

Book Reviews/Comptes Rendus

David Jaques, (1984). *Learning in Groups*. London, Croom Helm.

This small book grows better and better as you travel through it. In the first four chapters the author has a hard struggle to provide theory and supporting research for learning in groups. Interpersonal theories, such as psychodynamic theory and interaction theory are introduced to explain why groups are good for learning. The book is based on premises that intellectual growth is closely linked to emotional development, and that student centred learning is superior to tutor centred learning. This may run counter to the experience of many readers who could state instances where intellectual growth has been quite independent of emotional growth. Experience also suggests that students, particularly those pressed to develop a knowledge base in a limited period of time, have a strong preference for professors who provide them with a theoretical framework rather than urging them to do it themselves. We could expect that a book on learning in higher education would make reference to research on problem-solving and critical thinking; it does not. In short, the theory as enounced in the first four chapters of the book is relatively unrelated to the rest of the book.

The aims of learning groups

The real beginning of this book is in chapter five, where Jaques discusses the aims and objectives of learning groups, and gives us the reason for the book. He points out that one of the intrinsic aims of group discussion is to develop an enquiring attitude, and then goes on to suggest the relationship between learning in groups and the aims of higher education. As stated in the book, the aims of higher education include the development of imaginative and creative thinking, a critical and informed mind, an awareness of others' interests and needs, a sense of academic rigor, a social conscience, a willingness to share ideas, and an ability and sense of enjoyment in lifelong learning. This list would undoubtedly spark debate among academics; it suggests a gentler civilization than many of us would recognize in our own universities in these days of budget cuts and technological focus. But it is a plausible and enlightened set of aims. Jaques states that these aims have two things in common: they appear to be of more personal interest to both student and tutor than is the acquisition of knowledge and may thus have a greater long-term value; and they are processes which are experienced mostly if not totally within well-organized discussion groups. He concludes that the aims of group techniques are therefore among the most central aims of postsecondary education.

Tasks and techniques

We then come to the heart of the book, the practical ways of making groups work. In the chapter entitled tasks and techniques, Jaques considers what constitutes a suitable group task, and then discusses the advantages and disadvantages of different techniques. The tasks are described in sections depending upon whether they are intended for groups as a whole, for individuals followed by group discussion, and for peer tutoring. The techniques to accomplish these tasks are then briefly described in categories concerned with cognitive objectives such as knowledge, comprehension, and problem-solving; with creative objectives such as seeing new relationships, connecting the emotional and the intellectual, and producing imaginative solutions; and with developing individual or group awareness such as personal growth, communication skills, and participation and the breaking down of interpersonal barriers.

Some of the techniques will be recognized as old friends but frequently Jaques supplies a new perspective or a different way of utilizing the technique. Others come from specific disciplines but can be seen to be readily applicable in a variety of as yet untried situations. The techniques begin with those requiring more tutor control and then flow to those which allow for greater student freedom. Controlled discussion and step by step discussion are the first techniques discussed, followed by buzz groups, where students are asked to turn to their neighbors to discuss a particular issue for a short period of time, and snowball groups, in which buzz groups are extended by progressive doubling of the group size. Variations on this theme are crossover groups, where members of subgroups change groups, and horseshoe groups, which allow for both large and small group discussion. Diagrams of the different formats are good aids to comprehension.

For those who have tried and experienced disaster in the form of a seminar, the next section is a delight. Jaques begins with a review of all the possible problems of seminars as analyzed by an education student, then goes on to discuss the ideal seminar and to provide some suggestions for making one work. Tutorials, syndicates, case studies, peer tutoring, and projects are then described in two to five pages each. A plan and flow chart for a project show how this relatively loosely organized approach to learning can be structured so that students have a sense of direction while they are tackling real but amorphous problems. Games and simulations are explained in some detail as means of integrating knowledge and gaining perspective. The debriefing, or review of the game, is singled out as the most important part of the task educationally, and a creative and sensitive pattern for debriefing is supplied.

The last three techniques are much more interpersonally oriented. Free or associative discussion is aimed at giving students perspective on their idiosyncratic reactions to problems. Brainstorming requires creativity and acceptance of others, that is, a non-critical team attitude. The third technique, synectics, is a structured scheme for problem-solving based on the use of analogies and metaphors. The use of synectics involves (1) creating psychological states of

involvement and detachment; (2) speculation; and (3) hedonistic responses which indicate where the discussion should go. The states are induced through operations such as personal analogy, in which each person is invited to imagine being the object under consideration, symbolic analogy, where a visual or metaphoric image is used, or fantasy, where group members daydream in order to problem solve.

How to use small group techniques

From an analysis of techniques, the book moves to a discussion of the tutor's job, and the discussion should be useful for both professors and teaching assistants. First, strategies and parameters in relation to group size, group membership, and physical conditions are dealt with. Then a short section on planning a meeting leads to a consideration of what steps must be taken by the tutor in order that a particular learning goal be achieved. Jaques characterizes the roles the tutor might choose to play – leader, neutral chairperson, facilitator, counsellor, commentator, wandering minstrel, and absent friend – in a way that is both amusing and enlightening. He then goes into some very directive leadership interventions, such as *bring in and shutting out*; *turning questions back*; and *re-directing*, which end the chapter on a serious and task-oriented note.

The next chapter, learning groups in context, provides examples of how learning groups can be introduced into a department and into the curriculum. Just under forty innovative group teaching experiences are provided with references and addresses of the innovators. The case studies cover a variety of situations in many disciplines, although all of the references are to professors in British Universities or Polytechnics. Reading the chapter, I felt a twinge of envy for the network that has obviously been assembled to aid teaching innovators: it presents a challenge that we should take up in Canada.

The thorny problem of evaluating groups is the subject of the next chapter and, having been declared a complex phenomenon, evaluation is approached positively as a learning situation. The methods suggested include observation; diaries; reporting back for 5 to 10 minutes on what happened at the last meeting; checklists; do-it-yourself checklists where the snowball technique is used to develop statements worth making about the class; interviews; pass-round questionnaires, self-made evaluations to be used on another subgroup; and video playback. We are then provided with useful forms for checklisting and observing group behaviors. The final chapter provides a number of methods and activities for training group behavior or leadership. The activities include introduction and interview techniques as well as contracting and team building scenarios. The concluding activity is a program for a small group teaching workshop. Jaques says au revoir to us by returning to the premise of the book, that participants, whether they be college students or practising teachers, are willing not just to learn, but to learn how to learn and to integrate this into their future development. Learning is a cyclical process and includes the taking of risks, the willingness to share, the acceptance of feelings and the ability to monitor one's own experience and progress.

Overall, the book is a little treasure, a reference work that should be on every department's teaching shelf. It deserves a better typeface and proofreading, and it should be revised to use nonsexist language, but the author's style is relaxed and the message is both useful and enjoyable.

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Ian Lewis. *The Student Experience of Higher Education*. London: Croom Helm Ltd. 1984. 178 pgs.

This book describes several ethnographic studies performed at York University in England in order to obtain a better understanding of the experiences of students. The author explains that less than 30% of the people in England have had direct experience as a university student and therefore British research on the university which has been of a quantitative, questionnaire-based type does not provide information which can be easily understood or correctly interpreted by most people.

To exhibit the richness of detail of the ethnographic approach, five studies are reported, each concerned with a different aspect of student experiences at York University. The first which was a participant-observer study focused on the first few weeks of first-year undergraduate life – certainly a critical period of transition for many students. It highlights the problems of becoming a student and emphasizes the substantial gaps that exist between the perceptions of these students and those of their university.

The second study presents the results of a cooperative effort between a university librarian and the faculty of the history department. The results illustrate how the students perception of the requirements of the course become quite different from the original intent of the faculty.

Characteristics of mature students are investigated in the third study. This study was conducted by a mature student interviewing other mature students. The results of this study are compared with the results of a university sponsored study of faculty perceptions of the problems of mature students. The difference in the results of the two studies are discussed.

The fourth study centers on the perceptions of overseas students. Through a process of informal conversations with a number of overseas students, the researcher who was herself an overseas student, uncovers a major faculty misunderstanding regarding the problems of such students which was not identified in a more conventional study.

The last two chapters discuss the results of these studies. One chapter synthesizes the student perspectives identified in each study. These are then compared with the results obtained from the more traditional psychometric approach and the conclusion is made that the two approaches can lead to quite different results.