribe to this listserv.

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Blackboard for GTAs

So far this fall 2006 semester, Faculty Development and Instructional Design Center has offered four Blackboard workshops for GTAs. If schedule conflicts have kept you from registering for a Blackboard workshop there is still time to attend some Blackboard workshops before the end of the fall semester.

For GTAs looking for online grade book functions, *Blackboard Assessment Tools* will be presented on **Thursday, October 26, 2006** from **1:00** to **2:30 pm.** This hands-on workshop will highlight the survey and testing features in Blackboard. Participants will have the opportunity to explore the various testing tools, create quizzes and test pools, and practice some short cuts in creating Blackboard quizzes. Prerequisites: basic computer skills and attendance at a Blackboard Overview workshop, or previous experience using Blackboard. Advanced registration is required.

The discussion and file-sharing tools provided by Blackboard can enrich communication in the web-enhanced traditional classroom as well as in the online venue. These tools provide faculty and GTAs with a wealth of opportunities for building course communities, encouraging academic discussion outside the classroom and collecting assignments electronically. *Blackboard Communication Tools* will be presented on **Friday, November 17, 2006** from **1:30** to **3:00 pm**. This hands-on session also covers the features of asynchronous and synchronous discussion, the use of groups and electronic file exchange, including the digital drop box. Participants should have an understanding of basic computing skills and have taken a basic Blackboard workshop or previous experience with Blackboard. Advanced registration is required.

You can find useful information on Teaching with Blackboard at the Blackboard Resources Web site at http://www.blackboard.niu.edu/blackboard

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The Mentor's Guide: Facilitating Effective Learning Relationships [E-Book] by Lois J. Zachary; Jossey-Bass, 2005
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The Learning Needs of Millennial Students

One of the new TA workshops offered this semester was a video discussion entitled **"Millennial Students in the University Classroom"** on Friday, September 8, 2006. This teaching-related video and moderated discussion focused on the characteristics of the Millennials, sometimes called "our new students" and their learning style preferences. If your students were born between 1981 and 2000 they are identified as Millennials, a.k.a. Echo Boomers, Nexters, the Digital Generation.

Researchers found that this is the most diverse generation of learners we have had to teach, thus our teaching must be diverse, exciting, interactive, and integrated with technology in order to make their learning environment effective. The learning needs of these students have a major impact on our teaching. Recommendations for how teachers can have a greater influence on the Millennial student include the following:

- Recognize that students are already different in their attitudes and behavior as a result of the social and technological revolution, therefore, offer deliberate classroom and out-of-class opportunities for student personal awareness and exploration to take place.

- Deemphasize the need for students to use process tools for information retrieval and instead encourage students to accumulate a personal knowledge base.

- Develop a learner-centered learning environment that serves the needs of diverse learners (17-year-old Millennials, 26-year-old Gen X'ers, 40-year-old working mother Baby Boomers, etc.)

- Finally, understand and build skill sets to meet the demands of the diverse array of national, racial/ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds of all our college students.

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