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When the Cat's Away, the Mice Keep Learning

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“When the Cat’s Away, the Mice Keep Learning”

by Laura K. Simmons, George Fox Seminary

I teach a communication class, and I use my absence as an opportunity for the students to learn group communication experientially. This has been so successful when I’m away, sometimes I do it even when I’m in town—I vanish during the class session, and peek in once in a while to see how the students are doing. I believe students’ learning is cemented when it happens in an experiential context—and trying to work together as a group of 12-18 students is a powerful experience.

I find a lesson plan that does not necessarily require my presence (e.g. one where students are interviewing one another or discussing case studies). I make a puzzle out of the various parts of the lesson plan: one puzzle piece might have “discuss the reading” on it, another might say, “break into pairs and interview one another,” etc. If there are more students than activities, some puzzle pieces will contain pictures or graphics, not instructions. Each student receives a puzzle piece in an envelope at the beginning of class, along with a sheet of instructions:

Welcome to “Group Communication 101”! Today’s class will provide an opportunity for you to learn about group communication by doing it. Each person has one or more puzzle pieces in his/her envelope. Your task as a group is to assemble the puzzle—literally and figuratively.

Today’s class session is broken down into a variety of pieces/activities. You will decide as a group the order in which things will be done, the time to be allotted to each activity, and (if necessary) who will lead any activity that requires leadership.

There are no guidelines/rules for this exercise except these:

- save “reflection on the process” for last;
- you will want to be done with everything else and ready to tackle the reflection assignment by 11:10 at the latest (if you are not finished, go ahead and abandon whatever you’ve been doing);
- do not open the envelope with the reflection assignment in it until you get to that time.

Blessings to you as you embark upon today’s adventure! ☺

This group activity mirrors one we use in admissions; students must prioritize tasks and then execute them. As much as we often hate having to complete group activities, they do help us notice our own habits in a group, and learn to work together with others who may differ from us significantly. The task also respects students as adult learners who bring something to the educational process; each student has a puzzle piece, reminding them that everyone contributes to the class.

There are some variables in the process that can make students’ experiences more interesting. For example, some students try to read meaning into the puzzle pieces with pictures on them. I intended the pictures simply to represent groups working together, but occasionally students try to attach tasks to them: “this must mean we’re supposed to....” One year, a reading quiz and a reading discussion were pieces of the puzzle. Because I allowed the students to decide the order of activities, they elected to have the discussion before the quiz, thus ensuring the students’ success on the latter.

One puzzle piece always says “reflection on the process—last piece” and gives a time by which I expect them to begin their reflections. I have a separate envelope with a handout where students answer questions like, “On a scale of 1 to 10, how would

you rate the group communication of the class today?” and “Who emerged as the leader(s) of the group? How did leader(s) and follower(s) work together?” and “If you could change one or two things about (a) what you were asked to do, and/or (b) how it unfolded, what would it (they) be?” They also reflect on their own participation, and what role(s) they may have played in helping the group get to its goal.

Prior to this class session, students will have read a chapter about group communication, so they are already thinking about how groups work together (or don't). Sometimes they find themselves surprised by their own participation. The group members may vary radically in how they assess how well the entire class worked together to execute the assignment. They also may vary in whom they named as the emergent leader. Each student provides their input, and the forms are left in my mailbox. How they reflect on the exercise shows me their thinking on group communication and also how they view their own leadership and communication skills.

If I'm out of town, we'll debrief the group-communication exercise at the beginning of our next class session. If I'm in town, we may debrief it after the class is nearly over, if it looks like students have finished their appointed tasks early. The debrief allows me to probe any mysteries that appear in the student handouts, challenge them on problems that emerged in their ability to work as a team, etc.

One year, the class had more male students than female students. As I peered through the window into the classroom partway through the exercise, I noticed the men were all working together and the women were off to the side. In that debrief, we raised the question of why the women had either sidelined themselves or been marginalized during the group work. Evidently, one woman's input early in the discussion had been disregarded, and the men

“got into a groove” working together and didn’t notice the women’s silence until later.

Another year, it became clear to me in reading the students’ assessments of the class session that a major conflict had broken out during their group-communication session. During the debrief, they talked about an overbearing group leader, how he had shut down certain members of the class when they spoke, and how they worked this out between them (or attempted to) during the last portion of class.

This approach adds variety, empowers students, and cements learning on how groups work together. It might take some work to make it portable to a non-communication class.