

Making the Most of “reporting out” After Group Work

Have you seen the following scenario take place? Students are engaged in some form of group work in class; think/pair/share, working through an assignment, or simply brainstorming ideas in small groups. The students may start out slowly, but soon they are actively engaged, everyone is sharing their ideas and the class is filled with energy.

Then, it's time for “reporting out” the learning. Very quickly the energy is sucked from the room. Students don't pay attention because they are busy thinking of what they will say, there is a lot of repetition, and some students simply tune out.

After observing this in several classes, including my own, I've come to realize that, as instructors, we often do not give much thought to the debriefing aspect of such activities. Yet this is where important aspects of the activity occur: students compare findings, learn additional insights, and recognize patterns in the concepts at hand. If we keep in mind the importance of reflection in actually learning from our experiences (Dewey, 1938), we recognize that the debriefing time of an active-learning group activity is where the class as a whole has a chance to reflect on their collective ideas and make meaning from the experience.

Here are a few suggestions about how to make debriefing time less about individual reports, and more about deepening the learning and making meaning from the activity.

- Think through those 2-3 things you would really like students to get out of the activity and thus what is best suited for reporting out. The analytical or insightful aspects of an activity are better suited for sharing as a class than the repetitive or procedural aspects.
- Don't let the groups report out in a predictable order. As long as you've created a safe classroom environment, you can randomly choose groups to speak, and return back to previous groups, to keep them engaged in the discussion.
- If the activity has multiple parts, discuss one aspect at a time. For example, “first let's see what all the groups thought about the first question, then we'll move on to the next one.”
- Rather than asking each group to report in full, after the first group or two has a turn, ask the next groups to share only new ideas. Or have them compare and contrast their responses with previous groups.
- To really get the reflection going, don't have them report out at all. Perhaps as a group they fill out a concept map or matrix to turn in to you, and then the follow up discussion revolves around larger issues or application of the concepts. What insights did they gain from trying to create the concept map as a group? What disagreement occurred within their group? How would they apply their takeaways to a new scenario?
- To deepen the learning even further, consider debriefing the process itself. Did they gain new insights by discussing this topic with others? Do they see the issue or concept differently now?

By viewing the reporting out aspect of a group activity as a distinct, yet vitally important, reflective component, we recognize it requires some thought and planning to fully maximize its benefits.

Resources:

John Dewey, *Experience in Education* (New York: Touchstone, 1938).

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