

Group Dynamics and Individual Roles: A Differentiated Approach to Social-Emotional Learning

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ABSTRACT

Differentiated instruction is a set of strategies to help teachers meet each child where he or she is in order to improve students' engagement, lead them to do their best work, and maximize their success. This article describes a differentiated classroom management approach based in group dynamics which focuses on the development of group norms and roles. By teaching students about task and social-emotional roles, and about positive and negative roles, this approach provides venues for talking about student misbehaviors in a constructive way, helps students understand roles as something they *choose* rather than something they *are*, and gives every student new ways to shine in class by helping them discover their own unique roles that can contribute positively to the whole classroom group.

KEYWORDS

Classroom environment;
social-emotional learning;
differentiated instruction;
group dynamics; high school;
middle school

Ms. Robin's freshman English students are just not responding well to her attempts to address more interpersonal learning styles with them. In every discussion, they seem to either sit in silence or, even worse, get into endless arguments with one another.

Mr. Peterson's eighth grade social studies class has a larger than usual group of students with IEPs this year. He's made a number of attempts to help them connect with the material on an appropriate level for them, but the other students are impatient, and sometimes even rude, which is beginning to create conflicts.

Ms. Light attended a workshop on multiple intelligences over the summer and is struggling to find a way to incorporate them into her advanced algebra class. Unfortunately, most of the content standards address strictly logico-mathematical intelligence.

Differentiated instruction is a set of strategies to help teachers meet every child where they are when they enter a class in order to better guide them forward on their educational path (Birnie 2015; Levy 2008). Instead of applying the same teaching methods to every student, a differentiated approach allows teachers to connect with individual students' strengths, interests, and styles of learning (Tomlinson 2010). The potential benefits of this approach include improving students' engagement, leading them to do their best work, and maximizing their success (Morgan 2014).

Despite the advantages of differentiation, situations like those experienced by Ms. Robin, Mr. Peterson, and Ms. Light illustrate a number of frustrations involved in trying to implement a differentiated approach. These include disciplinary content-based curricular standards that do not lend themselves easily to differentiation, misbehaviors that emerge from students more accustomed to teacher-centered instruction, and even nagging doubts from one's own pedagogical training that resist stepping out of a traditional mode of teaching. One source of these dilemmas is that, despite the claim that differentiation can keep the focus on students rather than on standards, it is nonetheless still portrayed primarily as a method for addressing content standards more effectively (Levy 2008). In other words, there is still a bias towards a, "focus on the cognitive elements of education, while other life skills are often absent from the in-school experience" (Buffett and Shriver 2013).

This is a tremendous missed opportunity, as differentiated instruction suggests an excellent classroom management approach that can address students' social-emotional learning—one that is based in group dynamics. This approach teaches students that the classroom environment is everyone's responsibility,

and that there are a variety of roles available to them to help create that environment. It empowers students by treating the roles they play in classes not as something they *are*, but as something they *choose*. It addresses individual students' social-emotional needs, ironically, by asking not what they *need*, but what gifts they are able to *contribute* to the group, giving every student a way to shine other than being the best at learning the content.

Social-emotional learning

Social-emotional learning (SEL), which has been described as the “missing piece” in education (Civic Enterprises et al. 2013), proposes a shift away from an almost exclusive focus on content standards. SEL is defined as the process through which children acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills to understand and manage emotions, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning 2015). SEL includes skills such as knowing your own strengths and limitations, understanding and empathizing with others, and working in teams to resolve conflicts (Civic Enterprises et al. 2013).

SEL has been connected with a number of positive student outcomes, including decreased absenteeism, increased pro-social behaviors and interest in classes, and improved academic performance (Durlak et al. 2011; Murray and Malmgren 2005). A whopping 93% of teachers believe that SEL is important for students' experiences in school. Despite this promise, SEL programming is still fairly uncommon, especially at the high school level. Only 28% of high school teachers say SEL programming is occurring regularly at their schools, and less than half of high school teachers have received training in SEL (Civic Enterprises et al. 2013).

Group dynamics and individual roles

For several years now, I have used a group dynamics model of classroom management to explicitly share SEL with my students. This approach is similar to cooperative learning in that both recognize that students in a classroom are not just individual learners, but are part of a *group*, defined by shared goals and interdependence in achieving those goals (Hare 1976; Johnson and Johnson 2013). Groups are distinguished from mere collections of individuals by the development of group

norms, which are generally held beliefs about appropriate behaviors and attitudes for group members, and of individual *roles*, or sets of behaviors that are expected from certain individuals and reinforced by the whole group.

However, my approach differs from cooperative learning in a couple of key ways, particularly in the ways in which I teach students about roles. While cooperative learning does emphasize the importance of interpersonal skills and relationships, this tends to be always in the service of specific academic learning goals and task completion (Johnson and Johnson 1995). As a result, cooperative learning groups tend to focus on *task roles* such as Materials Monitor, Cheerleader, Task Master, and Recorder (see Kagan 1994 for more examples). The list of roles I share with students (shown in Table 1) contains these *task roles*, but also includes *social-emotional roles*. Some teachers may initially be confused or put off by roles such as Emotional Historian or Empathetic Sharer. However, these roles are central to building relationships and creating a group experience. With this list, my students and I are able to discuss SEL not just as a means for covering the curriculum better (although that is also an outcome) but as an important end in itself. Relationships and friendships are central to adolescents' development, and learning about different social-emotional goals, I have found, is a key to students' developing a commitment to my classes.

The second key difference is that my list outlines for students a number of negative roles that students can take on in classes (see Table 2). These negative roles provide a great way for students to understand misbehaviors in terms of their impact on the whole group. I have found this to be a refreshing shift from an individualistic approach that simply invokes consequences for student infractions. Seeing the positive and negative roles together also makes clear to students that these roles are all options available to them, and that there are multiple ways to contribute in positive ways to the classroom other than just raising their hand to speak, listening to teacher directives, and turning in assignments on time. This is a truly differentiated approach that allows all students a chance to be successful—sometimes through content-related tasks, sometimes through building relationships and connecting with others, but always through the shared goal of creating a cohesive group through shared effort with

Table 1. Positive group roles.

Task Roles	
Task initiator	Focuses group attention on tasks, proposes directions for effort.
Explorer	Asks for ideas of other group members; requests clarification.
Historian	Brings up past group experiences to help group move work forward.
Info provider	Offers facts, opinions, or beliefs related to the group's task.
Decision maker	Tests group for consensus, decides on course of action for task at hand in light of group's positions.
Conflict mediator	Mediates disputes among members, resolves differences.
Gate keeper	Reminds group members of norms of acceptable behavior, encourages respect and communication.
Feedback provider	Provides feedback to group on progress in its task.
Risk taker	Goes out on limb with new ideas or suggestions to move group forward.
Task cheerleader	Recognizes, encourages and cheers on other group members by being friendly and supporting their input.
Social-Emotional Roles	
Emotional initiator	Shares own feelings with other group members in way that encourages communication and sharing.
Emotional feedback provider	Senses feelings or moods within group and reflects this back to the group.
Emotion encourager	Supports and encourages others by being warm and responsive to their feelings and contributions.
Emotional historian	Reminds group of past emotional issues in a manner that helps group to grow and evolve.
Cohesion builder	Attempts to reduce group tension and get group members to explore their differences.
Empathetic sharer	Tells other group members, "I know how you feel."
Comic relief	Refreshes group and relieves tension through humor.
Social director	Encourages group members to engage in positive social interactions separate from group tasks.

Note: This list, developed specifically for use in the classroom, is based on a list originally articulated by Kevin Dubrow, LCSW and is used here with his permission.

me and their classmates. What follows is an outline of the approach I use to teach students about these roles.

Developing individual roles in the classroom group

1. Create class norms

A norm is not merely a rule upon which a class verbally agrees. It is the actual practice of a group that is enforced by the responses of group members. A norm is not legitimized by verbal agreement or by force, but by actual processes in the group. For example, in a norm setting activity, if students agree to the norm, *everyone listens respectfully to the contributions of others*, yet

students talk over others during the activity, then the *actual* norm created is that it is okay to be disrespectful when others are speaking. This norm is entrenched by the failure of students or the teacher to confront this negative norm. As norms are discussed, it is vital that the teacher (1) be aware of the *actual* norms that are being enacted, (2) confront and redirect negative norms, (3) identify and encourage positive norms, and (4) encourage students to do the same.

In my classes, we establish norms over several days. With freshmen and sophomores, I have found it helpful to provide structure by giving students a short list of norms as a starting point (Table 3 provides a sample). I then divide students into small groups each responsible for explaining and illustrating one norm to the rest of the class. We also have whole

Table 2. Negative Group Roles.

Scapegoat	Accepts blame for everything that goes wrong in group, serves as lightning rod for others to blame when problems occur.
Monopolizer	Dominates conversations and group activities, interrupts and ignores other group members.
Conflict avoider	Minimizes or avoids conflicts that emerge in group, attempts to make conflicts "all better" without truly processing them.
Conflict escalator	Makes group conflicts worse, impedes communication in conflict.
"Poor, pitiful me"	Constantly complains and tells problems to group, rejects help offered by group.
Attacker of vulnerability	Attacks or mocks group members who take risks, belittles emotions and ideas shared by others.
Withdrawn member	Acts indifferent, focuses attention on own individual tasks, ignores tasks or discussion of group.
"I can top you"	Boasts about personal achievements or problems, strives to be center of attention.
Attacker of problem solving	Interrupts problem solving process by criticizing and blaming others or continuing to argue points group has already agreed on.
Sometimes member	Is often late or absent to group meetings, marginalizes self by never knowing what is going on.
The know-it-all	Asserts authority in group by displaying greater knowledge of every subject discussed, fails to listen, discounts others.
Negative clown	Breaks focus or concentration of the group by clowning or joking.
Punitive "parent"	Asserts authority over group through anger and hostility, belittles other group members.
Delinquent	Glorifies getting into trouble, presents image of self as rebel or trouble maker.
Terminator	Attempts to disrupt and end every group process by whatever means necessary.
Negative historian	Brings up past group experiences in manner that disrupts or sidetracks group from its focus.
"Voice of doom and gloom"	Predicts efforts of group will not lead to positive results, does not contribute to group efforts.
Weirdo/outcast	Presents self as different from rest of group, avoids interacting with other group members.
Don (or Donna) Juan	Flirts excessively with other group members, distracts group with salacious contributions.
Dependence seeker	Constantly seeks assistance from others, refuses to take initiative or take risks.

Table 3. Sample List of Group Norms.

There is laughter in our class. We are able to laugh at our mess-ups and not take ourselves too seriously.
There is a feeling that we're all in this together. The group works together and listens to each other to solve problems.
This is a place of respect. Disagreement and conflict are accepted and encouraged, but this is always done respectfully.
Class members are open to trying new things and dedicated to trying to grow and improve over time.
Class members make an effort to include everyone in what the group is doing.
Class members are positive and optimistic.
Class members are not worried about sounding dumb or saying the wrong thing.

class discussions about topics such as the benefits of particular norms and which norms will be most difficult to follow. With older students, I offer the opportunity for them to develop their own class norms, starting with a prompt like, “What would the perfect class look like?” I have also started with a team building game and then asked students what they liked or did not like about how our class worked together in that game, using the game as a starting point for norm development. Through small group brainstorming, class presentations, and roundtable discussions, we work from these questions toward a small, manageable group of norms.

It is not important what particular activities you do, only that they be similar to the types of activities that you intend to do all year. Throughout the entire process, I point out positive and negative norms *as they are occurring*, confront negative norms, support and model positive norms, and encourage all of the students to do the same. For example, when a student politely disagrees with another student, I will (politely) interrupt: “Did anyone notice what just happened? (*Pause, puzzled looks.*) Janine just did two of our norms perfectly. She listened carefully to Randall and then responded to him respectfully as well. That was awesome. Even though she thought he was wrong, she upheld our norms.”

The most difficult (and important) part of this process is getting students to begin upholding and enforcing the norms themselves. The tendency is for students to gravitate toward the norm: *addressing misbehavior is the teacher's sole responsibility*. Changing this attitude fundamentally alters the role of students and their relationships with each other and the teacher. This shift is necessary, since making the teacher the sole arbiter of norms is death to the entire group process (Schmuck and Schmuck 2001). On this point, I find it helpful to include the norm: *everyone is responsible for our*

classroom environment, making explicit that it is not just my job, but in fact everyone's job, to uphold our norms.

2. Introduce the idea of individual roles

The goal in this phase is for students to decrease their participation in negative roles and increase their participation in positive roles in our class. We begin by making students aware that they already play roles, whether they consciously choose to or not. I start by passing out the list of negative roles in Table 2. I ask each student to write briefly about two roles from the list that he or she has played in classroom situations. We use their writing as a foundation for a class discussion about negative roles. Interesting questions that can be explored in this discussion are: What roles have you played in classes in the past? What roles have you frequently seen others play? Have you ever seen teachers play any of these roles? How did you feel about those teachers?

The goal of this conversation is for students to see negative roles as something they *choose* rather than something that they *are*. It is also important that students come to a shared understanding of the impact of these roles on the group. Finally, it is essential that the teacher highlight and confront negative roles *as they are being played out during the discussion* so that the roles are not meaningless abstractions, but concrete, shared experiences.

Once students are familiar with the negative roles, I share the lists of positive roles. Students often need greater clarification of the positive roles. This is because they may never have seen students play many of these roles. They may never have even experienced some of the social-emotional roles in a classroom. Students can be helped by using guided role-plays to show how these roles work, even if the examples come from non-classroom settings. Another challenge is that students perceive many of the positive roles as, “the teacher's job.” The key here is to emphasize that even though the teacher does most of these, each role is available for everyone to try.

3. Allow students to take ownership of positive and negative roles

In order to learn how to enact more positive roles, students need to become aware of which roles they usually play in groups and consciously pick positive

roles that they would like to learn. I have each student identify one negative role she would like to stop playing and two positive roles she would like to learn from the list. As students are making this decision, I walk around the class, listen to students as they discuss the roles, and help those who are having difficulty. Here, giving a student feedback on negative roles he plays affords me the opportunity to discuss misbehavior in a constructive way. I also have the chance to give positive feedback and suggestions on what roles he might be good at or would offer him a challenge. Often, my assertion that a student would be good at a role and could really support the class strengthens his feeling of having something valuable to contribute and his desire to do so.

Once students have chosen their roles, I have them fold a piece of blank paper into thirds and write one role on each of the thirds, along with a design or picture that represents each role. They keep these tripods, as we call them, in their class folders. We establish a routine at the beginning of each class that each student pulls out their tripod, picks which role she wants to work on the most that day, and places that role facing out on her desk. This gives her a concrete reminder and me a visual cue so we both know what role is her focus for the day.

4. *Be the Gatekeeper!*

Even after students have learned about and chosen roles, they will not automatically start working on their new roles. Once again, students have not been taught to see themselves as a part of a group, and they are not used to the idea of being a member who plays a vital role in that dynamic. The teacher must play the role of Gatekeeper throughout the school year, but especially early in the year. As Gatekeeper, the teacher must set the boundary that each person, every day, must strive to be conscious of the roles he is playing and how he is affecting the group.

Every day for the first month, as students enter class I ask each of them what role he or she wants to work on that day. This reinforces the norm of discussing and understanding these roles, since students know they are not getting into class unless they have chosen one. This daily ritual leads to dynamic and connective discussions. Even students who struggle academically are given a meaningful way in which to shine in class. I am able to give positive feedback on their roles and support them in learning more roles. I often use the discussion

to stretch them to try more challenging roles. Some students even start asking what roles I think they should try. This creates an entirely new venue through which to go beyond the curriculum to mentor students in meaningful ways. These discussions provide an opportunity to recognize every student as a potential positive contributor to our class.

Be the Cheerleader!

Especially early on, students really need help and encouragement to see the benefits of playing their roles. As the year progresses, I find that many students enjoy becoming Cheerleaders for their classmates and can provide this support. However, at the beginning of the year, the teacher must be the biggest Cheerleader of all as students are trying out their new roles.

Once students understand the roles, every time I play a positive role, I act as my own Cheerleader and point it out: “You see how Anastasia answered a question and I asked her to explain that one part a little more deeply? That’s what an Explorer does.” “Hey, I just brought up a difficult issue we worked through three weeks ago. I’m being an Emotional Historian.” Whenever I can, I also point out opportunities for students and prepare them to play positive roles. “This is going to be a difficult question. Who are my Risk Takers today?” “Wow, a couple students are really frustrated here. Can anyone be an Empathetic Sharer and let them know you feel the same way?” Whenever students do a particularly nice job in a role, I make a point of thanking them either during or after class. The powerful result of all of this is a language system for discussing how they can be successful and contribute meaningfully in our class, and a feeling among students that their contributions matter.

6. *Continuously revisit norms and roles throughout the school year*

Sadly, this process is not a panacea to solve all of the problems in any classroom. The magic of the first month or two is not easily sustained throughout the year. Even with all of the initial work, it is difficult to maintain momentum. Students forget or lose their tripods. They try only one or two positive roles and just stick with those. When course work becomes difficult, they forget about the group and focus on their individual grades.

The key, when positive roles fall by the wayside, is to repeatedly put them back on the front burner and ask students: is this the kind of class that you want to have? What roles are we lacking? How else can you contribute? Over an entire school year, it is vital to have periodic activities to explore, reassign, and reclaim roles. This may involve students giving each other feedback on roles they have done well or that have made a difference. Discussions could focus on what roles the class as a whole is lacking. You might try highlighting a “Role of the Week” and set a goal for the day or the week for a number of students to take on that role. Also, setting aside a few minutes at the end of each day for students to provide group feedback can be very helpful. All of this requires significant time and energy throughout the entire school year. However, the transformation of a class into a growing community is not only inherently beneficial, but it does, in fact, lead to better learning of the content in the long run.

Classes as groups: The challenge

Teaching students explicitly about group dynamics and individual roles has given my classes a way to discuss classroom issues in a manner that is constructive rather than coercive. Every student is given a chance to feel like a competent, contributing member of the group, regardless of academic ability. Furthermore, the classroom relationships that are fostered through this process create an atmosphere of trust, open feedback, and risk-taking that is essential to teaching and learning. We do spend a lot of time talking about group processes, but my students learn the course material, and they learn it well, because they do not have to learn it alone.

My work with group dynamics in the classroom has also challenged my notion of what it means to be a “good” student. Unfortunately, in this era of accountability and high-stakes testing, even the best teachers are lured into a mode of thinking in which “good” students are those who do not interfere with our getting through the content standards. Academically talented students are socialized to think in terms of their individual achievement. For varied individual reasons, “bad” students do not feel that academic success holds the promise of social acceptance or achievability, and tend to take on negative roles. Are students even aware that another model is possible? Sadly, they are not.

Sharing the responsibility for the classroom climate through group dynamics is challenging for teachers as well. In a world of merit-based pay and value-added measures, it is risky to cede any control of the classroom to students. In my experience, this risk, and the time required to teach students how to function as a cohesive group, have been well worth the effort. Every student needs to find a way to feel successful in school. By shifting my focus away from an exclusive focus on content, group processes have helped my students feel more connected and competent, and ultimately to be more successful, not just in learning the curriculum, but with social and emotional tasks that they will face every day for the rest of their lives.

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