

Team-Based Learning (TBL) Fact Sheet

A quick guide for busy faculty and administrators

What is TBL?

TBL is an instructional method that puts students—working both as individuals and in permanent groups—into roles of greater responsibility for acquiring and using information. A TBL course uses specific assessment techniques and social processes in order to foster team development, productivity and accountability as the term progresses. The central goal of TBL is to shift the use of class time away from instructors transmitting information, and towards students working in teams to apply course concepts. The team structure is an essential condition for requiring students to perform at higher cognitive levels. A key driver of TBL is frequent, immediate feedback—on both individual student preparation and team execution of critical thinking tasks.

Lots of people use collaborative learning and student teams. Isn't that the same as "TBL"?

No. As users of collaborative strategies know, groups do not consistently turn into teams. Members of a group normally start out as individuals who may or may not function well together, due to hitchhiking members, dominant personalities and poor communication/listening skills. At these early stages groups are typically ineffective at making good decisions as a group. Groups evolve into teams when an instructor creates conditions specifically designed to induce group members to interrelate more competently to meet course goals. This is not done by micro-managing or coaching the groups, but by assigning tasks that, by their design, teach groups to become more productive. Over the course groups gradually learn to reach consensus on knotty problems, benefit from their mistakes, rein in ineffective behavior, and eventually trust in the team's overall ability to outperform any given individual. The key to group development is effective assignment/task design.

How is TBL different from PBL (Problem-Based Learning)?

TBL is more overtly structured than PBL, in that the instructor sets the agenda for covering and processing a specific body of information, much the way he/she would in a conventional lecture-based course. By contrast, in PBL the instructor's role is restricted to identifying the problem, while students seek out the information they need in order to solve it—with limited direction from the instructor. Both methods are highly effective, depending on goals and circumstances. In TBL, however, the tighter control of content is very attractive to many university instructors, as it allows TBL-taught courses to co-exist with traditionally-taught courses, and does not require altering curriculum content.

Assessment of TBL

TBL is now being used internationally in every academic discipline, from natural science to social science to professional disciplines to philosophy and literature. The emerging research helps explain why it is even attractive in information-heavy and highly technical fields such as medicine and engineering. The social and assessment-driven design raises the level of engagement and persistence of students confronted with dense material, and at the same time raises their performance level, not only as teams but as individuals. Instructors report consistently that TBL enhances quick retention of core information and allows instructors to challenge their students more rigorously. A surprising outcome has been that, while initially users of TBL reduce course content to allow for increased in-class processing, they find that within a semester or two of experience with the method they are able to restore content coverage back to original levels, and in many cases, beyond the original level, with greater overall student understanding of disciplinary knowledge.

What is the theory behind TBL?

TBL emerged out of research in behavioral and organizational psychology. Among the principles that drive the method are the following:

- People learn best when feedback is frequent and timely.
- Group work is effective only when individuals see that their own interests are in alignment with those of their team.
- Individuals need to be held accountable as individuals, before they can participate effectively in a team.
- Groups begin to turn into teams when they are held accountable for the group's consensus-based decisions.
- Instructors can intentionally and consistently create specific conditions conducive to group development.
- Effectively functioning groups can respond to more rigorous challenges than can most individuals.
- Effectively functioning groups need very little instructor management: TBL is therefore scalable to larger classes.

What does the TBL process look like in a course?

A course will normally be divided into 4-7 instructional units within a 15-week time frame. A typical sequence over 2-4 class meetings would be as follows:

- 1) A substantial reading assignment (outside of class)
- 2) Graded individual "readiness assessment" test on the reading (in class)
- 3) Graded team "readiness assessment" test (in class)
- 4) Posting of team scores, comparison of results (in class)
- 5) Filing of appeals for unfair or ambiguous questions or reasonable alternate answers (in class)
- 6) Brief lecture, if needed, to clarify confusion made visible by the tests (in class)
- 7) Team tasks and assignments (cases; problems; applications) using the material covered in the initial reading (in class—this phase usually last 2-3 days)
- 8) Assessment of learning in the form of assignments and products, some individual, some in teams (in or out of class)
- 9) Peer evaluation at midterm (formative) and at end of course (for a part of the final grade—in class or on line)

What are the risks?

Because the method moves students out of their familiar "information receiver" roles, instructors who use TBL will find some students uncomfortable for the first 2-3 weeks, until they begin to experience the benefits. Older students may experience greater discomfort than freshmen and sophomores, due to more engrained "consumer" habits and acculturation. Faculty members and their chairs or program directors (who may hear about it from students) should be prepared for this temporary discomfort as a natural part of the learning process. However, experience indicates that both student satisfaction and learning increases in TBL courses in the long run.

For a comprehensive collection of information on Team-Based Learning, along with how-to's, research, and video clips showing TBL in action, visit the TBL Website at <http://teambasedlearning.org>.