**Coffee Conversations
Feature Article**

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Purposeful Discussions through Team-Based Learning

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In 1953, Brinkley reported on a study whereby students were asked to rank ten common learning situations on the basis of mental engagement. With data collected over the previous two decades, he found that students consistently ranked group discussion as one of the top activities requiring active thinking, second only to written examinations. By contrast, listening to a lecture or listening to another student give a report ranked in the bottomthree activities.

Despite the (humorously flawed) mental image I hold of bygone days and the lone professor pontificating to a room full of attentive students, this study suggests two things. First, instructors have long been incorporating group discussions as an integral class activity. Second, students have long recognized the mental effort group discussion requires of them. However, as many instructors I have worked with – as well as my own experiences – will attest, simply putting students in discussion groups does not ensure they learn the intended lesson. Without thoughtful consideration for how students are grouped as well as what they do in those groups, opportunities for student discussion can quickly turn into idle chit-chat about weekend plans or the latest gossip on social media. Here is where team-based learning (TBL) can provide a useful framework to promote effective student collaboration.

To help foster learning in a group, instructors who utilize the TBL framework deliberately consider three aspects when planning: (a) how to put students into effective groups, (b) how to hold students individually accountable for being prepared to contribute to the group, and (c) how to keep students actively engaged with the group during class time. A fourth aspect, providing frequent and timely feedback, helps ensure students remain a productive team member – and self-correct when necessary.

As further explained by Michaelsen and Sweet (2008), creating groups should be a strategic effort that capitalizes on individual differences, with the intention that these teams remain the same for the duration of the course. To ensure individual students are ready to be contributing team members, instructors test student understanding at the onset of each instructional unit (rather than only at the end) through readiness assurance tests. Testing in this way not only holds students accountable for reading assigned material prior to class, but also provides instructors with a way to identify and focus on concepts that require further clarification, thereby freeing up class time for team activities. Thus, students are provided ample opportunity to work during class on activities that prompt discussion focused on application of key concepts in order to generate solutions, evaluate ideas, or synthesize information.

Activities that foster student interaction rather than a divide-and-conquer approach are key but challenging to develop. However, the TBL framework can help balance individual accountability

with positive interdependence, two elements researchers have agreed are critical to effective collaboration (for a review, see Johnson & Johnson, 2009). With empirical evidence for TBL's effectiveness growing, instructors needing assurance that group discussion will not be wasted class time now have a way to structure such experiences for their students.

References

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