

“Individually, we are one drop. Together, we are an ocean.”

Guided Group Work for Effective Learning

- Saroj Koirala

In a 2009 seminar held in Kathmandu, Prof. Rajivan Karal from India shared an interesting experience about the implementation of group work strategy. An Indian school running with traditional teaching methods appointed a new and skilled lady teacher. She started taking classes with the students working together in several groups. The roaming headmaster heard noise and entered the class. She, obviously, answered the query that the students were involved in pair and group works. The chief ordered to give up such method as it would disturb the adjacent classes. After a few days the roaming headmaster could not hear any sound from that room, neither of teacher nor of the students. He peeped into the room to find that students were all whispering to each other in group and the teacher as well was communicating in whisper. After she explained he got amused to know that group work was possible without making noise too. Then, the method resumed in the class though with repressed sound.

According to various constructivist teaching-learning theories learning new idea is possible upon the knowledge a student already has—called “schema.” Schema is fully acknowledged as a point of departure for new learning. On the other hand, it is believed that teaching-learning activity can be conducted to promote cooperative, competitive, and individualistic efforts. The competitive situation is one in which students work against each other. But, cooperation results in higher achievement, greater productivity, more supportive and committed relationships, and greater social competence and self-esteem. So, the strategy of group work is based on schema and cooperation.

Group work strategy at once contradicts with traditional lecturing method and working individually. A pure lecture method is undermined for several facts and reasons. One of the facts is that, after 20 minutes of lecture-listening the attention of even an intelligent learner begins to fall down. On the other hand, this method is

hegemonic and undemocratic. Such lockstep system where a teacher presents and practices the same material in the same way to and with all the learners simultaneously fails to foster student's imagination and participation. This lockstep system is insufficient in terms of production too. But, learning becomes more effective if a student is actively engaged in the process as in group work rather than passively attempting to gain knowledge in lecture method.

Group work is obviously different from individual work. They can be differentiated in various ways. One way of separating them, according to Mr. Sheelnidhi Chand of Siddhanath Campus, is that in the former problem is the same but it is different in the latter. Undoubtedly, group work is a better tool than individual one. But it is not always so. For instance, group work is good for large size classes whereas small size classes become more effective in individual work, asserts the same lecturer. But, Mr. Chand is not free from mess. Students learn well if they are allowed to construct personal understandings based on experiencing things and engaging on those experiences with others. Of course, individual method may help partially achieve the goal, but it is always done inefficiently. Instead, the strategy of group work that also contains individual activity during think and pair stages has multiple benefits.

While implementing group work strategy the students, above all, work together in several groups through the steps of think, pair, and share. This is opposite to the traditional method where students work alone, learn through repetition, and the subjects are tightly bound to and are guided by the curriculum. Group work means working together to accomplish shared goals. It emphasizes on social and communication skills along with the collaboration and exchange of ideas. The students work together to maximize their own and each other's learning. They work through the assignment until all group members successfully understand and complete it for the mutual benefit. Here, all group members share a common fate—we all sink or swim together.

Active involvement of the learners, democratic participation, student-centered interactive activities, teacher just as a facilitator of the learning process, and responsible and autonomous students are the ideals of group work strategy. The teacher, here, does not directly instruct but leads the students through questions and activities to discover, discuss, articulate, and assimilate the new knowledge. The teacher's role is primarily to encourage and facilitate the discussion. She guides the students by asking questions that might help them to develop own conclusions. In other words, she works as a coach and scaffolding.

Some people opine that group works can not be conducted in large size classes. But, it is no more than an unprofessional fiction. In such condition, the instructor needs to be more cautious than handling the small size classes. The teacher should provide a variety of experiences, encourage students' participation, and obtain and use feedbacks. While handling a large class teacher requires to be more organised in various ways. She should learn students' names as far as possible and move around the classroom or lecture hall. Just directing the students to work together, cooperate or to make a team is not enough. But teacher should structure the matter cooperatively and intervene in case of the passivity of some students. She should incessantly promote interaction, preferably face-to-face.

The teacher needs to be more careful while dividing the groups also. For example, first, divide the students into three groups; high, average and low performance. Based on their previous scores and skills mark each student from score 1-9. The highest three make the first cluster, the middle three make the second cluster, and the next three make the third block. After marking H, A, and L before their names, divide them into male and female marking M and F. Then, compose the groups including at least one high ability, two average ability and one low ability student. Also keep at least one female student in the group. Thus, deliberately ensure the heterogeneity. Mixing students based on achievement level, gender, ethnicity,

academic interests, learning styles, or any other relevant factors will bring different strengths and approaches to academic tasks.

There is always something new to meet in such group work. As a popular saying goes—many heads, many minds. Though the approach is same, here, the fruits it bears are varied. The main advantage of group work is the sharing of ideas and the collective effort. To borrow the words of Margaret Carty, “The nice thing about teamwork is that you always have others on your side.”

Group work is, of course, very necessary and useful strategy in teaching learning process. However, it has certain limitations too. One of such remarkable situations is heuristic teaching activity. Likewise, unnecessary argumentation and sometimes even quarrel among the members is a remarkable flaw of this method. On the other hand, solo approach is ahead because of fast decisions. In addition, when the group work is much emphasized the ideas of the more active students may dominate the group’s conclusions. Group work is biased to students willing to learn more independently. This technique is also accused of making the students just to “reinvent the wheel.” But, in reality, they do not reinvent the wheel. Rather they observe how the wheels move and function.

Obviously, group work is a strategy with a number of merits along with a few shortcomings. On the other hand, lecture method and individual work have some pros too. Therefore, in sum, a combined approach with considerable amount of group works based on the necessity can be the best alternative. The issues of teaching, level of learners, duration of class, and many other physical and cultural factors can be causal in this sort of arrangement. So, a mixed approach that incorporates group work along with individual work and guided teaching strategies can better meet the learning needs of the majority of students—a guided group work. It is recommended that a teacher always keeps Henry Ford’s statement in mind, “Coming together is a beginning. Keeping together is progress. Working together is success.” Indeed, the Indian teacher of Prof. Karal’s anecdote had convincingly ventured to challenge the hegemony of tradition.