
Ask Ms. Multi

Part 1



Since Miss Manners was not available to answer questions about how to behave appropriately in a multilevel class, her cousin, Ms. Multi, agreed to answer teachers' questions. Ms. Multi has the same ironic tone as her better-known cousin, but she assured us that her responses are of the most serious nature.

Dear Ms. Multi:

How do you help students at ALL levels in a multilevel class build their vocabulary? Even students who do a fair amount of reading in English outside of class have a difficult time retaining and reusing new words.

Word Wealth

Dear Word Wealth:

Ms. Multi always has to remind herself about active and passive vocabulary. As she understands it, passive vocabulary means you recognize a word and can figure it out when you see it in print, but you don't have the confidence or ability to use the word easily in conversation or writing. Active vocabulary means you can use the word easily. We acquire vocabulary at different stages and paces; words move from the vague to the clear depending on how often we see or hear them. That's why Ms. Multi has always been somewhat suspect of the "define a new word and use it in a sentence approach," because it seems sort of contrived and without context. Ms. Multi also suspects there is a functional element to the pace of vocabulary development: As students need the new words they will call them forth and make use of them. In short, maybe you needn't expect students to actively use even the majority of the new words they are acquiring. (Steven Krashen's *The Natural Approach* probably gives some good advice in this area.) Ms. Multi is confident you are providing context rich opportunities for students to acquire new language, rather than lists of words that do not relate to a larger meaning. If new words grow out of a topic you are studying over a period of time, there is more chance students will remember them.

Dear Ms. Multi:

I have a small class of mixed abilities. The situation is complicated by the fact that the not-as-literate student is also the only woman in the class (besides myself). Last class we were working collaboratively to edit a letter we are going to send, and I watched as the men essentially and perhaps not even intentionally shut out the woman from the editing process. Basically they wrote their ideas down on a piece of paper which the woman could not see very well, let alone read. She got more and more frustrated, asking, "Where are you in the letter? What paragraph are you changing?" and so on. When I tried to intervene and suggest we edit in a more public (and large print) way on the board, everyone protested that things were just fine. How do I make sure that collaborative projects like this one can effectively include all?

Worried

Dear Worried:

In a case like this, Ms. Multi would most likely have done exactly what you did: intervene as the class facilitator. Perhaps she would have been a bit more emphatic and directive by wresting the paper from the students' hands and insisting that we use newsprint and markers so everyone would have an equal chance to see what was going on.... But Ms. Multi wasn't there, and it's so much more fun (and easier) to imagine the scenario than to live through it!!! Anyway...

Ms. Multi also shares your concern that gender issues are at play, though maybe not consciously. Has this dynamic displayed itself in other class sessions? If so, perhaps you might try some problem-posing activities to address the issue of inclusiveness, assertiveness, and so on. Ms. Multi knows, from our precious contact, that you are well familiar with the techniques that originated with the late Paolo Freire and were made popular by educators like Nina Wallerstein, Elsa Auerbach, and others. Perhaps you could develop a “code” (a cartoon or drawing or other representation that acts as a catalyst for discussion) that shows a group activity (at work, maybe) where someone is being squeezed out. Then you could do the drill with questions like: What is the problem here? Whose problem is it? What can X say? What can X do? and so on. Maybe even follow up with a role play. One would hope that students might recognize some of their own behavior in the class and become more sensitized to ways of dealing with it. The men, for example, need to see the value in allowing participation by the woman, who is not as experienced with literacy but might have good ideas to contribute, while the woman may see the value of rehearsing some assertiveness with the rest of the group so she can better get her needs met should the situation re-emerge, when you might not be there.

Dear Ms. Multi:

Is individual instruction better than whole group for a multilevel class? I choose individual instruction for my ABE class because it is easier to meet everyone’s needs that way. I have read in previous columns that you do not approve of this method. Why?
One by One and Loving It

Dear One by One:

Ms. Multi thinks there are times when individual instruction makes sense and she surely does not dismiss you for doing so. Ms. Multi gently leans toward the group approach because she believes that knowledge is socially constructed. However, she would rather not create rigid dichotomies between individual and group instruction, and often encourages teachers to deconstruct this polarity in an effort to arrive at more creative and complex solutions to instruction.

Dear Ms. Multi:

You always suggest grouping or pairing students as one way to deal with multilevel classes. You dispense this advice so glibly! Have you never had problems with students who resist group work? Some of my students like it, but others refuse to work with other students. This has caused underlying tensions in the class and it makes me furious and frustrated because I keep hearing that it’s a good way to teach as I read about all the cooperative activities all the experts endorse. What’s going on?
Wired

Dear Wired:

You are absolutely right. We cannot assume that group work is easy. We cannot assume that it is appropriate all the time. It is loaded with possible conflicts. Ms. Multi suggests that you read the articles in this issue to examine conclusions some teachers have reached regarding group work. Though difficult, Ms. Multi does not suggest dismissing groups and pair work out of hand. The teacher needs to understand some basic things about the culture of students in the class—where animosity might linger because of the political history in their home countries; where gender issues (men and women working together) are highly sensitive or forbidden, and so on. In short, you gotta do some homework. Ms. Multi doesn’t believe, however, that students cannot be challenged on some level; neither does she believe that it is impossible to negotiate new learning approaches with students who may be resistant because your approach is so different from the one used by teachers in their home country. Ms. Multi always thinks it best to be open with students about what and why you are doing something, and invite discussion about these issues in the classroom.