

## Team Based Learning

At first glance it might seem these students are simply hanging out, talking together, waiting for class to begin. But, this is the middle of class and these students are well into their lesson. This is team-based learning or TBL and this approach has found its way into the classrooms of universities across our nation. Don McKinney uses team-based learning in her computer science classes at the University of South Alabama.

“I think one of the most important things about team-based learning that I’ve noticed with students is the student engagement; they are alive, they’re talking, they’re communicating, they’re thinking.”

While teams and collaborative learning have been around for a long time, USA’s team-based learning program follows the design of Larry Michaelson, largely regarded as one of the pioneers of TBL.

The program is characterized by four specific components. The first component is the division of the class into diverse, balanced, permanent teams.

“When we got to class the first day, she divided the class into two teams and half of us sit on one side of the room and the others sit on the other side of the room and we learn in groups.”

Another component is the readiness assurance process. This component consists of both individual and team assessments of the subject matter.

“With team-based learning, they have this readiness assurance process that forces every team member to be prepared because they’re taking a test.”

A third component of TBL is inclusion of application activities where teams work on specific problems.

“Today, we were going over a question we had last week, a problem we had been solving, and we realized there are problems in it. So we were making new designs to try and fix it and each team got to come up with their own design and then the teacher and her assistant came up with theirs as well and so we got to post them on the board and then we picked parts that we like and that might have been better than ours.”

The fourth component is peer evaluation, where students get to evaluate each other’s performance.

“Nobody wants to be that one person that didn’t do the reading or didn’t do the work. So we all try to come in and, you know, everybody wants to contribute and that way you’re encouraged. It’s almost like peer pressure forcing you to learn.”

Miss McKinney has been using collaborative learning approaches for years and finds team-based learning a valuable and effective model.

“They’re coming more ready, they’re coming more prepared, and it just really enlivens the experience and makes it so much more valuable, and the learning is deeper.”

Translating traditional classroom content into a team based format can be challenging, but the payoff is promising. Students that are more critical in their thinking and more collaborative in their learning.

“I definitely recommend this learning style because it gets more understanding out there.”

“I hope that a lot of other classes will start doing the team-based learning, start implementing it, because it’s a really good idea, it’s really helped me.”

For Dawn McKinney and the University of South Alabama, team-based learning is well worth the effort.