

Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education

Issue 17 Winter 2016

Group Dynamics: Lessons and Surprises from Multiple Sections of a Single Class

Kara Becker
Reed College

Alexandra Wood
Reed College

Follow this and additional works at: <http://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe>

 Part of the [Higher Education and Teaching Commons](#)

[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

Recommended Citation

Becker, Kara and Wood, Alexandra "Group Dynamics: Lessons and Surprises from Multiple Sections of a Single Class," *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*: Iss. 17 (2016), <http://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe/vol1/iss17/4>

GROUP DYNAMICS: LESSONS AND SURPRISES FROM MULTIPLE SECTIONS OF A SINGLE CLASS

Kara Becker, Assistant Professor of Linguistics, Reed College
Alexandra Wood, English major, Class of 2015, Reed College

Introduction

In this essay we describe a student-faculty collaboration for two sections of a single course. Although student-faculty partnerships most commonly center on a single course, and thus a single group of students who participate in the course, we highlight the benefits of working with multiple sections. Specifically, work with multiple sections reveals the key role of group dynamics in the success of a course, and allows for a pedagogical focus on responding and adapting to those group dynamics. Rather than attenuating the responsibility of the faculty member in course success, a focus on group dynamics highlights the intersection of student and faculty work and responsibility in the classroom.

We are Kara Becker, Assistant Professor of Linguistics, and Alex Wood, English major at Reed College and Class of 2015. Our collaboration was part of the Student-Consultants for Teaching and Learning Program through the Center for Teaching and Learning at Reed College. Academic year 2014-15 was the first year of this program at Reed. Both of us participated in student-faculty collaborations in the fall semester. In the spring of 2015 we partnered for two sections of an introductory course in sociolinguistics entitled *Introduction to Language, Culture and Society*. The course is offered each spring in multiple sections and is a requirement for the Linguistics major. In spring of 2015, two sections of eight and nine students, respectively, were taught using the same syllabus.

It was the fourth time Kara had offered the course. Her teaching goals centered on fostering a successful conference dynamic, with a specific focus on facilitating student-led discussion in the social science classroom. The Reed College conference is characterized by close interaction between faculty and students, with an emphasis on student-led and open-ended discussion. The subject matter of sociolinguistics is a blend of the humanities and the social sciences, which is directly manifested in classroom time that is a blend of student-led discussion and faculty-guided discussion. A major goal for this course was to succeed in this hybrid style, clearly communicating with students about expectations for their participation, and facilitating students' movement through different activities and styles of conference behavior. In addition, because this is an introductory course, bringing students at different points in their college careers and with different backgrounds and experiences to the conference table, another goal was to successfully engage all students in the course material.

Because these goals related to the conference dynamic, Kara chose to partner with a consultant with no prior background in Linguistics, anticipating that a consultant from another field could better focus on the practices of a successful conference that are universal across disciplines. Alex worked with an English professor the previous semester, on a class that she herself had taken for the major. She similarly chose to work with a faculty partner in a different discipline, hoping that the new field would narrow her to focus to pedagogy.

The rest of this essay describes the collaboration chronologically, tracing key moments throughout the semester that highlight the lessons learned through comparison of the two sections. Our goal in using this format is to highlight how much our perceptions of each section changed from the early weeks of the course to the end, and to compare the trajectories of each group as they changed over time. We first describe the early weeks and our first impressions of each section; next, we outline our attempts to effectively foster conference discussion in each section. We then describe the mid-term evaluations, where we first heard directly from our students about our work. Next, we describe our response in the second-half of the semester. We end with an endorsement of collaborations that combine a focus on group dynamics with the across-groups work done by faculty members, and give specific suggestions for activities that respond to the changing nature of a group across the semester.

The First Weeks

It was clear from the first day of the semester that we had two very different groups. Section 1 was composed primarily of freshmen and sophomores, and overall seemed timid. Discussion in the first few class meetings was halting, and required a lot of faculty guidance. In short, we felt Section 1 would require a lot of work on our part to gel into a lively, student-led conference. In contrast, Section 2 was composed primarily of sophomores and juniors, and came across as confident and engaged. Discussion in this group was both thoughtful and lively from day one. In our early reflections, we felt that Section 2 would need very little work from us to be a successful conference.

Alex's notes from the first day highlight this immediate observation:

The first section is definitely more timid than the other section, and I will be interested to see how this plays out...They seem like the type of class who will struggle if given 'open' questions, so we might want to talk about ways to engage them otherwise.

The second section is amazing. They were very engaged with the subject, reading, and you. They responded well to everything you talked about. I think they will be much easier down the road. They are much more confident (which makes sense given their general age), and are more willing to jump in. I think this will be the section that will work best with open discussion with really hard questions.

Even in these early weeks, our work differed by section. First, we spent far more of our weekly meeting time discussing Section 1, who we saw as the section requiring more guidance, and strategizing ways to foster good conference discussion. We did discuss Section 2, and focused on ideas for pushing them to go even deeper with the course content than they already seemed to be going.

Interventions

Based on our initial impressions of the sections, we carried out some similar and some different interventions aimed at strengthening conference discussion. In Section 1, we often broke into small groups of two or three at the beginning of class to encourage students to speak in a less

stressful environment. These small groups would then report back to the larger group, bringing points of interest or clarification into the larger discussion. This worked quite well, and early on we saw very timid students opening up in the small group format. In addition, we relied on an active faculty-led discussion to engage and encourage student discussion. This group responded well to a focus on linguistic “knowledge” (defining terms and discussing results) rather than a discussion of the conceptual or theoretical, so we used that observation as a template for walking students through the material. In part the reliance on faculty discussion was a result of our own hesitancy that opening up class time to the group would fail; we weren’t sure if these students were ready to take charge of their conference at this point.

In Section 2 we allowed conference discussion to emerge more organically. Instead of focusing on the kinds of activities that would foster discussion, we turned our attention to discussion questions. In our view, discussion questions need to be sufficiently open-ended that students are not concerned that the faculty member is looking for a particular answer. At the same time, we felt that the hybrid style of the social science material meant that we couldn’t simply open the conversation up for discussion without providing some direction to the conversation. Here our approach was to heavily frame the day’s activities; i.e. “Our goals for today are ____.” For example, one day Kara asked the class, “*What gets packaged into the notion of the standard when we use it to describe an ethnic variety?*” Such questions gave the class a very clear direction. We hoped students would challenge themselves to be able to answer it by the end of the day. This approach often led to a presentation of information at the beginning of the day before turning to student-led discussion, a nice manifestation of the hybrid style we were after. Following this was a very open-ended question: “What reactions did you have to this article?” or “What do we want to say about this topic?” Resisting the desire to fill in silences often led to highly-engaged student-led discussions of material that was both technical/quantitative and social.

As the semester went on, we made notable progress in these efforts. We hoped, however, that the second half of the semester would bring new pedagogical ideas, and with it, new successes. Specifically, we hoped that Section 1 would move beyond internalizing linguistic “knowledge” and embrace student-led discussion. With Section 2, although they were already confident and engaged, we wanted them to continue to grow and engage more deeply and critically with the material.

Mid-Semester Feedback

As part of the Student Consulting Program at Reed, consultants were in charge of leading mid-semester feedback with students. This was a unique opportunity to gain insight into what the two classes thought of their own learning, and how they perceived the efforts we were making. We knew that, as Reed students, both sections would be familiar with providing feedback to professors, as well as thinking critically about their conference style and participation. By facilitating this feedback halfway through the course, we hoped to provide students with an opportunity to advocate for their academic needs or desires. We also hoped that this would be an opportunity for us to express our own desires for them, and to ideally identify areas where both sections could improve their own learning.

The mid-semester feedback began with a worksheet on which students answered several generic questions about how they felt the class was going. We also felt that the mid-semester feedback should be completely transparent about our goals and methods, so as students wrapped up their answers to the worksheet, Alex began a discussion that largely focused on the conference dynamic. We felt the central concern was how students were responding to our varied conference style. We formulated the following question:

How is discussion going? Specifically, do you feel that the class is hitting the goal of wearing multiple “hats”? — That is, sometimes Kara talks, sometimes everyone works through basic or technical material, and sometimes the class has traditional, open-ended discussion. What could be done differently to make conference discussion better?

With Section 1, Alex mentioned how we used small groups as a way to encourage more voices to participate. With Section 2, she told the class how obviously engaged they were, and how we wanted to find ways to push them even deeper.

While both sections affirmed our beliefs — that the first was more timid, and that the second enjoyed open discussion — they also contradicted many of our assumptions. Through the feedback, we found that Section 2 was much more resistant to the many “hats” of conversation than we realized. Despite being deeply engaged, they were not interested in trying new approaches to learning. All of the responses to our central question were essentially the same. One student wrote, *“I personally prefer the traditional discussion format. It gives everyone a chance to engage fully according to their ability without putting anyone on the spot.”* Other students mentioned that they disliked small-group work, exercises, or writing tasks. Section 2 seemed to think these pedagogical methods were juvenile and unnecessary. Though they acknowledged the potential benefits of mixing up the format of discussion, they were not willing to step out of their comfort zone. Overall, the class seemed to be content with a conference that had a traditional back-and-forth with the professor. They desired a conference where Kara would lead, and where participation happened through voluntary additions to the conversation. They resisted the “many hats” model because it aimed to break free from this simple back-and-forth.

Section 2 also pushed back on the idea of preparation before class. With the acknowledgement that the semester was becoming more and more difficult, and that they were consequently less energetic, Alex suggested ways to help keep everyone engaged in conference. Alex offered that coming to class prepared with a question or comment might help start conversations immediately, and thus allow for discussion to delve deeper more quickly. Yet students resisted this idea completely. They asserted that they were content with conference discussion, and argued that it would be unfair to ask them to do more work halfway through the semester. They hoped to reserve this kind of analysis or critical work for the conference itself. Alex suggested several other methods of initiating conversations, to which she received similar responses.

Most surprising, however, was the response of Section 1. During discussion, Section 1 unanimously agreed that they wanted more autonomy in discussion. While they all expressed their appreciation for Kara’s guidance and questions, they hoped to be able to lead discussion themselves and to let Kara take a step back. On their worksheets, one student wrote, *“If Kara could step back a bit somehow to work more off each other, that could be useful.”* Another wrote,

“[Discussion] does feel varied, but I wish there was some way it could be more student-driven.” Students all agreed that they wanted Kara to allow longer pauses before answering questions. They contended that they needed more time to consider the question and return to the text before they felt prepared to answer. If given more time, they felt confident they could each come back to the group with a strong response and evidence to back it up.

Contrary to Section 2, Section 1 asked for preparatory assignments so they could come to class ready to delve into discussion. They hoped to jump-start the process of analyzing their reading, so that conference could be a place to compare and challenge each other's thoughts. Alex showed them again where to find the discussion questions Kara had already prepared. Inspired by this reminder, the class suggested that each student, before class, post a comment or question they had about the reading on the Moodle. They could then begin each class by reading each other's posts, and initiating discussion from there.

After reviewing the mid-semester feedback together, we felt both confused and enthusiastic. While the two sections remained extremely polarized, they had completely flipped. Section 1, which had before been our focus due to their hesitancy during conference discussion, was now asking to take their learning into their own hands. And Section 2 seemed to have stagnated; they were either simply content, or there was some underlying issue that caused them to be unwilling to delve deeper.

Section 2's resistance to Kara's "many hats" model posed an interesting problem: was it possible to respect the students' desire to keep things as they were while simultaneously encouraging them to do more? Our own beliefs about teaching and our goals for Section 2 led us to feel that maintaining the status quo felt like giving up. We both felt that in order to get students to think in new or more complex ways, we would need to adjust the method to inspire that thought. But without the flexibility in pedagogy, we were left hoping that something new could come from more of the same. We were surprised that the class we had so admired for challenging themselves intellectually was so hesitant to challenging themselves pedagogically. We struggled with the idea of letting Section 2 have their way, when it was such an obvious impediment to growth. Yet we ultimately decided that it was not in our best interest to deny their wishes after opening ourselves up to suggestions. We thus decided to reduce the variability in the day's activities, giving them more room for the "traditional discussion format." We hoped that they would appreciate our trust in their wishes, and would then take it upon themselves to make the most of discussion.

Section 1 presented a much more exciting prospect. We had a unique opportunity to experiment with the exact opposite of what we had been doing. Whereas our focus before had been on guiding the class through every step of discussion, we could now sit back and watch them develop the discussion on their own. This also offered us an opportunity to gain insight into how the class was processing the material, and what about sociolinguistics was important to them.

In addition to the requests the class made for longer pauses and Moodle posts, we wanted to adjust the type of direction we gave the class in discussion. Rather than pointed questions throughout the day, Kara would begin each class stating her goal for the day. Providing this general direction would strike a balance between Kara's hopes for each day and the class's own

interests. With this established at the beginning of class, Kara could then step back and watch discussion unfold. Kara admitted that she was uncomfortable with a more relaxed teaching style, especially with the long silences the class desired. We discussed the merits of allowing students more time to think, and how the two of us could monitor the silences together. We decided that Kara would wait for students to answer a question unless it seemed like they did not understand. We were both excited about this new challenge for Kara, and felt enthusiastic that the class would respond positively to the new conference style.

The Second Half of the Semester

After Spring break, we returned to class with a solidified plan. We began the second half of the semester by informing each section about how we had taken their feedback and how we planned to move forward. We opened the conversation up to more suggestions or thoughts, but both sections seemed content with our decisions.

On the first day back, Section 1 immediately took advantage of the new conference style. The day's reading focused on the language use of gay men and trans individuals. Despite the sensitivity and difficulty of the subject matter, the class dove right in. After handing out the Moodle posts, one student asked a clarifying question about another's comment. The second student was forced to elaborate their point, and the first student was then able to respond, using the text as support. This back-and-forth reaffirmed the class's desire to have more interpersonal dialogue.

The conversation continued with more clarifying questions about the text. As the students led their own conversation with these questions, it became clear that this new approach would allow them to flesh out any confusion they might have after doing the reading. Whereas before Kara's questions and guidance might delve directly into analysis, the students were now able to ensure they all had a thorough understanding of the basic themes and ideas of each reading before doing any analysis. For both of us, this was an unexpected benefit to the student-driven discussion. After establishing a strong understanding of the texts, the class seemed much more prepared to discuss the arguments, and consequently had a more thoughtful discussion.

On the other hand, Section 2 seemed hindered by their decision to have a traditional conference. Without prompts, group work or preparation, Section 2 seemed less engaged than before. The "traditional" conference method, of allowing students to speak voluntarily and in their own time, created an unexpected ambivalence, an unwillingness to jump in. In the first class after break, it was clear everyone had done the readings, but they struggled to find something to discuss. There was a long lull at the beginning of class. Kara jumped in with the suggestion that someone talk about a piece of the reading they found interesting. Yet even this extremely simple starting point proved difficult. The discussion lagged, and never seemed to find a sense of direction or inspiration. At one point, one more vocal student asked how the article was defining sex and gender, to which the entire class responded. This dialogue, however, was divorced from the readings, and never arrived at a deep analysis of the linguistic aspects of sex, gender, and sexuality.

After sitting in on both sections, Alex's notes reflected our initial excitement and fear. She wrote:

For a first day of student-led conversation, I think today went great. It was a little tricky because the topic is pretty sensitive, but all things considered, I think the class did a good job of keeping this in mind and having a respectful conversation. I definitely think that the Moodle Posts and the handout at the beginning of class are a good way to start off Section 1. They responded really well and it gave them a way to direct themselves without your help.

The second section was a little slower to get started without Moodle posts or small-group work, but they got there eventually. I do wonder, however, if some prep work would help make discussion pick up faster and keep going longer. The first section just seemed overwhelmingly more prepared when the only difference was the questions they prepared.

We were both amazed by Section 1's enthusiasm and determination. Despite any doubts we might have had, they rose to the occasion and took responsibility for discussion. Everyone was able to voice their opinions, and there was more interpersonal discussion than we had seen before. It was obvious that this new approach allowed the students to feel more responsible for their own learning, and hence more invested in it.

The contrast of the two sections proved to us the value of preparatory assignments. It affirmed our belief that Section 2's resistance to such methods would only hold them back. We realized that without writing assignments or small group work, we lacked a way to guide Section 2 through the beginning of class.

We decided to see if conversation would pick up more over the next few classes, but arrived at the same results. Every day, Section 2 struggled to initiate discussion. They always arrived at analysis towards the end of class, but the day seemed overshadowed by the frustration at the beginning. One day, Alex wrote:

The second section was a little slower. Especially at the beginning. I do think it's weird that this is something they very obviously struggle with, but something they aren't willing to do prep work for. I wonder if maybe the solution is for you to start class off with just a broad question, and then let them lead. It seems like they need somewhere to start. Because when it lags at the beginning, it really brings energy down, and you can feel it dragging through the rest of the conference. They were less engaged with each other.

Whereas Section 1 seemed not to need general direction in order to start conversations, we realized that this was absolutely necessary for Section 2. We decided that Kara could start every class with a question she wanted answered or a goal she had for the day. We hoped that with a more defined purpose for each day, students would feel less overwhelmed by the vastness of the subject matter, and would better be able to direct themselves through conversation.

Over the next few weeks, stating goals or questions at the beginning of the Section 2's class seemed to help initiate discussion a bit. Yet students seemed markedly less engaged with the texts and with the class. We wondered to what extent this was a symptom of general student exhaustion nearing the end of the semester. Whether a natural occurrence or a result of their desired conference style, however, it was clear we needed to address the issue with a stronger hand. Kara took more of an active role with Section 2, asking more pointed questions and bringing them back to the text during discussion. Despite our efforts to be direct with the class about their declining engagement and preparedness for class, conference for the rest of the semester continued to lag. We resigned ourselves to the loss of potential, reminding ourselves that despite the slowness of the second-half of the semester, Section 2 still possessed a great understanding of the material.

As always, our two sections were on different trajectories. Whereas productivity and analysis declined for Section 2, Section 1 continually improved their discussions and analysis. Every day they came to class prepared, having done the reading and come with at least one topic they wished to discuss. We began to hear the more quiet voices speak up more frequently, and some of the louder voices began to take a step back. The class was obviously making very pointed efforts to be inclusive. The conversations consequently became more lively and diversified.

Apparently inspired by their success leading discussions, Section 1 also became more ambitious in their analysis of material. Towards the end of the semester, Kara assigned her most difficult reading, expecting both classes to struggle. Section 1 was up to the challenge. They all expressed their enjoyment of the text's difficulty, and their determination to walk away from class with a better understanding. Kara took on a more active role this day in order to ensure that everyone would understand the basic argument. Yet even with her more active role, the class continued to participate and engage with each other. At the end of the day, Alex wrote: *"In the first section, it seemed like everyone was really up for the challenge. They seemed confused, but not too frustrated, and really willing to jump right in. They responded well to your questions, took chances, and asked questions when they were confused."*

This day was another challenging day for Section 2, but not without its benefits. At the beginning of conference, several people voiced their discomfort and frustration with the text. Overall, the class was daunted by the task of taking apart the article. They seemed even more unmotivated to critique and analyze the argument. Yet with a similarly strong hand as with Section 1, Kara successfully led Section 2 through the day. Towards the end of conference, students were visibly engaged. They presented thorough criticism of the text, marking both its strengths and weaknesses. They further highlighted the article's relation to the course as a whole, drawing connections to other theories of linguistic study. Before packing up for the day, the students who had initially voiced their frustration now informed us that they enjoyed the day's challenge.

For us, this day was monumental. It marked our incredible success with Section 1. We were inspired by their ability to take responsibility for their own learning. Additionally, we learned that in fostering strong student-led discussions, other forms of discussion (such as this day's faculty-led discussion) would also improve. For Section 2, this day was an important reminder: even though they might get off to a rough start, they consistently challenged themselves intellectually. They always achieved the day's goals, and were continually inspired to further

develop their critical understanding of sociolinguistics. Both sections proved the value of student-input in their own learning. With a combination of faculty-led discussion and self-direction, both sections surpassed our expectations for the course.

Conclusion

Our ability to compare the trajectories of two sections of a single class reveals best practices that should be relevant to collaboration in any classroom. First, we recommend involving students in the conversation about pedagogy. We decided to be transparent with students about our sense of each group's dynamic, and talked to them frankly about discussion. When we told Section 1 that we felt they were hesitant, this allowed them to agree and affirm the observation, but also to participate in the conversation about how to improve class discussion. To our surprise, this group wanted more ownership over their trajectory in class. They asked for more autonomy and then made major changes to the conference dynamic, participating in their own transformation. This change would certainly not have been possible without their self-advocacy.

Second, we would focus on the importance of adaptability, both to a group's dynamic and to changes in a group dynamic. We implemented changes in the first half of the semester based on our perceptions of each group's abilities in conference discussion; then, after mid-semester feedback, we adapted again to incorporate student feedback and try new things in the second half of the semester. We had to adapt again with Section 2 later in the semester when they pushed back against some of our suggested changes to the conference. We had to find ways that Kara could help them maintain their thoughtfulness and critical thinking skills, specifically by framing the day's conversation with specific goals or questions. These experiences highlight the importance of incorporating a group's strengths and weaknesses into pedagogical work over the course of the semester.

Finally, we recommend being responsive to a group's desires for their conference, even when those desires feel at odds with your teaching goals. With Section 2, we found ourselves frustrated that such a promising group was resistant to strategies that we felt would help them realize their full potential. Yet we decided to accept this group's desire to maintain the status quo, and instead focused on ways to push them within their own boundaries. Importantly, this was a class that by all accounts was great, but in the context of our consulting work together, we had a hard time being content with great. Although our efforts to foster discussion with them were not always successful, trusting the desires of the group ultimately proved to be a rewarding experience. Because we involved the groups in discussion of their own success and then tried to adapt to what we heard from them, we ended up feeling satisfied that the students had achieved, and surpassed, their own academic goals. The attention we paid to group dynamics allowed for a semester where each group's strengths, weaknesses, desires, fears, and personality impacted both our own work and, crucially, the success of the conference.