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COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

Roles That Encourage Equitable Collaborative Learning

A look at how to distribute the roles—both academic and managerial—that make up group work to boost engagement and learning.

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Barry Diomedee / Alamy

Team roles can support efficient, thoughtful, and equitable collaboration when used well. When used poorly, team roles can have the opposite effect.

Certain role schemes can concentrate power and influence with those who already have it, leading to

inequitable participation, effort, and engagement. For example, a student who takes on the role of “synthesizer” or “facilitator” may be expected to do intellectually complex work, while a student who takes on the role of “timekeeper” may limit their engagement to watching their cell phone. Furthermore, students don’t always buy into roles or see them as anything but empty titles.

Fortunately, it doesn’t have to be this way. Teachers can leverage student roles to promote equitable collaboration that leads to deep learning. To do this, teachers must determine which roles will best support collaboration and learning, and support students to play those roles effectively.

STUDENTS TAKE ON MULTIPLE ROLES

All roles are not created equal. Different types of roles serve different purposes, and students should take on multiple roles of different types in any given collaborative activity. Consider the following three role categories. For productive and equitable collaboration, every student should have each of the following types of roles within a given project or task.

Professional and field-specific roles: Professional and field-specific roles are ones that mirror the work of real professionals outside of the classroom. Since all students deserve access to intellectually rigorous and meaningful work, all students should take on a meaningful role of this type. That means in a history project all students should take on the role of a historian, in a math project all students should be mathematicians, and so on. In an interdisciplinary project, a single student may take on several different professional roles at different points.

Students may also take on roles that mirror a given job. Within a STEM project, they might take on the role of an engineer, and in a communications project they might take on the role of photojournalist.

Problem-exploring and problem-solving roles: When students work collaboratively on a complex task or project, they will inevitably have to step into a variety of additional roles to effectively explore and problem-solve. At various times, students may step into the role of leader, negotiator, critic, or collaborator. To address interpersonal conflict within the team, a student may need to step into the role of conflict mediator. To help the team incorporate a variety of perspectives, students may need to take on the roles of devil’s advocate, synthesizer, or summarizer.

Problem-exploring and problem-solving roles may be fluid, with students moving in and out of the roles

based on the problem they are exploring, where they are in the problem-solving process, and their own judgment on what their team needs in the moment.

Team management roles: Effective teams require members to fulfill additional various roles to support their team process. Issues of power, status, and bias can lead to inequitable patterns of participation. Team management roles can help disrupt those patterns by supporting the team with a clear and thoughtful collaborative process. These roles may include facilitator, project manager, timekeeper, notetaker, resource manager, process observer, and participation tracker, among others. In effective teams, students know who is in what management role, as well as the responsibilities that come with each role.

MAKE THE ROLES AUTHENTIC

A role is much more than a title. Calling a student a facilitator doesn't make them one, nor does encouraging every student to think like mathematicians guarantee that students will. Teachers and students should clearly define the meaning of each role they use by considering the different authentic aspects of each role.

Processes and practices: Students should engage in the processes and practices that are authentic to their roles. In their role as scientists, students should engage in authentic *scientific practices* (<https://ngss.nsta.org/PracticesFull.aspx>) such as observing natural phenomena, creating hypotheses, and planning and carrying out investigations. In their role as historians, students should engage in authentic *historical thinking* (<https://sheg.stanford.edu/history-lessons/historical-thinking-chart>), by scouring primary source documents, attempting to make judgements on the veracity of historical accounts, and making arguments about what happened. In their role as engineers, students should engage in an authentic engineering design process.

Tools and technologies: Professionals in different roles use specific tools and technologies to carry out their work. In their role as mathematicians, students should use the authentic tools of mathematics to make sense of and solve problems, such as mathematical models, graphs, and other mathematical representations. In their role as photojournalists, students could use real photo editing software to edit and produce their work. In their role as a project manager, students might use a project calendar, Gantt chart, or project management software.

Materials and resources: Students should engage with materials and resources that are authentic to their roles. In their role as historians, students might engage with primary source documents. In their role as mathematicians, students might use real data sets while engaging in authentic *mathematical practices* (<http://www.corestandards.org/Math/Practice/>). In their role as scientists, students may engage with real specimens and lab equipment within their investigations.

LEANING INTO ROLES

As members of the classroom community deepen their shared understanding of these roles, they can create supports and scaffolds tied to each role, whether the role is novelist, collaborator, or timekeeper. Resources such as role descriptions, sentence starter guides, anchor charts, role rubrics, and reflection tools can help all students lean into their roles.

When students have opportunities to practice their roles, they'll become more familiar and better equipped to engage with the authentic processes and practices, tools and technologies, and materials and resources associated with their roles. Far more than just a title, these roles can ultimately lead to more effective collaborative learning and more equitable participation in intellectually rich, worthwhile work.

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