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TEAM LEARNING ROLES: A COOPERATIVE LEARNING TECHNIQUE

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ABSTRACT

The Team Learning Roles (TLR) model builds upon two cooperative learning techniques --"jigsaw" and role play-- to create a "learning organization" in the classroom. It involves structuring the class into teams of four, five or six persons, each of whom plays a different specialist role. Teams are then responsible for analyzing a case and leading class discussion. The six-step TLR model has proved effective methodology in senior undergraduate business policy courses.

TEAM LEARNING ROLES

In most work situations with which I am familiar, work teams are built upon a specialty. A marketing person works with a production engineer and so on, because each brings clear expertise to the team. Usually also, a project manager and supervisor are identified to run the meetings and integrate the process.

In the business school classroom, however, the work situation parallel often breaks down. There may be no project manager/ integrator; work may get assigned by default, or the supervisory aspect may get relegated to after-the-fact peer reviews.

The Team Learning Roles (TLR) model attempts to overcome the breakdowns that can occur in classroom teams. The model integrates the logic of the scientific method with the dynamism of interactive learning: the steps of the scientific method are reformulated into learning roles and both the "jigsaw" (Aronson et al, 1 978) and role play cooperative learning techniques (Gentry, 1 990; Slavin, 1990) are used. Thus, the TLR model encourages intellectual thoroughness by its structure and cooperation by its method to create a "learning organization" (Miller, 1 991) in the classroom.

Steps in the TLR Model

Step 1) Establishing Team Purpose. The TLR model aims to foster abilities to: participate as a member of a team; teach new skills to others; and exercise leadership (SCANS 1991, 1992).

Step 2) Learning Specialist Roles. The class counts off one through six, with one's assuming a specific specialist's role (such as "conceptualizer"), two's a different specialist's role (such as "definer") and so on and I distribute a copy of Table 1 which sets out the duties involved in each specialist role. The specialists then group together to discuss how they will accomplish their specialty skill when they subsequently join their team.

Step 3) Forming Teams of Specialists. Specialties are then assembled into a project team which is faced with selecting for itself, from its own experts, what it needs to do to deal with case and chapter assignments. (Some specialties may be combined to achieve four or five member teams.) I then explain the remaining steps, respond to concerns and, in a prepared overhead, share student "advice" and comments from prior semesters.

Step 4) Establishing a Team Learning Process. Specialists at this time begin teaching their team members. Each team may be given responsibility for a case and a different unit of material. This means that each team is responsible for data gathering, case preparation and then leading a class presentation for about forty-five minutes of a 75 minute session.

Every role must be performed to create a complete mental picture of the situation. Without all the pieces the "intellectual jigsaw" puzzle would be incomplete. Just how team members choose to interact and build such an understanding is for them to work out. All they know is that they will both evaluate each other's efforts and be evaluated on their effectiveness as a team when they lead class learning (and they know in advance the various criteria used.)

Some guidance usually helps in the early stages. First, a team will meet a number of times prior to its session and sometimes will include the professor to clear up any problems. As a rule I meet with first two teams to assure that a high standard is set for the semester and may even suggest various presentation techniques. In general, I emphasize that they should involve the class in the material and maintain their roles, primarily because each role is essential to an overall understanding.

Step 5) Leading Class' Learning. Each team has

responsibility for: learning content material, connecting it to other areas, and planning creative ways to actively involve the class in understanding concepts and issues. Any number of formats have been tried --court room dramatizations, role-plays, panels, game shows. The professor is the seventh member of each team whose role is to provide audiovisual aids, and generally supervise as needed. In most instances, it works best to let the webber/ connector from the presenting group actually write on the board, drawing on the group while doing so. (To assist with connections, a mindmap or web, is required.)

Step 6) Evaluating Process and Product. Both formative and summative evaluations are used which have led to syllabus redesign, and changes in group structuring and managing of learning. An example of a question asked: What advice would you give to next semester's class? has elicited student suggestions that I use on an overhead: "Start early and really research your topic; run through the game plan to better coordinate ideas and try and have fun;
•….and, if you truly want to be part of the learning then this class is for you."

ROLE OF PROFESSOR

The professor clarifies confusing issues, corrects misinformation, controls overly loquacious students, deals with poor student preparation (although very few students want to appear out of it in front of their peers and I do use a peer review form) and praises genuine accomplishment. Learners actually take responsibility for their own learning and this has necessitated that I, as teacher, move from an authoritarian role to more of a coach. And this has meant that motivating, encouraging and in a sense nurturing has taken on a greater importance in my teaching.

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TABLE 1
TEAM LEARNING ROLES (TLR): SPECIALISTS ROLES

Concept Development_____
Conceptualizer. Search case/ text and identify all the major concepts. Be able to answer when questions arise in class. Work closely with the Connector and Storyteller so that your group covers the major concepts and the class understands them.
Concept Clarification_____
2.Definer. Know the definitions of termsand be able to clarify their meaning.
3.Contrarian. Cases and real life can be at odds with theory. Your job is to point out contradictions and dilemmas in the case and the text. Find disagreements with the text or accepted wisdom. /Bring the class into debate over the problem issues.
Verification_____
4.Factfinder.Know the facts in order to help your team deal with the contradictions and dilemmas that surface.
5.Story Teller.Finds case examples --dealing with a dilemma or a real life situation-- from the WSJ, business magazines, the text, your life, and bring them into the class discussion to explain/ illustrate the concepts.
Interpretation_____
6.Connector/ Networker/Webber. Be prepared to draw a "web" diagram on the board showing the relationships of relevant major concepts. Show the major linkages between ideas in both your chapter/case and in other aspects of the course.
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