

Building a Thinking Classroom Together: November

From Jess at Mora High School:

I've been doing thin-slicing tasks a few times a week for over a year now and I love it. I'm still struggling on a regular basis with students not being good about staying with their group and/or just letting others do the problems. I try to move the marker around and talk a lot about what the work is supposed to look like, but do you have any other suggestions for keeping students engaged in the work?

Thanks for the great question. There are two approaches I want to talk about for this issue.

I am not making a statement about your classroom, especially since I don't have any observations to go by. But I want to make sure to talk about what classroom management looks like while students are at the boards. When you start the year with non-curricular tasks, you are training your students for future curricular tasks. Each day of non-curricular tasks, take time at the end to name the desired behaviors that happened. You need to set the expectations and culture at the beginning. When you get into curricular tasks, especially during the first quarter, remind students at the beginning about the structure (i.e. one marker per group, write only what other people tell you to write, and pass the marker around so that everyone has a chance to write).

In general, teachers need to still manage students. As amazing as a Thinking Classroom is, it isn't a magic wand. Kids are still kids. They will get distracted and they still need to learn how to work in groups. When I have students who misbehave, I still take them to the hallway and visit about my expectations during class. I still have to redirect students; I might directly tell them to get back on track, or I step into their group and start asking questions about the task. Either way, the more involved and active I am in keeping them involved, the more involved they are.

The second approach comes from Chapter 12, "What We Choose to Evaluate in a Thinking Classroom". This is something that I was skeptical about because it seemed unnecessary. But in the spring, the end-of-year behaviors were getting in the way of group work, so I decided to give it a try. The effectiveness of this practice was dramatic and immediate. I highly recommend giving this a try when you are struggling with what is described in this month's question.

Let me give you a quick overview of what to do. At the end of class, ask your students a question like, "What is good group work?". Kids know what makes good group work, so they will have many answers for you. Ultimately, you are trying to get them to create and own the model behavior you are looking for. Knowing what needs to be better, you can steer them in the right direction. Write down what they say and make sure to also ask them what the opposite of their suggestions are. For example, let's say one of their suggestions is "Everyone is talking". You first want to hone that to specify what "topic" they are talking about (i.e. the task), and then ask them what the opposite of that would be. They may say something like "Nobody is talking". But don't leave it there, what is happening if nobody is talking? Is someone just writing what they are thinking and the other two are watching or distracted? Make sure to be specific and thorough with this conversation.

When you have three or four competencies you can end the class. To create the rubric that you will use the following day, make a table with three columns. In the left column, you will list the worst version of the competency. In the right column, you will list the best version of the competency. The middle column is left empty. See an example from my class below.

Off task, negative, not listening to each other		Good Discussion (positive, supportive, math-related)
Excluding, independent		Everyone participating
Ignoring the understanding of others		Helping each other

Print one of these for each group to be used the next day. When class starts, display the table and remind the students of the competencies they came up with the day before. Make sure to demonstrate how to fill it out. I usually talk about how I am in a group and pretend we are at the end of the lesson. I talk with my imaginary group members about what happened during the task to determine which part of the middle column we should mark (the middle column is a sliding scale to mark where groups performed for the day).

Continue the rest of the class period as normal. At the end of the class, make sure to leave time for groups to evaluate their group work. Pick a couple of groups to evaluate also. Visit with those groups to agree or disagree with their evaluations.

You are not giving points or grading the rubrics, but you will find they are effective just by giving time and attention to them. Every time I have done this, I find group work has improved immensely. Do it for only a couple of days and then go back to no rubrics. If behavior starts getting bad again, create a new rubric addressing the behavior.

Thank you for your question. I hope this helps fix group work behaviors in your classroom. It has done great things in mine.

*Look for a Building Thinking Classroom book study coming soon. We hope to facilitate a rich opportunity for Minnesota teachers to read the book together and network as we continue to grow in this practice.

**I am looking for more topics and questions to discuss in future articles. If you have a question about the Thinking Classroom, or if you have a story or success that you would like to share, please send me your question in this [google form](#).

Until next time, keep on building! Together we will build a generation of thinkers.

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