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Essays on Teaching Excellence

Toward the Best in the Academy

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Collaboration or Plagiarism? Explaining Collaborative- Based Assignments Clearly

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Much has been written about the use of collaborative learning as a pedagogical tool to enhance student learning. Collaborative learning, or group work as it is commonly known, can be defined as a structured process where students are required to work in groups to complete a common task or assignment for a particular course. It has been identified as one of the most effective ways for students to become actively engaged in classroom activities (Davis, 1993; McKeachie, 1999; Nilson, 1998).

Although there are many positive aspects of group work, there are negatives as well. One particular problem occurs when students are confused about faculty expectations involving the work product of teams. More specifically, students often have difficulty determining how much of a group product, if any, is to be created by an individual. The intervention of faculty can play a key role in shaping

student's perception of group work and other forms of collaborative learning opportunities.

In collaborative learning, students are authorized and required to work together. Generally, they must design the assignment topic, complete the research together, and jointly present their findings to the class as a whole. It logically follows that students who are working as a group ought to be required to submit their research in writing, and that this writing be a jointly written product.

When faculty assign "group work" it is plausible that students infer that the group produces one product, that is, they work together as a team and submit one report. It follows that a bifurcated process of group research and individual presentation is more likely to be construed as a "study group", i.e., people study together and are evaluated separately (Davis, 1993). When students are given little or conflicting instruction, it is difficult for students to conclude which line of thinking is appropriate. Accordingly, the more instruction and detail faculty give to students, the more likely that there will be a "meeting of the minds" as to which type of assignment is expected and what procedures are to be followed.

When faculty want students working as groups to produce separate papers as the final product, it is imperative that they be given specific and detailed instructions as to the nature of the assignment. It should also be clear as to how the individual assignment differs from the work that is submitted as part of the group effort, if both types of

assignments are required in a single course. The distinction between the two types of assignments is key for the students since it can make the difference between accurately completing an assignment and suffering the charge of plagiarism.

Plagiarism and What Falls Under the Guise of Collaboration?

Faculty members can take several steps to clearly define research procedures that are authorized and those that are not.

1. *Don't make assumptions about what students know.* Although it can be assumed that today most college students have worked in groups in an academic setting, it cannot be assumed that students have had an experience with group work that was structured, positive, and meaningful. Accordingly, course materials should help students develop the skills that are required for success in the course. For example, faculty should suggest structures for group processing of work and for managing their time. Also, faculty should make certain that students know what is expected in terms of the format and content of products that need to be produced. The more specific the instruction, the better the product (and the more likely it is that the assignment meets the instructor's expectations).

2. *Define individual vs. team accountability.* Faculty should give detailed instructions about the tasks that need to be performed and be clear about the fact that one person in the group should be responsible for each task, where appropriate. If students are intended to pursue research as a group but submit individual written projects,

how topics for individuals get assigned becomes important. Can they or should they organize the distributions of topics on their own or with the intervention of the instructor? If such subdividing of larger topics is envisioned, vague paper assignments make the task very difficult for the student. “Conduct research in one area that we’ve discussed in class about which you would like to know more. Write a 10-page paper on this topic.” This example of an assignment is extremely general and leaves room for varied interpretation on the student’s part.

Contrast the above with the following set of instructions: “Conduct research on the United States Supreme Court’s ability to assist Bill Gates in circumventing the Antitrust Act. One student will be responsible for addressing the Sherman Act of 1890. Another should address the Clayton Act of 1914. The third person will be responsible for addressing the Antitrust Civil Process Act. Although students can conduct research as a team, each individual is expected to submit a separate and distinct paper.” Providing instructions in this explicit manner gives the group a clear understanding of who is responsible for which part of the group assignment. The more specific and detailed the instruction, the less likely it is that students can submit the same assignment.

3. Be clear with students about the purpose of the assignment.

Student learning increases when the instructor intentionally ties the assignment to the course objectives and is explicit with students about how the assignment meets the stated objectives. Articulating

this also helps to clarify expectations. Once it is known that the intent of an assignment is, for example, “to demonstrate the ability to compare and contrast,” it is easier for both the faculty member and student to consider whether this skill is clearly demonstrated in the assignment.

4. *Follow-up any discussion about assignment particulars in writing.* When clarifying assignments (group or otherwise) in class, make certain to put all explanations, clarifications, and revisions in writing so students can refer back to the discussions after leaving class. This type of follow-up allows both faculty and students to have a documented common understanding of what is required for a particular assignment.

A Word About Technology and Explaining Assignments Clearly

Today, it is more likely than not that both groups and individuals will integrate the internet into research assignments. On such occasions, guidelines become important. In an effort to assist students in maintaining academic integrity, faculty should consider taking three easy steps.

1. *Give students detailed guidelines.* Students should be given a unique but specific format for research papers upon which they will be graded. While students are frequently instructed on the number of pages an assignment should be, it is just as useful to inform students about specific topics that need to be covered within a paper. For example, instructions that read, “All papers need to present five (5)

distinct solutions for addressing the Bill Gates antitrust problem. Each solution should be supported by research garnered from at least two peer reviewed journals that can be found in both print and electronic medium.” If students know that they will be graded based on the criteria, and the weight thereof, they are more likely than not to make sure to follow these specific instructions (which is not easy to do when using a paper that has already been created using different criteria).

2. *Focus on the process of writing a research paper.* Requiring students to complete assignments in parts is a helpful way of preventing students from submitting materials that are not of their own making (either from another member of the group or from the paper mill variety). Encourage students to submit annotated bibliographies, thesis statements, and detailed outlines in stages prior to the complete paper deadline (Rocklin, 1996). This allows faculty to give students feedback early in the process (and makes it more likely that students who are having difficulty with the project will be identified early on). In addition, it is less likely that a student will wait until the last minute to find a research topic and complete the assignments - one of the leading reasons why students feel forced to plagiarize. (On student plagiarism, Nilson, 1998, chapter 9).

3. *Information Literacy.* Students need to know how to use the research that they find when doing an assignment. It is important to know whether students know how to evaluate, analyze, and cite information found. If a class is unfamiliar with skills related to

information literacy, reserve a class meeting time specifically dedicated to “teaching” students these skills (e.g., direct students to sessions on information literacy offered by the institution’s library staff.)

Resources

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