

Harvard study says 1-on-1 contact aids students

By Anthony Flint
GLOBE STAFF

Small classes, study groups and one-on-one contact with faculty and advisers are all key to a successful college experience, according to a new report by Harvard University.

"Nearly every student with strong academic performance can point to a specific activity that ties academic work closely to another person or a group of people," said Harvard education professor Richard J. Light, chief author of the report.

The report, based on interviews

with 570 undergraduates, is the second installment of results from the Harvard Assessment Seminars, an effort begun five years ago on teaching, learning and the undergraduate experience.

For more effective learning, the report said, students should mix large, required lecture courses with at least one small class per semester, and professors should organize classes into small study groups, emphasizing the "interpersonal nature of academic involvement," Light said.

"Putting it in negative terms, to

come to Harvard or any other college and select four large classes each semester and drift quietly and anonymously in and out, to sit in a section quietly, and to study alone — maybe that will work for a few people, but students report overwhelmingly the opposite," Light said.

One effective way to prompt interaction is to have students read each other's assigned papers and discuss them in class, Light said. In general, the more writing, the more engaged the student, Light said.

The report also found that one-on-one contact with faculty advisers was important, but that many stu-

dents did not feel comfortable approaching professors for informal discussion. Informal contact — a talk over coffee or chatting after class — is often the most important to students, Light said.

The Harvard Assessment Seminars are viewed as a model for teaching and learning methods at colleges and universities. The first report, released in March 1990, suggested that professors give one-minute quizzes regularly to monitor students. That recommendation has already been adopted at some institutions.

Educators say those who learn together learn better

By Phyllis Coons
Globe Staff

CHICAGO - A 10-year-old said learning in a group is like "having four brains instead of one." Alfie Kohn, author of "No Contest: The Case Against Competition" told the National Association of Independent Schools earlier this month as he explained cooperative learning.

Children who learn cooperatively not only feel smarter but are more likely to retain their knowledge, and those who compete for prizes are no longer interested in the problem once they are rewarded, Kohn said at the association's annual meeting, where other speeches revealed a small, growing national movement toward cooperative learning, or group-based classes, in public and private schools.

Kohn, who lives in Cambridge and is the author of "No Contest: The Case Against Competition," said another student told him that "All of us are smarter than any of us."

"The desegregation movement would have been more successful if kids of different backgrounds had been asked to work together instead of having to compete, once the buses pulled away," Kohn said. He also said that the reason that Japanese companies outperform many American firms is that the Japanese have learned how to handle teamwork.

Even in athletics, competition is distracting, Kohn said. "After teaching at



Globe staff photo/
Frank O'Brien

Richard J. Light of the Harvard Assessment Seminar says learning cooperatively, in groups, is as important to college students as to younger ones.

Those who learn together learn better, say educators

■ COOPERATIVE

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Susan E. Gruber, associate professor of special education at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee, reporting on research on cooperative learning, told the educators that, in a typical classroom, the attitude of teachers is, "Don't look at each other's papers. I want to see what you can do, not your neighbor."

Children learn in primary-school spelling bees that they have to spell words others miss in order to win a prize, she said, but in a cooperative spelling class, students work together in small groups to help each other learn to take the test, and each student's score is increased by bonus points earned by the group.

"A vast majority of students in the US view school as a competitive enterprise where they try to do better than the other students," she said. Yet they achieve more and they are more positive about school and each other when they learn cooperatively, regardless of differences in ability, ethnic background, or handicaps, Gruber said, citing research by brothers Roger and David Johnson of the University of Minnesota.

To prepare for the world outside the classroom, students still should learn to study alone and to feel competent in competitive situations, she said.

Gruber said teachers need help in making the switch from competitive to cooperative learning and have to be trained to set up cooperative classes. Many teachers don't want to surrender part of their authority to aides and student group leaders, she said.

Telling a group of teachers how to set up a cooperative situation, she advised them to assign heterogeneous students to groups of six or fewer and divide the material covered. Each student has one area to work on, but all help each other to understand and interpret the project. Results, according to research, said Gruber, help teach students to cooperate later in friendships, marriages and the workplace.

A Harvard professor said cooperation in learning is as important at the college level as at lower levels. Richard J. Light, professor at the Harvard School of Education, said that questionnaires cir-

culated by the Harvard Assessment Seminar among students and graduates of colleges asked what the most serious omission in their educations was. Many named the failure to learn to work cooperatively in groups. Ninety-one percent of students and alumni called group learning a very important skill, but only 16 percent said that their colleges had helped them to do it.

The Harvard Assessment Seminar, started when Harvard's president, Derek Bok, asked Light to gather information about the quality of student experiences, is a coalition of 20 New England colleges, represented by more than 100 students and faculty, who meet monthly to find which practices make for the most satisfying learning.

Some of the changes already made at some of the 20 colleges as a result of seminar suggestions, Light said, include:

- Reducing the size of discussion groups (held after lectures) from 20 to five and letting students, rather than teachers, run them.

- Rewarding teachers for classroom innovations whether they succeed or fail.

- Providing instant feedback for teachers by asking students to write, after each class, the major fact they learned during class and their most important unanswered question.

- Tracking student progress by comparing papers written at the beginning, middle and end of terms.

- Asking freshmen to keep track, in half-hour blocks, of how they spend their time for several weeks.

- Encouraging students to do more volunteer and extracurricular activities. The more hours spent this way, the happier students said they were, Light reported.

Interaction appears to be an important part of education, no matter what age. In fact, the younger the students, the more important it is for them to interact with each other. Lilian Katz told the association. Katz is director of the Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. "Young children should be interacting with adults and with each other, with materials and with their environment in ways which help them to make sense of their own environment," she said.

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