Principles of Group Formation:
Adaptations for Teaching in a Japanese College

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"OK everyone, divide into groups and discuss . . . ."

Both teachers and students have expressed disappointment with the outcomes of traditional "group discussions". Teachers lament that the results do not correspond to the time invested; students complain about having to work with unprepared individuals. Growing interest among educators in active and cooperative learning approaches has resulted in increased discussion about effective ways to group students to enhance teamwork while maintaining individual accountability. Issues such as group size, characteristics of groupings, duration of particular formations, heterogeneous vs. homogeneous composition, and techniques of group selection have received considerable, thoughtful attention.

In the following commentary, I revisit some established principles for group formation, and discuss how I have applied them in discipline-based language education at the newly established Miyazaki International College (MIC). What worked in my Canadian-based university teaching required re-thinking during my first semester of teaching in Japan. The discussion focusses on three features of group formation: size, composition, and duration. References to the research and teaching literature are intended to be representative, not exhaustive.

Tried and True: Some Principles of Group Formation

A clear set of guidelines for forming groups, or learning teams, has emerged within the active learning research literature. Group size can vary from two to six persons, depending upon the task and learning objectives. Many practitioners express preferences for three or four-person groups when forming semi-permanent teams. Barbara Millis advocates four-person groups or quads because:

> ... they are usually inclusive (trios sometimes result in an odd-person-out dynamic). They can function meaningfully despite an occasional absence and lend themselves well to pair work. Quads are small enough to allow equitable participation, but large enough to contain the diverse talents useful for problem solving. (Millis, 1995, p. 134)

Most practitioners favour instructor-selected groups to ensure heterogeneity of characteristics such as individual learning styles, age, declared major, gender and ethnicity (Millis, 1995, p. 134; Bennett, Rolheiser and Stevahn, 1991, p. 41). Instructors often combine students of mixed ability and motivation levels so that lower achievers experience working with high achiever role models (Abrami et al., 1995, pp. 62-66). There is a clear consensus that student-selected groups should be avoided since they tend to be homogeneous, and increase the risk of behaviours which are not on task (see: Johnson, Johnson, and Smith, 1991, p. 61).

With respect to duration, learning teams are usually structured either as permanent (remaining together for a semester) or semi-permanent, reconfiguring once or twice per term (Millis, 1995, p. 134, Abrami et al., 1995, pp. 64-66) differentiate several sub-types of "stable" and "combined" groups. Stable groups are divided further into "informal", "project", or "base" groups; combined groups are either "reconstituted" or "representative reporting" groups. Longer term formations promote cohesion and support among individuals. For tasks of short duration, in any

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class size, dyads are useful to check understanding and encourage quick discussion on a particular topic.

Unreflective Presumptions:
Transporting Pedagogical Principles from Abroad

Over a six-year period, I have experimented with three, four, and five-person teams in undergraduate sociology courses taught at the University of New Brunswick (UNB) in Canada. Class sizes have varied from 20 to 80 students, have been oriented to 2nd and 3rd year students, and have been scheduled to meet for 80 minutes twice per week. I have also taught Introductory Sociology to seniors from varied faculties (outside of Arts) in four/five-person groups, in large classes which meet for 50 minutes three times per week. This latter situation stretched my ability to coordinate and manage learning teams to the pedagogical outer limits because of the class size combined with the shorter lecture-based time slots. This, in particular, generated a need to develop effective ways to manage the people-paper flow within my classes (e.g. Rehorick, 1994a & 1994b).

Like Millis, I have come to prefer four-person groups since quads permit varied dyad interactions within the team. Varying the internal size and dynamics within learning teams during a single class period fosters intellectual alertness and individual involvement. As well, one group member's absence still leaves a viable group, the triad, to continue team tasks. While I have occasionally used five-person groupings (especially when division into quads was impossible), I've found that this configuration increases the risk of inequitable contributions and intellectual drifting by less self-sufficient students.

Grouping students from different university faculties has encouraged varying perspectives and interpretations of sociological thought. As well, I strive for gender balance as an initial organizing principle of team formation. When semi-permanent groupings are reconfigured, I have used the knowledge acquired about individual leadership and academic skills to enhance heterogeneity within teams. Sometimes it is useful to disperse "natural leaders" who have emerged during a unit so that later groups are neither over or under-represented by students who tend to take initiative.

Typically, I have used semi-permanent groupings and reconfigure teams after each course module, usually three per semester. Beyond learning the course content, I encourage students to acquire management and leadership skills which will be valuable throughout their lives. For that reason, skill processing exercises are introduced periodically throughout the semester. At the beginning of a new group configuration, everyone makes a written and verbal commitment to change one or two personal behaviours in order to enhance their contribution to teamwork.

In general terms, these are some of the principles of group formation that I brought to my first experience of teaching Japanese students at MIC in the spring of 1996.

Trial and Error: Adapting to the MIC Teaching Environment

During my first semester, I co-taught a discipline-language based 2nd year course (18 students), and a 3rd year content course (13 students). Compared with an average class size of 40 students at UNB, I was delighted at the prospect of implementing, even expanding, my repertoire of active learning strategies in the smaller MIC classes. However, my "made in Canada" approach to the active learning class elicited several unanticipated obstacles.

First, the usual practice of grouping students using heterogeneous characteristics proved to be unrealistic. The Japanese student body is young, so

neither age nor ethnicity provide a basis for grouping. Second, all students study liberal arts, and the distinction between "social sciences" and "humanities" has no practical bearing until third year. Third, the initial enrollment at MIC was disproportionately female; therefore, one could not ensure gender-balanced groups. If anything, homogeneity was the operating pedagogical rule.

Using my favourite model for group size and duration revealed further the cultural relativity principles and practices imported from the West. In a class of eighteen students, I applied my preference for quads, thus ending up with two 4-person and two 5-person teams. Given the English-language fluency spread within the class, there was a tendency for low proficiency speakers to drift intellectually, or try to communicate in Japanese within their teams. Some motivated, higher fluency students expressed dissatisfaction in being grouped with anyone who was not self-disciplined to try to speak in English, no matter how difficult the struggle. Ironically, an application of Western-generated "tried and true" active learning principles to the MIC context seemed to rekindle unproductive behaviours associated with traditional group work in many North American classes.

I close this commentary by highlighting some adaptations that I have made over three cumulative semesters of teaching at MIC. My suggestions are directed more to collaborative teaching (first and second years) since most students returning from their international Study Abroad experience (third year) display a qualitative difference in personal maturity and linguistic ability.

Discovering What Works: Fluidity and Motion

Moving from traditional groupwork and lecture-style to an active learning classroom entails shifting the teacher's role from dispenser of information and concepts to facilitator of a learning process. In popular terms, the teacher becomes "a guide on the side, instead of the sage on a stage." To sustain my role as facilitator of a learning process, I have discovered that MIC classes work better with these adaptations: (1) permit teams of varied size to be co-present during a class period; (2) vary the composition of learning teams, sometimes using homogenous, other times using heterogeneous language and academic skill mixes; (3) reconfigure one or two times during a class period of 90 minutes or more; and (4) work with fluid groupings, rather than fixed base groups, or semi-permanent teams. At MIC, the operative active learning principles become **fluidity** and **motion** within and between class periods.

By working with mixed team sizes during the same period, teachers can coordinate the efforts of students who display different fluency, outside preparation, and motivational levels. An accelerated group can be encouraged to read and write more. Students with lower fluency and weaker study skills can be monitored more closely, yet encouraged to extend to their maximum. On other occasions, groupings can reflect mixed fluency, intellectual, and learning skill levels.

The presence of two instructors in a classroom of approximately fifteen to twenty students provides optimal opportunity for individual-based assistance. On the other hand, it is a major challenge to sustain interest and advance the personal learning of non-native speakers for 165 minutes twice per week. Changing interactive student partners frequently helps to sustain attention. During a single class period, it is not unusual for my teaching partner and I to reconfigure the groupings two or three times. At MIC, I have found that two or three-person teams work best; quads are useful on occasion. Since a central pedagogical goal is to maximize the in-class use of English taught through academic content, smaller groupings support individual involvement.

I am always surprised when teachers pay little attention to the well-established knowledge about how the physical arrangement of the classroom affects learning. At MIC, the classroom structure is crucial. The operatives of fluidity and motion hold as much for the structuring of the physical classroom as they do to guide group formation. Once my teaching partner and I have decided daily objectives and teaching strategies, we pre-arrange the classroom setting before students arrive. By placing identification name cards on desks, students move quickly and orderly into the day's learning-team formations. Sitting in unexpected or unusual desk arrangements, or facing toward a "new wall" helps curb mental drift and the crystallization of habituated bodily patterns.

The opportunity to live and teach in Japan has prompted reflection on how I have applied active learning principles in university education. Tried and true, like most things in life, is relative to the place and the space within which one struggles to make learning work. Nonetheless, what's common to my cross-cultural teaching experience–UNB and MIC–is that active and cooperative learning approaches provide a context within which students can come to know the meaning of success.

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