

FOSTERING SOCIAL SKILLS VIA GROUP WORK IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Abstract. Higher education aims optimal blend of knowledge and skills necessary for human functioning in society. This is why role and importance of active learning is crucial throughout higher education. Active learning involves designing, implementing, maintaining and promoting, within and outside classroom, an environment for learning, through creating opportunities for active engagement with the subject matter. It strives for higher-order thinking and in-depth comprehension of the learner.

The article highlights group (team) work as the most efficient environment in active teaching and learning process and the importance of student and instructor report for a successful learning. Academic group work has notable effects on the development of work-relevant skills and attitudes. It helps learning, helps in the productive use of time and aids learning retention. Positive attitudes toward group work are associated with higher levels of sociability lower levels of social anxiety, stronger mastery of performance goals and higher levels of learning awareness.

Key words: active learning, activities, group (team) work, interactions, an incentive, communication, social skills, problem-solving, decision-making, instructional objectives.

Formation of the problem. Students have a natural inclination to learn and actively integrate knowledge into a coherent knowledge base. They must possess the necessary skills to meet new challenges and create sustainable solutions. Teachers should inspire students to reach their highest potential for human functioning.

Scholars pay much attention to active methods of learning. The problem of active learning remains to be actual nowadays. Active learning is the process of learning through interacting with the content. This means students will be asked to participate in learning activities during class that keep them engaged with learning material and encourage them to think about the material they are learning. Active learning is a method that encourages student engagement through activity, group discussion, experimentation and role-play, in contrast to the passive memorization of information.

Bonwell and Eison, the authors of *Active Learning, Creating Excitement in the classroom*, describe active learning as the process “when using active learning, students are engaged in more activities than just listening. They are involved in dialogue, writing and problem-solving, as well as higher-order thinking, e.g., analysis, synthesis, evaluation” [1; 121]. Chickering and Gamson underline that “Learning is not a spectator sport. Students do not learn much just by sitting in classes listening to teachers, memorizing pre-packaged assignments

and splitting out answers. They must talk about what they are learning, write about it, relate it to past experiences and apply it to their daily lives” [5; 3–7].

Meyers and Jones assure “Active learning involves providing opportunities for students to meaningfully talk and listen, write, read and reflect on the content, ideas, issues and concerns of an academic subject” [13; 10].

The aim of the article is to attract higher educators’ attention to active methods of teaching and learning. Active learning is widely revealed in group work. “Group projects can help students to develop a host of skills that are increasingly important in the professional world” [4; 248].

Through working in groups students develop both learning and social, skills and experience. Social skills are vitally important in order to communicate effectively with other people. Group work is basically a group between two and six students formed to discuss a particular issue or perform a particular task. Group work can be used to achieve a range of teaching and learning goals.

Group work can help to hone students’ skill in:

- listening to and respecting others’ ideas;
- thinking about one problem in a variety of ways;
- getting to a deeper level understanding;
- dividing up tasks and delegating responsibilities;
- sharing knowledge and abilities to get a better hold on a problem than they could individually;
- holding group members accountable – and being held accountable [9]

Presenting the main material. Group work is used as a means for learning at all levels in most educational systems, from compulsory education to higher education. At the present time, there is strong scientific support for the benefits of students learning and working in groups when working interactively with others, students learn to inquire, share ideas, clarify differences, problem-solve, and construct how understanding. Gillies also stresses that students working together are more motivated to achieve than they would be when working individually [7; 139]. Thus, group work might serve as an incentive for learning, in terms of both academic knowledge and interpersonal skills.

The Canadian scholars from the Centre for Academic Development in Victoria University of Wellington have generalized the benefits of group work for the learner. The effectiveness of group work is that:

- It encourages questioning, discussion and debate and can advance motivation to learn by raising interest levels.
- Students get to know each other and develop working relationships, which can have wider and lasting benefits.
- It engages students as active participants and gives them opportunities of *learning by doing*. They are put in situations where they have to communicate and explain what they are doing, why they have doing it and take account of the views of others.
- It safeguards against students being isolated, particularly in their first year, and hence serves as a valuable retention strategy.

- Students have an opportunity to work with others whose learning experiences may be different to their own. In forming a group ethos there is an emphasis on how you learn as well as what you learn.

- It develops students' transferable skills of collaboration, team working, negotiation, listening, organization, leadership and evaluation, which students can take into their working lives.

- It enhances student satisfaction of their learning experience and can nurture and promote self-esteem.

- It can stimulate creative ideas through brainstorming engaging in discussion and through debate of different perspectives on the approach to a particular task.

- Group work provides a platform to nurture independent and lifelong learning. Students can gain confidence, become more aware of their strengths and are encouraged to develop their own ideas.

- Group work can allow students to undertake a wider variety of assignments.

- Work done in groups can often simulate the tasks students might do in "real world" situations [3; 4].

Numerous studies have shown that the thoughtful use of group work brings about the following benefits to learners:

- higher academic achievement;
- long term retention;
- higher level of reasoning;
- critical thinking;
- teamwork skills;
- interpersonal communication;
- group problem-solving and decision-making;
- conflict resolution;
- improved racial / ethnic relations;
- improved sexual difference relations;
- higher self-esteem;
- individual empowerment [6; 2].

The Centre for Teaching Excellence in the University of Waterloo, Ontario, Canada makes great explorings in improving learning process and raising its effectiveness. Staff members of CTE are very highly respected among educational developers in Canada, as well as around the world. Their work is scholarly, grounded in current research on teaching and learning, innovative and carefully designed. To implement group work successfully in the classroom the group of instructors from CTE offers these steps:

Preparing for group work.

- *Think carefully about how students* will be physically arranged in groups.

- *Insist on professional civil conduct* between and among students to respect people's differences and create an inclusive environment.

- *Talk to students about their past experiences* with group work and allow them to establish some ground rules for successful collaboration. This discussion can be successfully done anonymously through the use of note cards.

Designing the group activity.

- *Identify the instructional objectives.* You should determine what he/she wants to achieve through the small group activity, both academically (knowledge of the material) and socially (listening skills). The activity should relate closely to the course objectives and class content and must be designed to help students learn, not simply to occupy their time. Roberson and Franchini emphasize that for group learning to be effective; students need a clear sense that group work is “serving the started learning goals and disciplinary thinking goals of the course [15; 280].

- *Make the task challenging.* Consider giving a relatively easy task early in the term to arouse students’ interest in group work and encourage their progress. In most cases exercises should be stimulating and challenging. By pooling their resources and dealing with differences of opinion that arise, groups of students can develop a more sophisticated product than they could as individuals.

- *Assign group tasks that encourage involvement, independence and a fair division of labour.* All group members should feel a sense of personal responsibility for the success of their teammates and realize that their individual success depends on the group’s success. Johnson D., Johnson R. and Smith K. refer to this as positive interdependence and argue that this type of cooperative learning tends to result in learner’s promoting each other’s success [12].

- *Decide on group size.* The size depends on the number of students, the size of the classroom, the variety of voices needed within a group, and the task assigned. Groups of four-five tend to balance the needs for diversity, productivity, active participation and cohesion. The less skillful the group members are, the smaller the groups should be [8; 191].

- *Decide how you will divide students into groups.* Division based on proximity or students’ choice is quickest, especially for large and cramped classes, but this often means that students end up working together with friends or with the same people. To avoid this vary group composition and increase diversity within groups randomly assign students to groups by counting off and grouping them according to number. For some group tasks, the diversity within a group (gender, ethnicity, level of preparation) is especially important and you may assign students to groups yourself before class. Previously collect a data card from each student on the first day of class to glean important information about their backgrounds, knowledge and interests. Alternately, ask students to express preference, and keep their preferences in mind assigning groups.

- *Allow sufficient time for group work.* You won’t be able to cover as much material as you could if you lectured for the whole class period. Cut back on the content you want to present in order to give groups time to work. Estimate the amount of time that subgroups need to complete the activity. Also

plan for a plenary session in which groups' results can be presented or general issues and questions can be discussed.

– *Try to predict students' answers.* Certainly, it is impossible to expect the unexpected, but by having some idea about what students will come up with you will be better prepared to answer their questions and tie together the group work during the plenary session.

– *Design collaborative work in multiple forms:* pairs, small groups, large groups, online synchronously, online asynchronously, etc. Some students might be better at contributing after they have had time to digest material, while others might be better at thinking on the spot. Other students will defer to others in large groups but actively contribute in pairs. All roles should be valued and included.

Introducing the group activity.

– *Share your rationale for using group work.* Students must understand the benefits of collaborative learning. Don't assume that students know what the pedagogical purpose is. Explicitly connect these activities to larger class themes and learning outcomes whenever possible.

– *Have students form groups before you give them instructions.* If you try to give instructions first, students may be too preoccupied with deciding on group membership to listen to you.

– *Facilitate some form of group cohesion.* Students work best together if they know or trust each other at least to some extent even for brief group activities, have students introduce themselves to their group members before attending to their task. For longer periods of group work consider introducing an "icebreaker" or an activity designed specifically to build a sense of teamwork.

– *Explain the task clearly.* This means both telling students exactly what they have to do and describing what the final product of their groupwork will look like. Explaining the final goal is important, especially when the group work will take place in steps (such as in snowballing or jigsaw). Prepare written or visual instructions (charts, sequential diagrams) for students. Remember to include time evaluations for activities.

– *Set ground rules for group interaction.* Especially for extended periods of group work, establish how group members should interact with one another, including principles such as respect, active listening and methods for decision making consider making a group contract.

– *Let students ask questions.* Even if you believe your instructions are crystal clear, students may have legitimate questions about the activity. Give them time to ask questions before they get to work.

Monitoring the group task.

– *Monitoring the group but do not hover.* As students do their work, circulate among the groups and answer any questions raised. Also listen for trends that are emerging from the discussions, so that you can refer to them during the subsequent practice discussion. Avoid interfering with group functioning – allow time for students to solve their own problems before getting

involved. You might consider leaving the room for a short period of time. Your absence can increase students' willingness to share uncertainties and disagreements [11; 113–116].

– *Expect a lot of your students.* Assume that they do know and can do a great deal [2]. Express your confidence in them as you circulate the room.

– *Be slow to share what you know.* If you come upon a group that is experiencing uncertainty or disagreement, avoid the natural tendency to give the answers or resolve the disagreement. If necessary, clarify your instructions, but let students struggle – within reason – to accomplish the task [14; 27–49].

– *Clarify your role as facilitator.* If students criticize you for not contributing enough to their work, consider whether you have communicated clearly enough your role as facilitator.

Ending the group task.

– *Provide closure to the group activities.* Students tend to want to see how their work in small groups was useful to them and for contributed to the development of the topic. You can end with a plenary session in which students do group reporting. Effective group reporting “can make the difference between students' feeling that they are just going through their paces and the sense they are engaged in a powerful exchange of ideas” [2; 107].

– *Reports are oral and written.*

– *Oral reports:* have each group give one idea and rotate through the groups until no new ideas arise. Or have each group give their most surprising or illuminating insights or their most challenging question. You can record ideas raised to validate their value.

– *Written reports:* have each group record their ideas and either present them yourself or have a group member do so. One variation on this is to have groups record their conclusions on a section of the blackboard or on flipchart paper that is then posted on the wall. Students then informally circulate around the room and read each other's answers. Alternately, you can ask students to move around the room in small groups, rotating from one set of comments to another and adding their own comments in response. Another variation on written reports is to have students write brief comments on Post-it notes or index cards. Collect them, take a few minutes to process them or put them in sequence, and then summarize their contents.

– *Model how you want students to participate.* When responding to students' answers, model the respect and sensitivity that you want the students to display towards their classmates. Be ready to acknowledge and value opinions different from your own. Be willing to share your own stories, critique your work, and summarize what has been said.

– *Connect the ideas raised to course content an objectives.* Recognize that groups might not come up with the ideas you intended them to, so be willing to make your lecture plans flexible. Whenever possible, look for a connection between group conclusions and the course topic. However, be aware

that misconceptions or inaccurate responses need to be clarified and corrected either by you or by other students.

- *Don't provide too much closure.* Although the plenary session should wrap up the group work, feel free to leave some questions unanswered for further research of for the next class period. This openness reflects the nature of knowledge.

- *Ask students to reflect on the group work process.* They may do so either orally or in writing. This reflection helps them discover what they learned and how they functioned in the group. It also gives you a sense of their response to group work [10].

Conclusions and prospects of further researches. The material considered in the article proves the effectiveness of group work in learning process and stresses the necessity of its implementation in the classroom. The potential of group work is great. It gives students the opportunity to engage in process skills for processing information and evaluating and solving problems, as well as management skills through the use of roles within groups, and assessment skills involved in assessing options to make discussions about their group's final result. The method of group work is widely used in teaching foreign languages mainly. But this method is proved to be successful and effective not only in practical classes but at lectures on other disciplines.

Group learning involves working together with peers toward a common goal. It involves collectively identifying and studying real-world problems, interacting with each other and assessing each other contributions. The best environment for group learning is one where students must cooperate to complete the assignment, and each hold accountable for the final outcome, help each other learn, use interpersonal and small group skills like decision-making, conflict resolution, and effective communication, and reflect on how well their team has functioned and how it can improve. Students understand other group members' ideas and are willing to offer help to group members. They not only learn better, they develop sociability and social skills that strengthen their relationships and prepare them for successful careers.

Unfortunately, group work which can essentially enhance students' learning has not found active implementing in higher education in this country and needs to be widely used by educators to help students think and work in a new way.

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Анотація. Активне навчання сприяє активізації навчальної діяльності студентів, розвитку їх особистості, здатності самостійно

здобувати і розвивати знання, формування інформаційних і соціальних навичок. Воно сприяє та значно підвищує інтерес до занять, сприяє професійному зростанню та покращенню практичної підготовки.

Однією з форм активного навчання є групова робота. У статті розглядається її місце та роль у навчанні студентів, акцентується увага на необхідності її широкого застосування у вищій школі. Важливу роль групова робота відіграє у досягненні виховної функції навчання, яка проявляється у формуванні колективізму, моральних та гуманних якостей особистості. У процесі такої діяльності розвиваються самооцінка, самоповага, толерантність, самостійність, відповідальність, вміння дискутувати та відстоювати свою думку.

Ключові слова: активне навчання, групова робота, соціальні навички, взаємодія, практичне мислення, самостійність.

Анотація. Активные методы обучения побуждают учащихся к активной мыслительной и практической деятельности в процессе овладения учебным материалом. В качестве основных достоинств активных методов выступают высокая степень самостоятельности, инициативности, развитие социальных навыков, сформированность умения добывать знания и применять их на практике, развитие творческих способностей.

В активном обучении довольно широко распространены групповые формы работы. Цель этой статьи – обратить внимание педагогов высшей школы на более активное их использование в учебно-воспитательном процессе. Групповая работа является важной составляющей эффективного обучения. В группах студенты не только развивают социальные навыки, полезные в профессиональной сфере. Они получают интеллектуальное и творческое развитие, учатся думать практически, проявляя креативность, принимая самостоятельные решения в различных ситуациях.

Ключевые слова: активное обучение, групповая работа, социальные навыки, взаимодействие, инициативность, самостоятельность, критическое мышление.

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ПІДГОТОВКА МАЙБУТНІХ ВИХОВАТЕЛІВ ДО СТВОРЕННЯ ЗДОРОВ'ЯЗБЕРЕЖУВАЛЬНОГО СЕРЕДОВИЩА В ЗАКЛАДІ ДОШКІЛЬНОЇ ОСВІТИ: ТЕОРЕТИКО-МЕТОДИЧНІ АСПЕКТИ

Анотація. У статті висвітлено теоретико-методичні аспекти підготовки майбутніх вихователів до створення здоров'язбережувального середовища в закладі дошкільної освіти. Розкрито зміст понять