

Setting class norms about behavior during group activities

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An important step in making collaborative learning in the classroom go well is to set some norms of behavior for interactions between the group members. This is particularly important when there are students from different demographic groups that may have rather different social norms. I have been using the following activity to establish norms, and it seems to work well. This is done on the first day of class and it serves two different beneficial purposes. First, it is a good first-group-activity, as the answer is nontrivial, and it is something where everyone feels equally qualified to contribute. Second and most importantly, it has the class establish norms for behavior in group work. I think this is better than me giving them a bunch of rules to follow, because they think more about the issue and internalize it, and they are setting the standards themselves, rather than it being my rules.

I have them assemble into groups of 3 or 4, and I tell them how they will be working together to solve many problems over the term, starting with this task:

“1) Take a few minutes to individually write down on a sheet of paper a list of behaviors that make group work most productive and enjoyable.”

(I walk around monitoring what people are writing down. If any student is not writing down anything, I tell them to, and stand over them waiting until they start writing. When most seem to be finished, I direct the class to proceed to step 2.)

“2) Now share your lists with the other members of the group, and come up with a general list that your group agrees upon. Make copies of this to keep.”

3) I then call on groups in sequence to give me an item from their list that has not already been offered. (There are a few standard things that virtually everyone has, so this goes quite quickly.)

4) I put up my own list (below) which is on a PowerPoint slide. It usually matches what they have already said, although sometimes they have missed one that I have, so I briefly give the missing item and say why I think it is important to add to their list (usually invoking a research study).

- Be nice – don’t make any derogatory comments about other students and their ideas.
- Make sure that everyone participates and gets chance to offer their thoughts.
- Make sure everyone gets listened to. *(I mention research showing that groups that perform badly almost always fail to listen to each other.)*
- Don’t interrupt when another student is talking.
- Come to class prepared.

For the next few classes, I am particularly careful to watch for students violating the list of good behaviors, and when they do, I gently remind them of the class list, and how they are not following norms of behavior we agreed upon. (Most commonly, this is one member of a group answering a question and being interrupted by another, particularly females being interrupted by males.) That reminder is generally sufficient to change behavior.