

Managing for Quality Learning

by

Sharon L. Hexum

When William Glasser discussed his book, *Control Theory*, at a recent Outcomes Based Education workshop, he presented three roles of teachers. In **counseling** we give a student options on how to deal with his or her situation. In **teaching** we give a student instruction according to his or her agenda or needs. In **managing** we persuade a student according to his or her needs. Glasser added that we really get students to learn while **managing** (persuading), not while teaching (giving instruction). The reason for this is certainly clear to any veteran teacher: We CANNOT force a child to learn. He or she will truly learn only if there is some need for learning. We have become experts in coercion occasionally trying to get a child to learn. But have we really gotten students to learn? Our biggest job has been to get students to want to learn and to think.

With self-motivated students we sometimes feel the managing task is unnecessary. Yet are we challenging these very same students? This question is one I had to face again this year. One of my new assignments is an American literature and composition course. In twenty years of teaching I had never taught American literature. In addition to dealing with a new text, I had to incorporate multicultural, gender fair, handicapped aware (or "fair") material by a district directive.

My challenge was threefold: encourage students to truly learn, incorporate "fair" materials, and cover American literature. The students in the two classes were relatively self-motivated. I knew that the more they were involved, or the more active their learning process, the more they would achieve. Thus, I decided on a cooperative group plan whereby a group would read a novel and present the novel to the others. We would divide the class into four groups and cover four separate novels. I chose those whose author, setting, or characters fit the mc/gf/ criteria. These titles are incidental but I list these just as examples: Richard Wright's *Native Son*, Edith Warton's *Ethan Frome*, Thornton Wilder's *Bridge Over San Luis Rey* and James Agee's *A Death In The Family*.

In determining group composition and selection of which novel would be read, each student chose a number. In that order the student came forward and chose a book. Six books were in each stack. This selection remained fairly random and "friends" did not all wind up in the same group.

When the groups met, they had to decide a number of things: (1) how many pages they would read by each date. (On the following example you will note a large gap of time. Week 1 started three days prior to winter break and Week 2 continued the week after the break. Week 3 was devoted to group presentations). (2) how they would present the book to the rest of the class and how each member would participate, and (3) which days they would want me to sit in on their discussions - the days they would receive discussion grades.

Next we had to choose criteria for assessing the project. The project would consist of three components - journal, discussion, presentation. Both individual and group work would be considered. The *journal* is a technique we have used all year. Students write their impressions of the author, the style, a summary, and any key comments they need to recall the piece. We used this format with the sections each group set as reading assignments. The *discussion* required the first person to summarize a first portion with comments, the next person to add or clarify, and yet others to ask any questions over that portion. This process was repeated with the next members of the group for discussing the other portions of that reading segment. Answers to questions or comments had to come from within the group. My only job was to validate or clarify some point. The students needed to organize the subsections, to practice cooperative group dynamics, and to be responsible to the group process. The *presentation* had to be complete and clear. This presentation, which the group previewed with me during the second week, had to include contributions of each group member.

PREPARING

On the second day of Week 1, the groups had to set their calendars (they decided what needed to be ready by what deadlines). During Week 2, they had to agree on a presentation plan and continued their daily discussions of the portion they had read. The order of presentation was, again, random. Each group selected a number which represented the order. Each would be allowed up to one half of a class period, 25 minutes.

To allow my sitting in on discussions, I chose alternate days for each group. I found it impossible to do more than 1 group per day. While I was in a discussion group, other groups met to plan, discuss, or prepare their presentation. Because my room is small, some groups met in the hall or stairwells near my room. This worked well for us, but a large area or conference rooms would work well or better. Perhaps because the students were in charge of their own learning and because they were very ACTIVELY involved in the process, I found the groups were most always

on task. The amount of time allowed for the project prohibited any "nonessential" behavior.

At the end of Week 2 and the first day of Week 3, I met with each group to hear their presentation plan

PRESENTING

During Week 3 groups gave their presentations. These were creative, insightful, and interesting: one group, *Native Son*, did a shortened court room scene where Bigger's attorney gives his closing argument; one *Bridge Over San Luis Rey* group built a bridge and placed a figure on the bridge as a student playing that character described his or her life; one of the groups who read *Ethan Frome* filmed a portion of the novel with students playing parts and did a Siskel and Ebert critique of the story; another did a "Meet the Press" show with the students being the experts on the story's meaning, themes, and symbolism. Class members were required to make evaluative comments about each presentation – its clarity, completeness, interest. After groups finished the presentations, the groups reconvened to read what others in class had written. No one was overly critical or overly kind since they each had experienced the same demands.

I found this project accomplished a great deal. Students became active learners. They used higher level thinking at both the application and critical levels. They discussed and shared cultural, gender, and handicap issues and learned a great deal about human nature. Discussions of authors' styles and themes floated between groups with no prompting from me. And in two and a half weeks (with a vacation in between), we had covered FOUR novels. What was exciting was the students' evaluative comments of each other's presentations. Many had decided to read another of the books. This reading spark alone would have been worth the project. Student comments and observations follow:

By participating in groups, we learned to work together as a team to get the project done. Having many different groups enabled the class to get a general idea about 3 or 4 other books through their peers' point of view.

When we did the book report I felt needed because the other students may have gotten along without me, but when they needed 5 people to do their skit, was one of the five. It was a very interesting thing that we did and we had a good time putting it together so I felt really good about it.

I feel that the project was a very good idea. In class if we read, discuss,

answer the questions, etc., everyday, it gets very monotonous. With the project we had many areas to choose from, and we could discuss it in our groups. By having such a group we could ask more questions and feel more comfortable than asking it in front of 30 kids. Also the story was more meaningful. Every person had his or her own part. One could concentrate on theme, another on plot, etc. Obviously that gives us a better picture of the story, theme, plot, characters, etc. Finally, it was fun! After we got through the hard stuff, we got to make our own skit. That was the chance to be funny and creative but teach at the same time. I think it worked well. If anyone asked me about my book, I could overwhelm him with the knowledge I had on it. I could also tell the basic plot and theme of the others I heard.

--I felt that the project method of reading novels was a breath of fresh air compared to the drab, traditional method. I liked setting my own deadlines, choosing my own presentation, and so on. It made things easier to deal with.

--I found that the style of presentation was pretty good. Having several people working together lets ideas bounce around, but we have to make compromises. I wanted to throw some special effects on the bridge – blow it up – but that wasn't possible. I wouldn't be thrilled to do something like this again, though.

--I liked that we got to work in groups – setting our own dates, discussing certain parts, deciding on our presentation. (Note: Several students stated similar opinion.)

--The group activity allowed the class the opportunity to hear about other books without reading them. (Note: Three other comments were similar to this one.)

--It was fun working with other people brainstorming, compromising, solving what and how to present something enjoyable to the class.

--It helped me understand literature and how it applies to life.

The role of manager was very rewarding to me and, I believe, was rewarding to the students as well. Persuading students they could and would be in charge of their own learning gave them the responsibility to learn. Books with characters and situations which were not the norm allowed them to face the "fairness" issue and evaluate it. Finally, synthesizing what they had learned and applying it to a new situation by presenting it, provided them with high level thinking opportunities. Perhaps the greatest reward was, however, that with the students in

control, I really had the time to check for understanding during the preparation stage.

(This handout was given to class on first day.)

Name _____ Novel:

Names of those in group:

Plan for reading/discussion deadlines (pages, sections, etc):

12/21

12/22

1/8

1/9

1/10

1/11

1/12

Also present presentation plan:

1/15 Presentation update/questions

1/16 Groups 1 and 2

1/17 Groups 3 and 4

1/18 Groups meet to read evaluative comments

1/19 Whole class discussion of themes, common issues, comments, etc.

Assessment:

/50 pts Journals kept for each reading portion listed above.

/25 pts Discussion on dates listed above

Each person may read or discuss reactions to portions read, ask questions, ask for clarification, summarize, restate themes, symbolisms, etc. **BUT EACH PERSON MUST CONTRIBUTE OR GRADE IS LOWERED.**

/45 pts Presentation

Plan - incorporate entire group

Info - clarity and completeness of novel to group.

The class will write reactions.