

SHARED VISION:
COOPERATIVE LEARNING AND THE TRANSITION PROCESS

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Editor's Note: We asked Rodney Keller to report, as a department chair, on the process of preparing a four-year curriculum.

Seven blind mice discover Something strange near their pond. Six of the blind mice explore the object and report individual findings of a pillar, snake, cliff, spear, fan, and rope. The seventh mouse, however, takes their accumulated knowledge and runs all over the object and concludes: Now, I see. The Something is as sturdy as a pillar, supple as a snake, wide as a cliff, sharp as a spear, breezy as a fan, stringy as a rope, but altogether the Something is...an elephant (Young 31-32).

Each individual blind mouse sees and interprets a portion of the elephant (leg, trunk, head, tusk, ear, tail), but it's not until they combine their information and gain an overview that they see more clearly and completely.

The English department explores, discovers, creates, and modifies a possible four-year program. As the English department explores, discovers, creates, and modifies a possible four-year program, we recognize again the invaluable role individuals play in the cooperative transition process. The following principles of cooperative learning, which most of us incorporate into our classrooms, directly apply to the work we are doing as a department.

1. IDENTIFY SPECIFIC TASKS.

With President Hinckley's BYU-Idaho announcement, stated and unstated tasks begin to unfold. The overriding general task is to create a four-year university, with more specific tasks of creating possible four-year integrated majors. But to create a program, more clear-cut tasks are necessary.

Several days after the announcement, our division dean gave the department chair a charge to create an overview English major. The chair has the responsibility to accomplish this task. Through extensive Internet and college catalog searches, prayer, and inspiration, the chair begins to develop a major blueprint to present to the division dean for approval. The next several weeks, the blueprint receives modifications and input until it is complete enough to present to the English department faculty in a pre-school meeting.

After general department approval of the proposed overview major, each faculty member receives specific, detailed tasks and committee assignments to help generate general and specific ideas for the BYU-Idaho English major. Each committee now has specific tasks to perform:

- Describe a general overview of their part of the major.
- Propose objectives and outcomes for their part of the major.
- List sample courses for their part of the major.
- Submit completed work to department chair.

2. LIMIT GROUP SIZE

Because of the English department's large size, smaller groupings allow individuals more discussion and involvement. Therefore, the English department creates nine separate committees with four or five faculty members within each group. The committees represent different aspects of the overall English major: prerequisites/graduation requirements, literature survey classes, genre/author classes, advanced writing classes, rhetorical and literacy theory/senior seminar, literary studies, English education, professional writing, and creative writing. With smaller groups of four or five members each, individuals each take responsibility for research, input, and direction. All participate actively.

3. ASSIGN INDIVIDUALS TO GROUPS

All English faculty members have diverse talents, strengths, and backgrounds. That diversity works well when different personalities and experiences join to address a single objective. Homogeneous groups generally reinforce their common positions; heterogeneous groups, however, tend to challenge and explore their different positions. Each English major committee represents wide ranges and years of teaching, interests, service, scholarship, and academics.

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4. SET SPECIFIC TIME LIMITS

Deadlines allow groups to set long-range, intermediate, and immediate goals. Because all faculty members have charges with preparing, teaching, evaluating, and advising, time limits allow groups to establish schedules. Department-set dates help to equalize and spread out activities. For instance, the department sets aside a particular Thursday at 2:00 for committees to meet in separate offices. The following Wednesday, committees submit completed assignments to the department chair. Because of strict deadlines, committees rarely have the luxury to do

their work leisurely. However, those time pressures encourage groups to remain focused.

5. ASSIGN SPECIFIC ROLES

The department chair assigns a chair for each committee. The committee chair is responsible for getting individuals together; making specific assignments to members to research, organize, and synthesize information; and overseeing the completion of group tasks. The committee chair also represents her committee to the department chair.

6. HOLD GROUPS ACCOUNTABLE

Each group is responsible for submitting to the department specific, completed documents. For example, during the first phase of committee work, each group submits a general overview of its section with proposed objectives and outcomes and possible courses. For the second phase of the committee work, each group submits possible specific course descriptions, goals, objectives, outcomes, assessments, and assignments. The department provides templates and examples to encourage format consistency.

7. ASSESS GROUP PROCESS

Finally, committees submit their work to the department chair, who solicits initial input from other committee chairs and department members. The department chair compiles the group information into course description outlines, curriculum plans, and a prospectus draft. The department chair e-mails these materials to the entire department, soliciting additional input and direction. The department schedules a department meeting to discuss progress and to air department concerns. The department chair then submits final work to division dean and Academic Council for further input and assessment.

Our individual views at times may have limits. The principles associated with cooperative learning that we use in our classes also apply to us as we work through this transition period. Each person within the English department has directly and indirectly contributed to both the overall and specific picture of a possible four-year program. Our individual views at times may have limits, and individually we may run up against pillars, cliffs, snakes, and spears, but by combining our experiences, our expertise, our insights, we can see and comprehend Something. The Mouse Moral: Knowing in part may make a fine tale, but wisdom comes from seeing the whole (Young 34). The Shared Vision

Moral: Working alone may make a fine prospectus, but wisdom comes from cooperatively creating a shared vision. ☞

SOURCE

Young, Ed. *Seven Blind Mice*. New York: Philomel Books, 1992.