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picture: The first time the author met a Galah

Hello, bird, I'm learning ornithology

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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

CONTINUED ON PAGE 6

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 4

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 exotic bird teaches ornithology.

A basic problem of group assignments 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, making student groups more like roommates than business co-workers. The cleanliness of an apartment is inversely related to the number of people responsible for keeping it clean, limited only by the messiest state anyone might be willing to tolerate. Similarly, overall work quality will often fall to the level which the best students in each group are willing to tolerate. The best writers in each group will do most of the writing, protecting their grades from damage by their less talented co-workers.

Yet the projects' frequent failure to teach writing, speaking and group-work skills is more basic, the ineluctable result of the philosophy of many business educators.

A gifted con artist, Professor Harold Hill in Meredith Wilson's "Music Man" convinces the people of River City that the solution to perceived threats to their youth's virtue lies in a student band. Instead of going to the new pool hall, they'll play instruments and wear uniforms, both of which he'd obtain and sell. Since no one in town knows how to play all these different instruments, he'll teach everyone using his Think System: think of a tune and you can play it.

In teaching approaches seemingly devised by Professor Hill, group projects are many but few faculty assigning them give attention to improving student speaking, writing or group interactions. The classes do not teach these things 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 students 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 contagion are not restricted to marketing. In the July/August 1998 issue of *Change* magazine, Philip Altbach and Patti Peterson described the fictitious 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 textbook's checklists. Making a conference presentation last Spring, Central Washington University's Ed Golden 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 students learn] important skills."

One can't deny that modem faculty time pressures are real. Years ago, my journalism colleague Leola had very large classes, assigned individual 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.