Hello, bird, I’m learning ornithology

By HERBERT ROTFELD
Auburn University

Faculty everywhere report increasing demands on their time. It seems that every university is increasing expectations for faculty research, with detailed administrative pressure counting journal article output per year. While programs are expected to develop students’ oral communications skills and writing abilities, class size and faculty teaching loads are increased to cover courses while budgets are cut.

A popular teaching “solution” to some of these pressures is to assign group projects and presentations. While lessening grading time per student, group assignments possess an added claim of developing students’ abilities “to work in groups,” or so the arguments go. In
addition, when a class has a written term paper assignment, it becomes
easier for a teacher to defend near-
exclusive use of multiple-choice or
other objective exams.
In reality, the way most faculty
run the projects teaches writing,
speaking and the ability to work in
groups the way talking with an exot-
ic bird teaches ornithology.
A basic problem of group assign-
ments is social loafing: people do
not devote as much time to a task
when their contribution is part of a
larger group. Some teachers try to
combat this by having students file
"shaft your neighbor" interpersonal
evaluation forms, seldom admitting
that they can only assess members' perceptions of equity and the
friendships developed by the project
experience. And if everyone does
equal but lower quality work, the
class-wide performance standards
for work on substantive material
goes down.
Student groups are egalitarian in
structure while business groups are
power-based and hierarchical, mak-
ing student groups more like room-
mates than business co-workers.
The cleanliness of an apartment is
inversely related to the number of
people responsible for keeping it

except by contagion and therein lies
the real problem.
"This is not a speech or English
course," is the often-heard faculty
refrain. The group members make
a presentation, but except for
(maybe) some critical comments on
that single output, little time is
done working on speaking skills.
When the writing is done, most
business faculty will often restrict
feedback to the substantive ideas
and not the writing. While the stu-
dents have the "experience" of a
group, actual education on working
in groups was not part of the course,
leaving that for the organizational
behavior department.
Such claims of education by conta-
gion are not restricted to marketing.
In the July/August 1998 issue of
Change magazine, Philip Altbach
and Patti Peterson described the fic-
titious claims to internationalization
of U.S. higher education. Beyond
problems of faculty and students
who do not learn a second language
or never travel overseas, contacts
with other countries often misuse or
lose the opportunity to broaden U.S.
student perspectives. There are too
many "international experience"
classes in which students get credit
to travel to other countries and only
keep a diary of places visited, while
accompanying faculty go to meetings
with local executives and conduct the
intellectual equivalent of making a
balloon animal.
Students want jobs and employers
want the students to be trained. Yet
the training employers want is really
in writing, speaking and thinking;
the abilities to think and write clearly
are more important than any text-
book's checklists. Making a confer-
ence presentation last Spring, Cen-
tral Washington University's Ed
Goldin noted that too many of us
just lecture without involvement in
the students. But, he concluded, "We
have to be an English teacher, we
must be a speech teacher [so stu-
dents learn] important skills."
One can't deny that modern faculty
time pressures are real. Years ago,
my journalism colleague Leola had
very large classes, assigned individ-
ual term papers and used only essay
exams. Her students waited weeks
for her detailed feedback on their
writing, but she saw no other way
to do the job. Meanwhile, the final
chapter on her dissertation seemed
to take forever to deposit and I
know not of her research activity.
The unfortunate problem is that
many faculty feel free to claim that
they teach important skills because
the students engaged in a certain
activity in the class, not because
they "taught" anything.