Instituting and Assessing the Impact of Team-Based Learning in a General Education Anthropology Course

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Introduction:

"Many students are not only failing to complete educational credentials; they are also not learning much, even when they persist through higher education." (Arum and Roksa, Academically Adrift, 2010:54).

Assessment of problems with General Education has a long history (e.g., McKeachie 1935) and more recently are better characterized as crises, including that General Education courses do not mean much to students (Fishinger 2006). Faculty members have expressed concern regarding the current state of General Education at the University of South Alabama and student preparation for work in upper division courses. As a small step in an attempt to address both student and faculty concerns, a new pedagogy, Team-Based Learning (TBL), was employed in AN 101: Introduction to Anthropology. This course was offered for the Fall 2017 semester.

Team-Based Learning (TBL):

TBL is an engaging educational approach that includes a specific sequence of individual work, group work, and immediate feedback to create a learning environment in which students are accountable for coming to class prepared and contributing to discussion (Michaelsen 2004; Michaelsen and Sweet 2006). In a number of studies across various disciplines, TBL has been demonstrated to be an effective learning strategy (e.g., Vangriesh and Lynch 2002; Madhavan and Madhavan 2002; Schmittl and others 2003).

Central elements of TBL include forming permanent, heterogeneous teams that complete a series of modules through the course that follow a set procedure. Each module includes students working outside the classroom, assessing that learning through individual and team readiness assurance tests, and applying that material in activities. Usually, the semester is divided into five to seven modules. Students also complete additional individual exams and projects appropriate to the discipline.

As the focus of our current Quality Enhancement Plan (2013 - 2016), TBL is implemented in order to...

Results:

"Institutions need to develop a culture of learning if undergraduate education is to be improved. This is not an easy or overnight process, but one that requires strong leadership... Setting student success, and learning in particular, as a priority provides guidance and focus for future action..." (Arum and Roksa, Academically Adrift, 2010:127).

General Outcomes To Date at USA:

Significantly fewer D’s and F’s and more A’s and B’s in TBL courses
Increased persistence for TBL courses (with withdrawal rate: 3.65% for AN 101 vs. 4.16% for the 101 course)
Increased student critical thinking, student collaboration, and engagement reported by faculty
Increased mastery of student learning (pre-course... 80% or higher)

TBL has proven successful at USA in courses ranging from upper-division undergraduate to graduate. Use in lower-division undergraduate courses is just beginning. The preliminary results for AN 101 demonstrate that learning is above or equal to that achieved in the traditional lecture-based pedagogy. This is significant when considering the traditional teaching method has been advertised by the instructor for over 20 years, yet this is the first time the instructor employed TBL for this class. While learning outcomes are the same or higher, just as importantly more students were successful. Fewer students dropped the course, and more students completed the course with a grade of C or higher.

Grades Distributions of AN 101: Fall 2014, 2015, and 2016 (Pre-TBL) and Fall 2017 (Post-TBL)

References:

Brown, W., 2005: "What is "Team Based Learning"?" The Educational Advantage, 1(1), 2.