Fostering Collaboration in Problem-based Learning: Some Group Dynamics Issues

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Outline of Comments

My teaching context

The problem-based learning unit

Issues with which groups struggle

How I address these issues
Teaching Context
EAD 861 Adult Learning

- Graduate-level course on adult learning
  - Emphasizing research and theory
  - Taught online – most asynchronous
  - 25 participants

- Problem-based
  - Real-life problems derived from educational practice
  - Increasingly complex and multi-dimensional

- Combination of individual and group work
  - Group and individual grades
  - Individual work grounded in group experience
  - Groups use consensus process for decision-making

- Groups
  - Three to four students
  - Teacher assigned
  - Usually diverse
Structure of Problem Units

- Introduction to the case
  - Framing the case within the research and theory
  - Reading assigned material
- Case scenario
- Generating preliminary understanding of the case
  - Statement of problem
  - Possible factors contributing to the problem
- Researching the problem
  - Guiding questions facilitate group research and study
  - Usually involves a division of labor
- Developing the group report (grounded in the research)
  - Clear statement of problem and why it is a problem
  - Factors contributing to the problem
  - Recommendations to address the problem
- Debriefing
  - Group process
  - Individual reflection on one’s learning
Process Issues

- Individual versus the group
  - Learners want to be actively involved and to work with others
  - But they want to be held individually accountable for their own learning

- The problem of authority
  - Learners need to depend on themselves and one another as emerging authorities in the cases
  - Yet they want to depend on instructor as primary authority

- The problem of intimacy
  - Learners want to feel a sense of belonging within the group and need to relate and interact with one another
  - But developing a sense of belong and relatedness involves taking risks and disclosing aspects of oneself
Addressing the Issues

- Curricular approaches
  - Orientation to PBL and group work
  - Practice problem-based unit
  - Group debriefing and individual reflections
  - Individual unit mid-way through

- Instructional approaches
  - Resource more than primary source
  - Maintaining presence but posing questions, drawing attention to issues, potential contradictions, etc
  - Fostering integration of both content and process
  - Seeing individual issues as group concerns
Lingering Issues

Managing the work

Independence vs interdependence

Integrating issues into the learning