Promoting Student Success Through Collaboration

By Oliver Dreon, PhD   January 21, 2013

Last week, a student named Mary visited me during my office hours and presented me with an interesting dilemma. In one of her classes, a professor had distributed a study guide with a series of questions to help the students prepare for an upcoming exam. Mary, being the millennial student that she is, decided to upload the study guide into Google Docs and invite the rest of the class to contribute to the document. Students answered the study guide questions from each of their individual notes and then refined the answers from their peers.

As the collaboration continued, Mary realized that she had created a unique opportunity where the entire class was helping each other learn. With more than 30 students actively collaborating on the document, she was certain that the whole class would be successful on the exam. That's where Mary's internal alarm went off and that's why she came to see me.

Mary is an education major and was a student in one of my classes last year. From our work together, I know she's going to be a great teacher one day. Mary was concerned about the collaborative study guide and wondered whether it could be misinterpreted as cheating. Education majors are held to a high ethical standard at our institution and disposition concerns can lead to someone being removed the program. If everyone got A's on the exam, would the professor think that somehow the class had cheated? As the person who started the collaborative document, would she somehow be to "blame" for the class's success?

I tried to calm Mary's fears. I explained that I was proud of her since she was implementing the concepts we had discussed in our class. In our Instructional Technology class, we had talked about 21st century skills like collaboration and communication and Mary was actually applying the concepts to help her peers learn and succeed. I really didn't believe that her actions would lead to disciplinary actions but I offered to speak to the professor to alleviate any concerns. Mary left my office relieved and encouraged.

Despite her reassured departure, Mary's situation has been on my mind for the last few days. As educators, I believe we're motivated to help all of our students learn. We want to provide them with the tools to help them succeed and hope that they'll meet the high standards we set for them. As a student, Mary had created a collaborative learning environment for her peers but worried that if everyone was successful that the success could be misinterpreted or worse, devalued. In a somewhat ironic twist, success for everyone was undermining the very concept of success. It's almost as if for success to be *real, authentic or earned,* there had to be some unsuccessful students as well. I know Mary didn't really think this way but her internal alarm went off nonetheless. As educators, we need to move past the concept of education as competition. Learning shouldn't be a race with winners and losers. Learning is about personal growth and meeting high expectations. As educators, we should be embracing student-led collaborative efforts that lead to class-wide success and looking for ways to foster it ourselves.

Here are a few ways you can help to stoke the fires of collaboration in your class:

- Make your expectations clear. You don't need to necessarily provide a grading rubric for your assignments, but you do need to make sure students know what you expect. While students always want to know page length and formatting criteria for papers, I choose to provide leading questions to help students assess their own work and the work of their classmates. By knowing the expectations, students can better help one another work toward meeting my learning goals.
- Introduce students to Google Drive (the new home of Google Docs) or some other collaborative writing tool. With their chaotic schedules, students can't always meet in traditional study groups like they once did. By introducing an online space that they can use, you help to endorse their collaboration.
- Avoid grading on a curve. While this may sound counter-intuitive, grading on a curve can undermine student collaboration. Students who don't want to see a classmate "ruin the curve" won't be motivated to collaborate with them and help them succeed.

If students work together and an entire class meets our standards, we should celebrate it. We need to promote a culture in our classrooms and on our campuses where success isn't defined or guided by failure but attributed to success in itself. That's a huge undertaking but I think it's more aligned to the promise of education, especially in the 21st century.

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