

Small Groups and the Teaching of Composition

Linda Dykes

One of the many advantages of small class size in E110 at the University of Delaware is the creative possibility for experimenting with a variety of teaching methods. A method which I have found particularly successful and productive is the use of small groups. While lecturing has its advantages, working in small groups encourages active student participation, dynamic class discussion, coverage of greater amounts of material, and learning by doing. Beneficial side effects also include a relaxed, friendly atmosphere, better student-teacher rapport, a sense of expectancy and accomplishment, a sharing of a wider range of individual responses, and the creation of unique classroom experiences. Because I am getting immediate response and feedback, it is easier to spot individual problems and to work with the class to correct misunderstandings. I have used small groups in three specific areas: class discussions of assigned readings, oral compositions of essays, and team sessions for research paper problems. The basic guidelines I follow in using small groups include my circulating during group preparation, sitting in the back during presentations, and allowing the students to decide upon their own method of presentations.

In preparing for writing a comparison/contrast paper, students were divided into four groups using articles and advertisements from Popular Writing as follows:

- Group 1 "1 Guy, 2 Bullets, & Joe Gallo is Dead"
"Death of a Maverick Mafioso"
"A Gang That Shot Straight"
- Group 2 "First Editorial Statement from Playboy"
"What Sort of Man Reads Playboy?"
"A Bunny's Tale"
"Bunny Image, Loss Of: The Case of Bitsy S."
- Group 3 "Kennedy Is Killed by Sniper as He Rides in Car in Dallas"
"The Assassination"
- Group 4 "Stephen Crane's Own Story"
"The Open Boat"

Each group was assigned several areas of discussion to compare and contrast; these included facts, purpose, style, and point of view. About ten minutes before the end of class, students chose their group and decided upon a leader and area assignments. The entire next class period was devoted to their discussion and comments. One of the greatest advantages of covering material in this manner is the necessary preparation by the students in order to participate. The teacher is not forced to lecture on material which only he has read or considered.

The procedure for teaching the strategy of cause and effect was very similar but went one step further--the students organized their

results in essay form. Again using Popular Writing, the following group divisions, topics, and articles and advertisements were employed:

Group 1 Causes of The Godfather's Popularity "Alchemy"
from The Godfather

Group 2 Effects of the Broadcast
"The War of the Worlds"
"An Invasion . . ."
"Mr. Welles and Mass Delusion"

Group 3 Effects of Criticism and/or a Better Vocabulary
"How to Win Friends"
"Thirty Days . . ."
Ads beginning on page 41

Group 4 Causes of Career Choices
"De Kid Wot Works at Night"
"The Bridge"
from Working

After each student in the group discussed in detail either one cause or effect, the leader then organized the material in outline form which he wrote on the board. From this outline, the class as a whole discussed the composition of the paper. Several other aspects besides strategy were thoroughly discussed by the students themselves as they put their essay together, such as use of details, exact word choice, transition sentences, introductory and concluding paragraphs. It was a very effective learning experience.

Research paper writing is another area in which groups can be utilized. In the beginning, groups of two discussed results of a note-taking exercise. After considering McCrimmon's discussion of note-taking on pages 321-25, students were given a magazine article, a proposed thesis and three sub-topics. They read the article, chose a topic, and took two sample notes. They then exchanged papers with a classmate whose evaluation of the notes' purpose and type was given to the writer. The week before papers are due, the class was divided in two with only one half reporting to class. They were required to bring an outline, note cards, a tentative rough draft, end notes, and bibliography with them. Working with another classmate, a student structured his paper and received feedback. I circulated and worked closely with each group to clarify problem areas and check bibliography and footnote form. This activity was especially praised by the students who appreciated not only my assistance but that of their classmate.

By implementing the concept of working in small groups in my classroom, I have benefitted from the unique input into learning experiences from my students. This is, indeed, the greatest advantage of all—I have become a participating learner.