

Team Learning

- A Solution for the Achievement Gap -

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Introduction

The idea of Team Learning (TL) was borne out of a creative marriage of organized sports and a classroom environment to combat the achievement gap. I believe that by convincing a classroom that they are part of a team and, therefore, responsible to the whole group for their actions, that such an atmosphere will create a camaraderie, cooperation, and a confidence in the students that will prove to be substantial in the academic realm. I believe that TL can improve racial/ethnic minority achievement by impressing upon them that their failures in school are not only meaningful but hurtful to people other than just themselves; the accountability created will provide the impetus for those underachieving students to apply themselves and take pride in their learning. Anytime someone takes pride in what they do, the results are of a higher quality.

Issue Assessment

Exploring the Achievement Gap

The achievement gap, a statistical discrepancy between white and racial/ethnic minority student performance on standardized tests, has been documented across the US. This documentation shows white students consistently exhibit a higher proficiency in reading and mathematics than American Indian, Asian American, African American, and Hispanic students. The Achievement Gap can also be seen in racial/ethnic minority collegiate aspirations; a higher percentage of white students enroll in college than the aforementioned minority groups, with the lone exception of Asian American Students. Even Minnesota, a state with a strong public school system, exhibits signs of the achievement gap as reported by the 2004 Minnesota Education Yearbook in the table on the next page.

<i>Ethnicity</i>	Percent above Grade 3 MN state achievement standards		Percent above Grade 8 MN state achievement standards		Collegiate Aspirations
	<i>Math</i>	<i>Reading</i>	<i>Math</i>	<i>Reading</i>	<i>% Enrollment</i>
White	77%	80%	78%	87%	49%
A. Indian	52%	59%	43%	56%	35%
Asian A.	57%	54%	58%	63%	55%
African A.	39%	46%	31%	50%	42%
Hispanic	45%	43%	38%	52%	34%

Source: 2004 Minnesota Education Yearbook (Davidson et al., 2004, qtd. in Geller & Werner, 2006.)

This phenomenon has become a topic of great debate, largely due to the recent ratification of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001, a national mandate for the improvement of the public school system with an emphasis on accountability for and measurability of a school's performance. NCLB requires that schools administer nationally standardized "high-stakes" exams that are used to evaluate the quality of the education offered by every public school in the United States. These evaluations are based on the idea of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), based on the school's initial performance on the exams, with an expected increase in that performance extrapolated out from that initial value. Schools that exhibit AYP consistently are rewarded with bonus national funding; schools that fall short of their AYP consistently could be closed for good. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is released every year, reporting the progress made by the US public school system from the previous year. According to the 2004 NAEP, "African-American and Hispanic students have made impressive gains in reading and in math" and "These gains were made as our country's population became increasingly diverse. As our schools have enrolled more and more minority students, these students have scored increasingly better in reading and in math." Yet the achievement gap still persists. Of the many theories dissecting its nature, two general categories emerge: psychological and societal barriers. I have included

descriptions of what I believe to be the most relevant theories to my reform initiative, Team Learning, which will be addressed later.

- Psychological Barriers -

Stereotype threat has been proposed as one of the major psychological barriers limiting racial/ethnic minority student achievement. (Stereotype threat has also been observed in female students, but that aspect of the theory will be omitted from this paper due to lack of relevance.) “[Claude] Steele argues that although all students experience anxiety in school situations...students who are members of minority groups for which negative stereotypes concerning academic ability abound...suffer additional anxiety” (Osborne, 2001). This additional anxiety creates an aversion (used as a mechanism for protection of oneself) to these academic environments. “This aversion serves to reduce stereotype-induced anxiety as it allows students to be no longer concerned with evaluation in that domain” (Epps, 1970; Katz & Greenbaum, 1963).

Another psychological explanation for the achievement gap is the adoption of a “cool pose” (or a front) to protect oneself in an academic setting. This front can take many forms, some of which are described as:

A ritualized approach to masculinity that allows [male racial/ethnic minority students] to cope and survive in an environment of social oppression and racism, including that found within U.S. schools. According to Majors & Billson (1992), [they] learn early to project this façade of emotionlessness, fearlessness, and aloofness to counter the inner pain caused by the damaged pride, poor self-confidence, and fragile social competence that results from their existence as a member of a subjugated group (Osborne, 2001).

Male racial/ethnic minority students therefore end up putting more of their energy into maintaining their front than applying themselves to their studies, a factor that would obviously adversely affect their academic performance.

- *Societal Barriers* -

One of the social barriers affecting racial/ethnic minority academic achievement is their likelihood to live in poverty; the Oregon Department of Education reports in their April 2005 newsletter: “Hispanic, African American, Native American, and certain Asian subgroups are most likely to live in poverty” (Barton, 2003, qtd. in ODE, 2005). This often creates friction in the home and takes students’ focus off of their classes. Because these families do not have much money, they are often forced to live in areas with lower-quality public schools and therefore subjected to a lower quality education in the form of underfunded programs, less-skilled teachers, and a school environment that does not promote a nurturing academic climate (Barton, 2003; Ogbu, 2003, qtd, in ODE, 2005).

Another aspect of this problem is that often racial/ethnic minority immigrant families are unfamiliar with the educational system of the U.S. and thus not able to support their children’s education as well as informed families are able to do (Okagaki & Frensch, 1998; Portes, 1999, qtd. in ODE, 2005). The U.S. public school system may also emphasize different cultural values than racial/ethnic minority students: “Schools and pedagogical practices tend to reinforce the American values of individualism and independence. These values may conflict with the values of cultures that are familial and cooperative” (Delgado-Gaitan, 1987; Reyes, Scribner & Paredes scribner, 1999, qtd. in ODE, 2005). This may detract from a student’s motivation because they do not have the familial or cultural structure necessary to support them in their endeavors.

Another theory proposed suggests that the reason why racial/ethnic minority students perform below their actual abilities is because of community or peer pressure. This is because academic success has been equated to “acting white” and thus a betrayal

of one's community. "Furthermore, these minority groups may have observed that even those among them who succeed in school are not fully accepted or rewarded in the same way that White students are accepted or rewarded" (Osborne, 2001). Students literally risk expulsion for their social group (or, in some instances, their community) for such a behavior, and may not even come away with any feelings of accomplishment to offset their cultural isolation.

The Next Step

Given the myriad of aforementioned factors affecting racial/ethnic minority students offering but a fraction of the theories attempting to explain the achievement gap, there is no one solution which can adequately address every facet of the problem. I believe the heart of the achievement problem resides within the structure of our public school system: it resembles our capitalist economy too closely. There is too much emphasis on individual accomplishment – combined with an attitude of "those who fall behind are left behind" – to create an academic climate that promotes enough accountability for oneself in the racial/ethnic minority student groups. What I propose is a new method combining my own personal experiences in athletics with literature I have found on group learning to create the concept of Team Learning, a strategy for creating accountability for oneself by creating accountability between oneself and one's peers.

Reform Initiative

I have played organized team sports for virtually my entire life. I have won my fair share of sportsmanship awards over the years, put in my time captaining teams, and I have filled every role there has been to fill on a team, from best to worst. I also know what it takes to make a great team, I know that regardless of ability level that everyone

plays a part on a successful team, and I know that a team is only as strong as its weakest link. But most importantly, I know that a successful team wins as a team and loses as a team; such a team requires a certain chemistry created by the coaches and the players to do the best they can. I believe in the power of a good team, not only in its ability to accomplish far more than any individual effort but also in the positive impact it can have on its players. Players should be held accountable for themselves and their teammates; this creates a solidarity unlike any other found throughout human society. It is from this wealth of experience I have created Team Learning.

What is Team Learning?

Team Learning (TL) is, at its most basic level, a curriculum with a heavy emphasis on group work, but it is much more than just that. Teachers would be charged with assisting students in the creation of cohesive teams. These teams would be assigned large projects with the end goal of promoting higher achievement through collaborative effort including all team members.

How does Team Learning work?

TL is founded on the fact that different students have differing abilities in any given subject also called the Theory of Multiple Intelligences. With the current focus on individualized learning those students who do not pick up the material as quickly as other students are at a severe disadvantage. They are required to put in extra effort outside of their usual studies to comprehend the material, often requiring extra help from their teacher or a tutor. In a TL classroom, these disadvantaged students would be grouped into learning communities with higher-performing students, thereby allowing them to learn from each other and increase their learning capabilities. This benefits both parties:

the higher-achieving students gain a greater understanding of the material by explaining it to the challenged students, who benefit by seeing the material presented from a different perspective and from a peer instead of an authority figure.

These learning communities would be expanded into teams, carefully selected by their teachers, which would ideally feature a balanced and complete skill set between all the members of the group. Each group member would be forced to share some of the load, and over the course of a term or a year each student would get a chance to try every role on a team. Clearly not every student is fit for each role, but giving students practice in all forms of the group process (e.g. presenter, discussion leader, etc.) that way they are more comfortable in these roles later on in life. Even group examinations would be given, promoting the concept of working as a team in a timed setting. These practices would increase accountability for oneself and others through cooperation, interdependence, and collective goals.

Teams would approximately consist of 4-6 students apiece. Depending on the subject, the teams would be assigned a sizeable project that would require contributions made by every member of the group to produce the most effective and successful project. Students would ideally receive an overall score for their collective effort and an individual score based on the self-reported evaluations by each group member on the contributions of the other group members. One of the most challenging aspects of TL (other than creating teams with good chemistry) would be to give the teams enough time to really grow into their team roles and come together as a team without cutting the process too short or letting teams get too stale by not reshuffling teams enough. Ideally students would get the opportunity to work with everyone in the class in differing roles

throughout the course of the year with the goal of equipping them with a range of skills, a large amount of experience working with different people and through these varied interpersonal experiences to create enough connections between all members of the class to forge an over-arching sentiment of their whole classroom being the true team. This unified team sentiment is the ultimate goal of TL.

Why will Team Learning work?

An obvious criticism about TL is that an overemphasis on group work will hurt a student's ability to do work individually. This is a flawed conclusion because TL is not about eliminating individual work but instead taking the emphasis off of it. It would be nearly impossible to remove all the elements of individual assessment from a classroom without overhauling the entirety of the U.S. public school system; it is too engrained in the culture, especially with a law like No Child Left Behind so recently ratified. Again, the emphasis would be placed on self-discovery and development in a group setting, which would give all group members an opportunity to be good at something. TL will also work because it creates a sense of responsibility for oneself by creating a responsibility for others because it creates pride in oneself and one's classmates and their academic performance. This pride can be translated into confidence, a critical element in anyone's academic success. TL is also good practice for the real world. There are few – if any – professions that do not rely on group work in some capacity; we are hampering our students' transition into such a world by forcing them to complete so many tasks alone and depriving them of rich cooperative experience in such a crucial developmental period in their lives which would help them in almost any field later in life. After all, is it not the goal of a school to produce able citizens to bolster our nation?

- Psychological Barriers -

The confidence created by the students' discovery of their own abilities and talents could be used to prevent students from succumbing to stereotype threat. Another positive element of TL that could be used to overcome stereotype threat is the camaraderie that would ideally be created in a TL classroom. Being an underdog can be an empowering position because you have nothing to lose and everything to gain; a tight-knit team can thrive on the "us against the world" mentality. Therefore, if the teacher can create the right atmosphere in their classroom, stereotype threat could feasibly become a source of inspiration for some students instead of a negative element.

The adoption of a "cool pose" could be overcome by creating a fun & engaging learning environment for those students, a trademark of a cohesive team. By creating an enjoyable learning atmosphere with a solid sense of community, a good teacher can mask learning with fun, which is a sure-fire method of improving achievement. The camaraderie created through TL also helps create a sense of responsibility for one's actions, thereby creating a responsibility to a higher authority that is one's team. No longer would failure just affect one student, it would undermine their entire class. That shared responsibility for the good of the team would encourage those students to think not only of themselves but also of their teammates, a powerful agent for action.

- Societal Barriers -

TL can overcome the socioeconomic barriers that face many students because it does not require a large financial investment, so even schools without much funding could implement the program. It is possible to adapt TL to cost large amounts of money through the creation of a reward system based off of team or class performance, but by no

means is it a necessary element. All that is required of a TL classroom is a committed teacher and well-planned curriculum, both of which can come at very low costs to a school. If a visionary and dynamic teacher was given the opportunity to create a curriculum using the principles of TL, that could cost as little as hiring a new teacher, a regular expense for a school, or simply giving said opportunity to an existing teacher, another regular expense. And while the resources at such a school might not be top-notch, these teachers should be able to rethink and re-work the existing curriculum for their grade to incorporate more group work.

The flexibility of TL could be used to counter the racial/ethnic unfamiliarity with U.S. schools and their culture. The new emphasis on group learning and achievement would benefit those with such a background and could easily be adapted to integrate racial or cultural elements of the students in a TL classroom. This would create a greater comfort for those students who feel alienated or ostracized in a classroom as well as promote intercultural understanding between team members as they learn and grow together throughout the process. By giving students hands-on experience with different people from different cultures, it promotes greater camaraderie within the teams and the class as a whole, which again feeds into students' enjoyment and confidence in themselves.

The community's negative attitude towards academic success would also be challenged by the responsibility of the students for one another. In an effective TL classroom, the racial/ethnic lines of academic success would be blurred beyond recognition as everyone would want to work together to become the best students they could be because that is what's best for everyone involved. A good team disregards the

societal pressures of difference, searches for and celebrates that which unifies the team (especially team purpose and/or team goals), and uses this camaraderie to inspire everyone on the team to do their best.

Potential Barriers within Team Learning

One of the most obvious flaws in TL is the propensity to cut corners. This can take many forms, including (but not limited to) cheating within teams, cheating between teams, excessive laziness by one or more group members, or intimidation by other teams. One method of regulating these types of behavior would be through the creation of a “Solo Points” system. This would require intense honesty from all members of a team but provide a much more meaningful punishment than any of the standard options (detention, suspension, etc.) because it continues to hold each team member accountable for their actions. On a team the negative actions of one player negatively affect all the other players on the team, creating a sense of responsibility in a team’s players because their actions affect their teammates, not only themselves. The Solo Points System is outlined in the “Implementation Plan” section.

TL also has the propensity to put a great amount of pressure on the extremes of the spectrum of classroom abilities; the high-achievers on a team might put too much pressure on themselves for ensuring the success of their group and, on the other side of the spectrum, might put too much pressure on the lower-achieving students on their own performance and generate frustration with oneself if they cannot do the work with the same proficiency as the other group members. To combat this the teacher must provide all types of students (including the middle) with the opportunity to succeed, building their confidence and giving them the opportunity to find their place within the group. By

creating these situations for each and every student to discover their own strengths, this will make them better group members as they will jump at the opportunity to exhibit their talents and make them better individual achievers because improving one's self-confidence is a recipe for greater academic success.

Implementation Plan

TL would be most easily phased in slowly in classes that feature objective subject material, such as mathematics, because math emphasizes concrete skills that are a series of processes, which can be mastered through enough practice. These types of skills would be most conducive with the idea of the learning community. That is not to say that TL would not work in a subjective skill classroom, only that it would be easiest to adapt an objective skill classroom. Once one classroom had been successfully transitioned into TL, that classroom could serve as an example for other classes – possibly taught by other teachers – across the full range of subjects. Again, this is not to say that every classroom should necessarily utilize TL, as every successful TL classroom must fulfill the following criteria: 1) a committed teacher, 2) balanced teams, 3) a well-planned curriculum, and 4) a well-developed disciplinary system.

- Finding the Right Teachers -

Everything in TL hinges on the creation of a solid team atmosphere. To create such an atmosphere requires not just good teachers, but good teachers who believe in the concept of TL. If the teacher does not adequately subscribe to TL then they will be unable to foster the appropriate climate for their classroom and convince their students to buy into the concept of TL. Ideally these teachers would feature some sort of organized athletic background so as to give them a context and familiarity with the factors essential

to making a cohesive team. The teachers should also have a strong sense for their students with the ability to discern as much about them (e.g. “What kind of student are they?” “What kind of personality are they?”) as they possibly can; that will facilitate the creation of the teams.

- Building a Winning Team -

A well-constructed team is composed of a few star players surrounded by as many quality supporting players as possible, and lower-quality players filling in the holes. In a TL classroom setting this is most easily translated to 1-2 “star” students, 2-4 “average” students, and 1-2 “underachieving” students. One must also take into account the personalities on a team. Putting too many strong personalities together can lead to friction while putting too many indecisive people on one team can lead to nothing getting done. This is why the teacher should (ideally) be able to quickly and accurately be able to read their students; the correct application of certain personality tests could make this portion of the teambuilding process easier. Teachers must also show enough wisdom to read the teams and their chemistry over time. If the teams are not given enough time to truly bond then TL truly becomes an overdose of unrelated group projects. Keeping a team together too long can lead to disgust or frustration with one’s teammates, possibly destroying the bonds created through the previous projects. This is why the teacher must keep a close eye on each team and all its members, monitoring their progress, happiness, and willingness to try new roles. Ideally every student in the class would eventually get the chance to perform every task expected of the group multiple times, but they cannot be forced into doing something with which they are uncomfortable. It is the teacher’s job to

ease them into the different roles they are expected to fill, slowly building their confidence in all areas of group academic work.

- Creating a Solid Curriculum -

A school year in a TL classroom would begin as it would in any other classroom: the teacher would teach the class as a group of individuals completing individual assignments. The difference would be in how much attention the teacher would pay to the types of students they had in their classroom, taking note of everyone, from the classroom leaders to the class clowns. These initial impressions would be used in the creation of the first teams within their classroom and would be refined over the course of the year to create better-balanced teams over time. But the start of the group process would not mean there is no going back; students must still learn to think and work on their own if they are going to be successful in other phases of school, assuming that TL does not sweep the nation, taking over all classrooms in one fell swoop. This is why a carefully-constructed curriculum must be established in a TL classroom that features predominantly group assessments (in the form of homework assignments, projects, tests, etc.) broken up by individual assignments testing students' abilities without their safety net and preparing them for individual assessment experiences in the future. A good way to do this would be to assign group work at the beginning of a new section or lesson, that way the students have their peers to help them with their initial understanding. Then, once the students show a mastery of the concepts in a group setting, individual assessments would slowly be phased in again to ensure that the students exhibit proficiency in the material. This curriculum should also give all students the chance to succeed. Building self-confidence is a crucial element in performing well in an academic

setting, so by giving students the chance to find out what they are good at and learn from their peers to strengthen their weaknesses TL allows them to grow into adept, well-rounded, and self-assured students.

- One Method of Meaningful Discipline: The “Solo Points” System -

At the end of each project each team member would fill out a secret feedback form for the teacher reporting their impression of the work that their other teammates. Each team member would have two Solo Points to dole out at their discretion in these reports. Solo Points would give the team member the option of nominating someone in the group to work alone on the next project assigned. For example: if one group member felt they unfairly carried the load in the previous project, they could elect to spend one or both of their points to sever their ties with the group and do the next project alone. They would still be expected to do the same amount of work as any of the other groups, but it would give them the opportunity avoid the potential frustrations of a bad group. Another possible usage of Solo Points would be to nominate another group member to work alone on the next project, thereby ridding the group of a poor contributor and forcing said group member to take responsibility for themselves on the next project. This would not be a permanent ban from one’s group; it would be best used to serve as a wake-up call for those group members who are not doing their fair share.

Alternative Representation

The following game was constructed to illustrate the importance of everyone’s contributions to the team. It can involve any number of people (broken down in to manageably-sized teams) and involve any variety of props so long as they illustrate that only when their resources are combined can the group actually accomplish their goal.

- The Pretty Tower Game -

Every student is issued one of three sets of resources: 1) tape, 2) paper, and 3) markers. They are instructed to build a tower using the resources provided to them and them alone that will be judged on the following criteria: 1) height, 2) stability/sturdiness, and 3) aesthetic appeal. The students will be given a short time limit (approximately 2-3 minutes) to complete their tower. The winners will be judged using the aforementioned criteria, with one point awarded to the winner of each category. A prize awaits the student with the most points, but there is no winner if there is a tie for first place.

Repeat the game but this time in teams of three, one team member representing each of the three resources. The groups are charged with the same task and the same time limit, only this time each tower will be judged in all three capacities. The winning team now gets the prize and ideally the rest of the class is given consolation prizes for their efforts. The rules can even be shifted to reward the team that worked together the best with the biggest prize, not necessarily the team that performed the best, that way the students learn that being a good teammate is just as important (if not more so) than beating each other up for the best product.

Dissemination Plan

A great way to disseminate the idea of TL would be to encourage its usage by Teach For America (TFA) Corps Members. Not only are they the perfect candidates to be the “team captain” of a TL classroom because of their youth and their energy, a number of them probably have experience with organized sports which would give them a first-person insight into what makes a good team. TFA members also often work in

schools with the demographics targeted by TL; it is the inner-city racial/ethnic minority students who need the help.

To get the information to TFA members would require nothing more than a connection or two with some incoming Corps Members. Those connections could be created through the relationships between somebody who has heard about TL and knows a Corps Member through a class they took together in college or any other form of interpersonal relationship. Clearly the class for which I am writing this paper is a perfect example of the possible connections to TFA members. Once in the hands of the TFA members, a few successful cases of TL would certainly generate conversation within the TFA community, allowing for widespread implementation and refinements to be made. Surely the primitive form of TL I posit in this paper is not the final or most successful form TL could or would take; it is just a starting point from which to attempt to implement systemic conservative (and sometimes radical) reform.

Annotated Bibliography

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