

Building Effective groups

Glenn Wagner - I do this thing called knowledge building in my classroom and basically, it's kids working with questions and ideas that really matter to them. And the kids pick their own type of knowledge building group, the questions and ideas that interest them. The one group that I'm looking at in my thesis is on black holes and gravitation. These kids selected black holes because they thought they were really cool. So I had these three groups that I'm looking at in this thesis. And one of the things I've noticed in one of the groups, after I looked at the data and after they posted all of their work on Knowledge Forum, is that one group has this group buzz, it has a spree decor, if you will. There's something about them that their really interacting in a really high way, with each other, compared to the other two groups. And I thought this was fascinating because when I got the material on black holes from this group buzz group, and I had experts look at what they learned, they found that they learned at a much deeper level compared to the other two groups. Even though the other two groups, the one group asked the same number of questions, posted the same number of notes, but this group tended to outperform this one, in terms of that knowledge base and the ideas that they produced. And the experts were quite taken by some of the questions that the kids were asking. In essence, what I'm trying to look at in my thesis is why this group has this kind of buzz going on with it. In other words, what are the identifiers associated with this one group compared to say, the other groups that didn't have those identifiers? And these identifiers look like words such as we and our ideas as opposed to mine or I. Another one is quoting the work of others. So you find this group right here, they quote the work of others an awful lot, compared to this group over here. So why is that? And this group over here, they tended to use each others names a lot and they tended to converse with each other, with the proper names. This group, not so much. And also finally, this group over here, they tended to have much deeper threads. They had more connections when they were building on each others knowledge. They just kept going deeper and deeper, compared to over here where the knowledge depth wasn't really that great. And so the idea that I tell them is that when people have a conversation face to face, we often ask a question. So, Ben how are you. And Ben goes, good. And then, well then your conversation's going to die. So, the idea is that when you're online, you need to ask a question back and so forth. But part of the conversation is I think they need to understand what it means to have a conversation online versus face to face. And I think that's where I can help a lot. So I tell em, leave a question behind. And then, you know, compliment somebody's work if they do bring something in, you think, oh that's a really neat idea. Just a little compliment and that just boosts you up a little bit and build on that and so forth. So that's what I try to do for those groups that might not be functioning as well as they should. What I think this thesis has informed me on is what makes certain groups really work well. So, if I see them communicating a lot, I see them, perhaps, laughing a little. I see them, the way they're facing each other. Are they interacting with each other in productive ways? I think, to me, that's what I see in face to face that ultimately I see online as well. So I think that transfers face to face to online. So yeah, it doesn't form my practice to a point because it's kinda hard to

say, okay you need to use we and our but I have, in the past, heard kids talking about their theory. Okay, here's my theory, we should da da da da. Okay, let me build on that for a second. And you start hearing them use the language that they had used in knowledge building and knowledge forum. Which you know, that's kind of integrated into their head when they're starting to do that. So, there's something going on in a community where they are cohesive, they are collaborating and ultimately I think they like each other. Not that this group, they didn't like each other, it's just that there was something missing there. There was a certain secret sauce that was not here compared to over here. I'm trying to figure out why this group really is at this higher level compared to this one over here. I'm trying to look for these identifiers of these high functioning groups in knowledge forum that ultimately we can run a test on, then go through the database and see how many times they're saying we and our and quoting the work of others compared to a group over here. And maybe use that as a marker of that social side of learning that I think is important especially in the 21st century when a lot of the learning is slowly moving over towards the computer side, this asynchronous communication.