

## Assigning Competence

Unless we address underlying conceptions of smartness, we risk reverting to the commonly held belief that groupwork benefits struggling students because smart students help them. As long as we have a simplistic view of some students as smart and others as struggling, we will have status problems in our classrooms. Students quickly pick up on assessments of their ability. For example, when teachers arrange collaborative groups to evenly distribute strong, weak, and average students, children will figure out that scheme and rapidly learn which slot they fill. If we value only certain kinds of expertise, the same students will always play the role of experts. If the groupwork task is rich enough, the strengths of different students will come into play, rendering the common mixed-ability grouping strategy useless. In fact, an essential practice for a multiple-ability classroom is *random group assignment*. If we believe that students can all learn from each other, then group assignments should not have an underlying design based on assessments of ability.

***“Assigning competence is the hardest aspect of effective groupwork to do well, but by far the most essential. I had to be honest with myself about my assumptions about what it means to be smart, and push myself to expand that definition in ways I genuinely believed. I had to train myself to have eyes and ears for smartness when it happened, and also the vocabulary to name it. I need to be able to assign competence every time a student presents, and every time I work with a team.”***  
~ Carlos Cabana,  
**Mathematics Teacher**

The next step is to help students recognize where they and their classmates are located on the complex topography of competence to shift their self-concept and their ideas about others. Students need to recognize these other competencies for themselves so that they know their own strengths and can work confidently on hard tasks. (Examples: posing interesting questions, making astute connections, representing and explaining ideas clearly, developing logical explanations, working systematically, extending ideas, etc.) Students need to recognize the strengths of their peers in order to interrupt assumptions based on a simplistic smartness hierarchy. If students believe their classmates have something to contribute, they have a motivated reason to listen to and learn from each other. Teachers can communicate these messages to students through the practice of *assigning competence*.

**Assigning competence is a form of praise where teachers catch students being “smart.” The praise is public, specific to the task, and intellectually meaningful.**

The *public* part of assigning competence means that this praise is not an aside to an individual student or a communication with the parent. It takes place in the public realm of the classroom, whether in a small-group activity or whole-class discussion. It needs to be *specific to the task* so that students make a connection between their behavior and their contribution. Simply saying, “Good job!” is not enough. Students need to know exactly what they did that is valued. The praise must be *intellectually meaningful* so that it contributes to students’ sense of smartness. Praising a student for a “beautiful poster” does not qualify as assigning competence when it is not connected to academic intellect. In contrast, if a teacher praises a student for a clear representation on a poster that helps explain or illustrate an idea, that is intellectually meaningful.

To broaden student participation, teachers must authentically extend views of smartness in their classroom. To help students understand their own competencies, teachers can disrupt status problems by assigning competence to students. Assigning competence is a particular form of praise that is public, specific, and intellectually meaningful and can help shift students’ perceptions of the value of their own and others’ contributions.

***“If I were to have a teacher concentrate on one aspect of effective groupwork, it would be to focus on learning how your students are smart and how they are developing confidence in their learning and their encouragement of each other.”***  
~Ruth Tsu, Retired Teacher, Complex Instruction Teacher

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