Creating Meaningful Assignments that Promote Active Learning

Good team assignments are essential for Team-Based Learning (TBL; Michaelsen et al., 2004). Michaelsen et al., (2004) notes the vast majority of dysfunctional student behaviors and complaints related to teamwork are the result of bad assignments, not bad teams. The following points provide an overview of Michaelsen's thoughts on creating meaningful assignments.

Three important characteristics of good team assignments:
1.   Good team assignments should be effective in promoting students' mastery of basic conceptual material and enhancing higher-level thinking and problem-solving skills.
2.   Good team assignments generate energetic engagement. One way to determine the effectiveness of team assignments is to observe the level of energy that is present during the total class discussion stage of the assignment.
3.   A proven approach for creating effective team assignments is to maximize the extent to which the learning tasks promote the development of cohesive learning teams.

Assignments that Promote Team Cohesiveness
The forces that promote "social loafing" can be offset by assignments and practices that develop team cohesiveness. To build team cohesiveness when designing an assignment ask yourself if the assignment:
• Promotes a high level of individual accountability for team members;
• Brings members into close physical proximity;
• Motivates a great deal of discussion among team members;
• Ensures that members receive immediate, unambiguous, and meaningful feedback;
• Provides explicit rewards for team performance.

Impact of "Make A Specific Choice" Assignments
Make-a-specific-choice assignments require students to already know the core concepts, and to use their knowledge in order to make a meaningful decision. "Make A Specific Choice" assignments have other effects such as:
• Focusing on "Why?" – Members generate reasons for making their choice;
• Requiring high-level thinking skills – including numerous comparisons and discriminations, exchanging and analysis of content information and verification of rule applications;
• Producing commitment to output – members are likely to engage in an intense give-and-take discussion of why any given choice is better than another so as to be able to present a clear and cogent rationale for their position to both their teammates and to other teams.
• Signifying high individual accountability – since members expect to be asked to share their choice with the team they enter team discussions with a clearly defined position and the ability to defend it.

Suggestions for Effective Team Activities

Michealsen et al., suggest instructors consider the following points when designing team assignments (p.69).

PRIOR TO Team Activity
- Are team members working on the same assignment and required to make a specific choice,
- Individually and in writing? (Note: This individual accountability is especially important in newly formed teams.)

During Discussions WITHIN Teams
- Are teams required to share members' individual choices and agree (i.e. reach a team
- consensus) on a specific choice?
- Will the Discussion focus on "Why?" (and/or "How?")
- Will the teams' choices be represented in a form that enables immediate and direct
- Comparisons with other teams?

During Discussion BETWEEN Teams
- Are teams' decisions reported simultaneously?
- Do team "reports" focus attention on absolutely key issues?
- Are teams given the opportunity to digest and reflect on the entire set of "reports" before
- total class discussion begins?
- Will the discussion focus on "Why?" (and/or "How?")

Resources
- Assignment Design site at DePaul University Teaching Commons. This site contains a nice synopsis of elements to consider at the various stages of assignment design: (http://teachingcommons.depaul.edu/Assignment_Design/index.html).
- Creating Effective Assignments. A good primer and links to other sites with resources for creating meaningful assignments: (http://www.unh.edu/teaching-excellence/resources/Assignments.htm).
- Barkley, E. F., Cross, K. P., & Major, C. H. (2004). *Collaborative learning techniques: A handbook for college faculty*. John Wiley & Sons. A wealth of collaborative learning techniques for a number of different disciplines. The book includes an introduction to collaborative learning, forming teams, and has several examples to help instructors effectively implement the techniques and make meaningful assignments and exercises.

Citations
- Michaelsen, M.K., Knight, A.B., Fink, D.L. (Eds). (2004). *Team-based learning, A transformative use of small groups in college teaching*. Stylus Publishing: Sterling, VA.
- Barkley, E. F., Cross, K. P., & Major, C. H. (2004). *Collaborative learning techniques: A handbook for college faculty*. John Wiley & Sons.