



# INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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## TEAM-BASED LEARNING

I could never quite understand why students who come to class every day, hand in their assignments on time, and ask questions during lectures performed poorly on exams. I assumed that by merely sitting in class and listening to the lectures they would glean at least enough information to earn a “C” on the exam. Slowly, I began to notice the “fogginess” in their eyes. Their habit of asking strange, “off-topic” questions in the middle of a lecture started to make sense. They were present in body but not in mind!

So I talked to them about being “active” learners and explained that by reading the textbook first they would make better sense of the lectures. I even hinted that if they read ahead, they would feel “smart” and could nod their heads in agreement with my lecture rather than feeling “lost” and “overwhelmed.” Nothing changed. I decided to enforce reading the textbook by giving random “pop” quizzes. Again, nothing changed, at least in an upward direction! As a psychology instructor, I knew that I should be able to align my course methods with what is known about the human memory system!

I started to research different instructional techniques. Fortunately, I came across an article by Larry Michaelsen, entitled “Getting Started with Team-Based Learning” (<http://teambasedlearning.apsc.ubc.ca/d/GettingStartedwithTBL.pdf>). This was it! His methodology made complete sense on a number of different levels. He forewarns that beginning team-based learning (TBL) will require three changes: course goals will change from “familiarizing students with key concepts” to “ensuring that students learn how to use those concepts”; the teacher’s role will change from “dispenses information and concepts” to “designs and manages the overall instructional process”; and students will shift from being “passive recipients of information and content” to being “responsible for the initial acquisition of the content and for working collaboratively with other students to learn how to use the content.”

I was in! Slowly and nervously, I began changing my lesson plans. It was much more difficult letting go of my

“lectures” and their associated stories and “ancillaries” than I anticipated. Prior to these changes, my course was primarily lecture-based with some demonstrations and a few videos. Student grades primarily were determined based on performance on four exams and a writing project. My courses today still involve some lecture, but I view them as “mini-lectures” devoted to clarifying specific topics that were assigned as “student preparation.”

My grading rubric is much more elaborate, but it allows points to be earned through many avenues, not just testing. I have numerous components to my class structure, but the main emphasis is on TBL, or what I refer to as “Groups.” On the first day students are assigned randomly to small groups of approximately five students each. They remain in the same group throughout the semester. Most of the learning now occurs individually prior to class or collectively in class during group activities. Students are provided with some notes in the form of PowerPoint handouts that address the more difficult concepts in each chapter. These notes, however, are incomplete and require students to read the text and complete graphic organizers or answer critical thinking questions about the material they have been assigned. Student preparation/participation points are recorded in their group folder for printing and completing the assigned PPT packet BEFORE coming to class. In addition, students take short online quizzes called “Readiness Assurance Quizzes” individually BEFORE the material is discussed in class. These two requirements ensure that students have read the text and prepared for class in advance. Students are required to take a similar quiz over the same material in their groups for which they are assigned a group score. During class I usually have the groups review their answers in the PPT packets with other group members to make sure they are all “on the same page.” Afterwards, I clarify any problems they seem to be having through a mini-lecture. I then pass out a worksheet or a “problem” for them to work on together in their groups to help them understand the application of specific concepts. Sometimes these group activities will count toward class participation points



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that are recorded in the group folder. Finally, they are tested over the material individually through four unit exams during the semester and an individual writing assignment.

I have been using this new approach for three semesters, and so far I have been pleasantly surprised. Today my students really DO read their textbooks! They really DO prepare in advance for lecture! The main reason appears to be the result of a form of peer pressure. They want to look good in front of their classmates! In addition, they are required to be familiar with the assigned topics in order to contribute to the group quizzes; questions are the same as those on the individual quizzes. However, because the questions are pulled from a larger pool, one student cannot carry the load for the whole group, as each has a different subset of questions. I enjoy listening to students battle over the correct answers to the questions on the group quizzes. I also enjoy watching them struggle with the problems I assign for group activities—they are animated, they are questioning, they are laughing, they are arguing, and they are AWAKE!

Of course, I am still struggling with some aspects of this strategy, but teaching always seems to be a work-in-progress. Student scores on exams have not improved much compared to previous semesters. Ultimately, this is where I really wanted to see an improvement. Students, however, are learning how to read a textbook, prepare for class, and manage their time effectively. It is a rare day when I look out at my class and see glassy-eyed students struggling to stay awake. Of course, one must also consider that my experience is being conveyed from the instructor's side of the podium. I am especially curious to see what my course evaluations will look like at the end of the semester!

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