



**NATHAN:** So what were you saying about taking an Arabic class? Could you recap that again? That’s really interesting.

**MARGARET:** About taking Arabic?

**NATHAN:** Yes, and also what you said about perspectives.

**MARGARET:** Ah, well, I’m taking Arabic because it’s part of my next research project, but the unforeseen upside of it has been that I’ve been able to be a student again. And there’s a good perspective that can be gleaned from actually sitting on that side of the classroom, and I’ve certainly enjoyed it. I’ve enjoyed making friends with the students, but I’ve also enjoyed remembering what it means to sit on that side and sort of try to be more empathetic with the needs of the students now. And also, interestingly, I’ve been reminded of how much I hate group work.

**NATHAN:** I was going to say, what are some specific things that you’ve gleaned from that. So, say something about group work.

**MARGARET:** All students hate group work.

**NATHAN:** All students hate it?

**MARGARET:** All students hate it. You can ask any student, “Do you like group work?” and their answer will almost always be no. I think students really . . . I mean, I do a lot of group work in my teaching, and I think it’s okay. It has its place, so I’m not coming down hard on group work, but I know that I’m in this room to learn something from the expert in the room and the expert in the room is the teacher, not me. And the complete constant flipping of the classroom where the students who don’t know all that much are now expected to teach each other, I don’t think it’s always the solution. I think there’s a reason why that person in the front of the room got a PhD and has real expert knowledge to share.

**NATHAN:** So what would be the reason then, since you are now both seeing group work from a student perspective and as a professor, what then as a professor would be a reason why you would use group work in a classroom? Now that you know they all hate it. You’ve confirmed they all hate it.

**MARGARET:** Well, they don’t all hate it. I don’t think they all hate it all the time. I think that sometimes group work is useful if the group work is really well-structured, so you don’t just say, “alright, everybody go off and talk about this book you read.” Instead, a group is given a particular set of documents to work with or a very specific task, and then the groups can come together at some point in the class and the students can hash through all of the various tasks they’ve been given and in that way unpack the book or unpack the reading, whatever the project was.



NATHAN: Is that typically what you do?

MARGARET: It is usually.

NATHAN: You assign groups to pull apart a reading?

MARGARET: That’s often what I do, but I have all kinds of different group work activities. Sometimes I’ll have the students actually work out what their assignment is, work out what their task is going to be in their group or work out a good task for a group to have, and then they give it to another group to do. And then that group is given a task by someone else. So they have to come up with good, thoughtful reading questions. So coming up with questions . . . in order to have a good question, you have to have done good reading, so it demands good reading if you make them actually come up with questions. I really like the more that I can make the whole class work as a group the better, rather than breaking them apart. I really prefer it.

NATHAN: What size classes do you teach? When you say you want them together . . .

MARGARET: As a whole group

As a whole group, what size class are we talking about?

MARGARET: Well, this semester, I’m teaching a class with 60 students, and I’m trying really hard to make them all work as a group, and then I have a grad class, which is, you know, just a grad class. So just yesterday, they read a great book by [name], and the assignment was, I put five markers at the blackboard or the whiteboard, and everyone had to come forward and write a question about the reading, a thoughtful discussion question. But there are 60 students, and every single person has to write a question that hasn’t already been written on the board. So the people who have done this with me before know it’s to your advantage to get up there quickly and get something down because the last people are really struggling to come up with something, but sometimes the very last questions are the best ones because the students are being forced to increasingly think more critically and in more abstract terms. So that works really well. There are lots of ways that I do this. Last week, I had 9 questions I thought were pretty solid that I wrote on index cards and put upside down, and then a student could volunteer to come forward and turnover the card and then run discussion. So turnover the card, read the question to the class, and then the student runs the discussion. And then they get a little bit of extra points for their quiz that week for having volunteered to be in charge, and of course I participate a lot, and I make sure that the question gets pushed as far as it needs to get pushed. So I don’t stay out completely from the conversation.

NATHAN: Yes, you’re not abandoning the students.



## **“Good Group Work is Structured and Specific”**

Interview with Margaret Peacock and Nathan Loewen

*The Teaching Hub*

MARGARET: I'm not abandoning the student at all. I'm totally still there. In fact, there was a student who came up and just could, read the question and just clearly didn't have it, didn't have the natural ability or whatever, and I basically took over. They still get the credit though because they were ballsy enough to come forward and turn over the card.

NATHAN: And in that sense, it's high stakes because it's in front of everybody, but it's low stakes in the sense that you aren't going to lose points for doing this.

MARGARET: No. You can only gain. You can only win.

NATHAN: You can only win, but there's also that social side.

MARGARET: I guess so. Yeah, there is that.

NATHAN: Which is great.