Exploring the Promise of Team Based Learning™

In January 2008, I finally discovered a mechanism for accomplishing my goals as a classroom teacher. Virginia Tech's Center for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching (now known as CIDER – Center for Instructional Development and Educational Research) hosted a winter workshop on Team Based Learning™, facilitated by the founder of this approach, Larry Michaelson (2008). Although I had been previously trained as an educator, through my bachelor's degree in agricultural education, I had long-since been frustrated by traditional approaches to education. I had continued to look for ways to engage my students in the learning process, developing their interpersonal skills and preparing them to be life-long learners. Team-Based Learning has offered that for me.

Team-Based Learning (TBL) is a special type of small group facilitation, which differs from cooperative learning or group activities. The TBL approach integrates case studies and applied learning throughout the entire semester, with student teams remaining intact for all of the small group discussions and assignments. Although each course has a different set of learning objectives with respect to content knowledge, the broader course objectives for TBL courses are consistent regardless of course topics. I now begin my courses by sharing these objectives with students:

1. Understand course content,
2. Be able to apply course content,
3. Develop interpersonal and group interaction skills,
4. Become life-long learners, and
5. Enjoy the course.

Beyond working in small group assignments, TBL has changed my overall structure for courses. I break my courses into five or six units and begin each unit with a readiness assurance process. The result is less lecture time because the readiness assurance process promotes student reading and study prior to the start of the unit. On the first day of class for each unit, we begin with a readiness assurance test that students take first as individuals and then within their teams. Immediate feedback from these tests turns them into learning experiences more than assessments. After the readiness assurance tests, I can address student questions and offer focused mini-lectures on content that requires more explanation than the assigned readings offered. Upon completion of the readiness assurance process, we spend the remaining 75% of the unit class time engaging in case studies and application activities. All of the units of study and application experiences feed into a larger project that each team completes at the end of the semester. For more information about the structure of TBL, visit www.teambasedlearning.org.

My implementation of TBL has been met with some resistance from students who find comfort in traditional teaching and assessment techniques. For example, at the end of the course, one student said, "I didn't gain a great deal from the team based learning experience because I personally learn a lot from lecture." In the same class, another student said, "Team based learning would have been more effective had we used our teams more. Lectures again got in the way of learning." My reason for persisting with the approach is captured in a third student's comment: "More like the real world, the team based learning is a good preparation process for the future." In end-of-course surveys, 74% of my students have agreed or strongly agreed that TBL was an appropriate way to structure the course and

69% agreed or strongly agreed that TBL enhanced their learning experience. While I am pleased with this early success, I believe the student experience with TBL will be further improved as I gain more experience with the approach and refine my implementation of the structural components. Preparing quality application activities that highlight the desired content and concepts is more challenging and time consuming than I had anticipated, but I am making gains with every course offering. As I move forward, I am also working to measure the direct effects of TBL on student development and learning gains through pre/post measures. I am grateful for several instructional micro-grants that are assisting me in that regard.

References

Michaelsen, L.K. (2008, January). *Team-based learning: A transformative use of small groups*. Presentation for Virginia Tech's Center for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching winter workshop, Blacksburg, VA.

Michaelsen, L.K., Knight, A.B., & Fink, L.D. (2004). Team-based learning: A transformative use of small groups in college teaching. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.