

Real-Time Teaching

Designing and Assessing Productive Group Work in Secondary Schools

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As an educator, have you ever felt that group work just was not working in your classroom? Observing your students, have you ever been reminded of the times your classmates and you socialized instead of collaborating, when your teachers made similar assignments? Even worse, can you remember doing most of the work while the slackers or less motivated students shared your grade of *A*?

Recently, I, Javier (first author), a U.S. history teacher, questioned the effectiveness of group work and my ability to differentiate tasks when I asked my students to work together. I wondered how to ensure that all students were pulling their weight instead of one or two doing all the work. I was convinced that my doubts regarding the effectiveness of group work at the secondary level were valid—it just did not work! I gave up group work and went back to whole-group lecture and individual assignments, positive this would be the best way to ensure that my students were learning and were accountable. After time and observation, I reached a different conclusion. As I lectured, I noticed that my students were bored, off task, and just not motivated to take ownership for their learning.

I was perplexed, as I realized my instructional goals were not being attained with or without group work. After reflection, study, and reevaluating my goals for my students' learning and my instruction, I knew I had to revisit group work with a plan to increase student engagement and accountability. Sharing a few texts about grouping and differentiated instruction with my colleagues (Frey, Fisher, & Everlove, 2009; Lapp, Fisher, & Wolsey, 2009), I realized that I needed to think of group work as collaboration and pose questions and projects to my students that would motivate their participation and critical analysis. Following are a few of our questions and thoughts and an example of how group work was implemented in my classroom when I designed and taught social studies lessons with Diane Lapp and Douglas Fisher.

What Is Group Work?

I now realize that group work must be a time for students to engage in productive and accountable collaboration around a task or problem that causes them to rely on one another's part or participation to ensure successful completion.

What Does Successful Group Work Look Like in My Classroom?

Successful group work can be designed and presented to the students, following three principles. The first, and most obvious, characteristic of successful group

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work is to design tasks that cause students to talk with one another, to hear how their peers approach the content and then to be able to compare this with their own approach. Second, the task must provide a stimulus question or problem that causes students to cooperate as they formulate, share, and compare ideas with one another. Finally, all tasks should be broad enough to involve both individual and group accountability.

How Do I Assess My Students As They Work in Groups?

It is important to assess students both individually and as a group during and at the completion of a collaborative project. While motivating students to do their individual parts, effective assessment also preserves group dynamics and decreases any resentment among members that can be created when an individual or small number of people completes a large amount of the work. Effective assessment can occur through an evaluation of each student's collected or presented segment of the information.

Although there may be one main group task, there are ways to tailor the task to accommodate student differences. One way is to assign students different tasks within the information-collecting process. For example, a group assigned to present the roles of a particular branch of government might divide the task by having a technologically savvy student find a few current pieces of related information on the Internet while others complete complementary tasks, such as researching a primary source document, surveying related literature written at various levels of difficulty, collecting information in a notebook from all who are doing the research, and compiling a PowerPoint presentation of the information which might be shared orally by yet another group member.

Implementing Productive Group Work

Our lesson purpose was for students to determine the benefits of the Social Security Act and how the U.S. government used posters to convey those benefits to the public. We decided to use group work as a way to promote discussion among the students about one of the most significant programs of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal, the Social Security Act of 1935. Throughout the process, group discussion, negotiation, and individual accountability and performance were continuous.

To begin, students were clustered in small heterogeneous groups. We assigned them to groups on the basis of their past performance, making sure each group represented the academic diversity in the classroom. Each group received a folder containing a handout detailing the five tasks to be accomplished by the group as a whole and by each of its members.

Task 1: Preparing the Students for Group Work

The students were asked to individually analyze posters created by the U.S. government in the 1930s to promote the passage of the Social Security Act of 1935. The posters can be found on The National Archives website at archives.gov. To support their doing so, they were given the following guidelines to use as a frame for analysis, discussion, and response:

- List what you see in the poster. (Visually divide the image into four sections to help you see everything in the poster.)
- Why do you think this poster was created to gain support for the Social Security Act?
- Who is portrayed in the poster? Who is *not* portrayed in the poster?
- Why do you think President Roosevelt and his administration chose this image to sell the Social Security Act to the United States?

Task 2: Supporting Students' Collaborative Attempts

Once students completed their individual poster analysis, they shared their reflections with one another. After listening to peers' comments, they recorded their classmates' names and reflections. This

Figure 1 U.S. Government Poster Promoting the Social Security Act

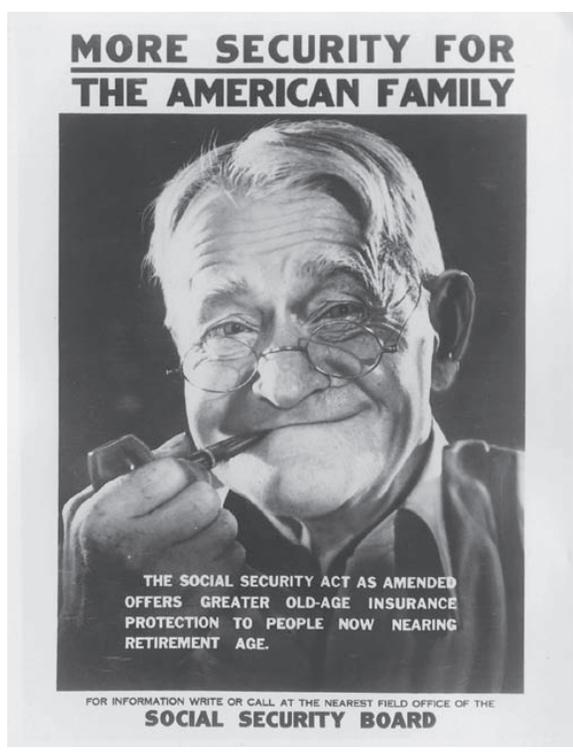


Figure 2 Student Poster Promoting the Social Security Act



encouraged sharing ideas with one another and a measure of individual accountability and knowledge.

We were then able to read the analysis of each student to determine if a connection was made between the poster's message and the Social Security Act's benefits. For example, one student who analyzed the poster found in Figure 1 of an old man enjoying the retirement benefit of the Act wrote, "It shows that if the elderly community agrees to the passage of the act, they will be happy." By reading this statement, it was obvious that the student understood the federal government's intent in using the poster to encourage people to vote for the Act and also one of the benefits of the act.

Task 3: Inviting a Critical Analysis

Next, students were asked to create present day posters that encouraged support of the Social Security Act. We reminded students to make connections to current issues when creating posters that would appeal to different segments of the population, taking into account today's diverse society and who may have been excluded from the posters created in the early 1930s.

For example, one student created a poster showing a woman holding her child as she stared out of a window wondering what might happen to them if her miner husband were killed. The student titled the poster "Live Secure" and included the caption "Live secure with social security. If your working husband does not come home your family will be compensated." Examples of the students' work illustrate their critical awareness of the diversity of current society and of the importance of inclusion (see Figure 2).

Task 4: Assessing Group Performance

Students discussed the messages from individual posters and decided which poster appealed most to people reaching retirement age, to widowed women, and to the unemployed. As a group, they were given the task to present a comprehensive set of posters that would support the Social Security Act while reflecting social diversity.

Each group was accountable for submitting a collection of posters that clearly promoted the Social Security Act and contained a caption explaining the intended message. Before doing so, the posters were presented to the entire class via a document camera. Each student explained his or her poster and its

message. Group grades were assigned on the basis of the posters' appeal to different types of people and were a reflection that students understood the varied benefits of the Social Security Act. For example, if the poster was meant to appeal to people nearing retirement age, the picture, title, and caption should reflect this understanding.

Task 5: Assessing Individual Performance

Finally, each student wrote a response to the following prompt:

Do you support the Social Security Act? Do you think the government should be responsible for helping those who are in need? Are you comfortable with the government taking money from your paycheck to pay for other people's benefits (retirement or unemployment)? Why?

Assessment of students' responses indicated if they had gained a comprehensive understanding of the intent of passing the Social Security Act. This collaborative project provided all students, especially English learners, with an opportunity to become more active

participants in their work. When planning group work, it is important to design tasks that promote conversation and also allow measurement of each student's individual and group participation.

References

- Frey, N., Fisher, D., & Everlove, S. (2009). *Productive group work: How to engage students, build teamwork, and promote understanding*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Lapp, D., Fisher, D., & Wolsey, T.D. (2009). *Literacy growth for every child: Differentiated small-group instruction K-6*. New York: Guilford.

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