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ABSTRACT
        Group effectiveness skills, including interpersonal
communication, negotiation, and teamwork, are essential in today's diverse
classroom and workplace. Various ways have been identified to prepare
learners to be effective in group situations and to aid teachers to prepare
themselves to be skillful group facilitators. The following are some
strategies teachers and trainers have found to be useful in developing group
skills: stress development of interpersonal skills; promote teamwork as an
individual skill; have students monitor their team dynamics; and draw upon
the community to broaden students' experiences. The following strategies help
teachers develop new ways of teaching that promote effective group
interactions: be aware of student learning styles; offer assistance, but
relinquish control; and model the behaviors expected of students. Eleven
references are listed. (YLB)

Group Effectiveness
in the Classroom and Workplace
Practice Application Brief No. 15

Bettina Lankard Brown

Group effectiveness skills, including interpersonal communication, negotiation, and teamwork, are essential in today's diverse classroom and workplace. This *Brief* identifies ways to prepare learners to be effective in group situations as well as ways teachers can prepare themselves to be skillful group facilitators.

Businesses are adopting work groups or teams to offset the challenges of competition, customer demands, and a diverse workplace. Approximately 70 percent of Fortune 1000 businesses surveyed in the mid-1990s were organizing their efforts around work teams to realize increased productivity, higher-quality output, and improved employee morale (Chen and Barshes 2000). Increased diversity in the workplace has intensified the need for workers who have the interpersonal skills that enable them to work cooperatively and collaboratively with others to accomplish organizational goals.

Although group work is seen as an optimal strategy for many job or task challenges, employers claim that schools have not prepared students to function well in a team capacity. Students must be prepared with skills that will enable them to work collectively with others to solve problems that cannot be solved through individual effort alone (Gardner and Korth 1998). However, in the classroom, many students are not receptive to group work. They have had experiences in groups where only a few members do all the work. In addition, schools tend to reward individual effort, which promotes competition rather than collaboration among group members.

Why is group work in the classroom less effective than it might be?: "a lack of focus and unclear goals for the groupwork task, tasks that can be done more efficiently by individuals, and a lack of clearly defined roles for the group members" (Homan and Poel 1999, p. 12). Most important, students simply do not know how to work effectively in groups (ibid.). Company work teams experience these same obstacles, as well as those created by confusion over chain of command, demands of work/life balance, and technology issues (Farren and Maurer 1999). It is imperative that educators and trainers take steps to prepare learners to be effective in group situations.

Preparing Learners to Be Effective In Groups

Following are some strategies teachers and trainers have found to be useful in developing group skills.

Stress Development of Interpersonal Skills

Individuals have different ways of relating to each other based upon their personalities, communication styles, learning styles, culture, and experiences. Learning to work together requires all team members to recognize their own behaviors in relation to those of other team members and to respect the uniqueness each member brings to the team. Most basic to the maintenance of good interpersonal relationships is the art of listening, one of the least used communication skills (Duttweiler 1997). Careful listening promotes questioning and reflection; it indicates respect for feedback and the opinions of others. It also promotes open-mindedness and leads to inquiry, discussion, and decision making.

Promote Teamwork as an Individual Skill

Because teamwork is defined as a group skill, being able to get along with others and be well liked are often emphasized. But Avery (2000) contends that teamwork is really an individual skill. "Teamwork is the primary means for getting one's work done in a highly indepen-

dent and changing environment," and "treating teamwork as a group skill and responsibility rather than an individual one allows highly skilled employees to account for their nonperformance by pointing fingers at others" (p. 6). The following steps are suggested by Avery as ways to improve each team member's ability to get work done through interaction with others (pp. 6-7):

1. Tackle collective tasks and create space for others to engage.
2. Align interest. Matching levels of motivation is far more important to successful teamwork than are concerns about matching appropriate skills.
3. Establish behavioral ground rules. Team members must be equipped to call each other on broken agreements.
4. Honor individuals and their differences. Two types of behavior kill synergy: people stating more than they know and people stating less than they know.
5. Expect breakthroughs and synergy. Although these high-performance elements of teamwork will occur, they cannot be sustained. Teams, unlike departments, do have beginnings and ends as their collective tasks begin and end.

Have Students Monitor Their Team Dynamics

The theory of constructivism promotes the view that knowledge is created as individuals interact with each other in the social environment and reflect upon these experiences, developing insight, understanding, and new knowledge. Feedback is a crucial part of this reflective process as it provides learners with valuable information about their behaviors and practices, giving credence to their perceptions and interpretations of those experiences. It "provides a framework to guide future action and helps students advance from passive learners to active doers" (Goby and Lewis 2000, p. 40).

One strategy for helping students assess the critical elements of their team dynamics is to have them answer questions about their teamwork experiences (Spann 2000): Can team members speak freely? Does everyone feel a part of the team or are certain members excluded? Can everyone interact with everyone or is contact limited? Does the team balance individual and team needs? Do team members trust each other? Does the team have a way to resolve conflict? Does the team or its members have influence over other members? For example, does the team have the ability to reward, punish, and work productively? Can the team perform tasks and achieve goals? Are the team and its individual members growing personally and professionally?

Draw upon the Community

Learning cannot be confined to the school building. Community organizations and businesses offer additional ways for students to develop skills that will help them work effectively in work groups. Volunteering for community service, for example, can broaden students' experiences in working with others toward a common goal, as well as reveal a direct link between school learning and workplace performance. Challenge and adventure programs create situations that require participants to work together, offering another vehicle for learning.

The virtual community created through technology can also enhance group learning. Such experiences "promote diversity by creating an environment that shifts attention away from individual participants who may be high ranking, aggressive, or popular members of the culturally dominant group, and toward community expression where each group member...can contribute thoughts via

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technology that records attendees' comments anonymously on an electronic white board" (Clark 1998, p. 8). Although there are drawbacks to electronic collaboration, online interactions also encourage precise and rational thinking as they afford time for thought, investigation, and reflection (ibid.).

Preparing to Be a Skillful Group Facilitator

The following strategies help teachers develop new ways of teaching that promote effective group interactions.

Be Aware of Student Learning Styles

Personality indicators such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator and Kolb's experiential learning cycle can be used to illustrate how the psychological underpinnings of personality and communication influence group behavior (Goby and Lewis 2000). For example, in a study involving graduate students at a Midwestern university (Gardner and Korth 1998), it was found that students who prefer learning through concrete experiences and active experimentation (called *accommodators*) are most likely to have a positive attitude toward group work. These students prefer learning from hands-on experiences and are interested in knowing how they can use the information they uncover. Other groups showing interest in group experiences are those called *divergers*—who view situations from many different points of view and ask "Why?" and *convergers*—who look for practical uses for ideas and theories and ask "How?" (ibid.). Students who prefer active conceptualization and reflective observation are more focused on learning through individual means. These students, called *assimilators*, seek to understand a wide range of information and put it into concise, logical form. They are more interested in answers to the question "What?" (ibid.).

To accommodate different learning styles, teachers can provide different roles for students to perform in the group work. "For example, part of the class could actively participate in a role play (accommodators), while a second group observes and provides feedback to the participants (divergers), a third group develops a model/theory from what they have seen and shares it with the class (assimilators), and the fourth group develops a plan for applying what they have seen to new situations and shares it with the class (convergers)" (Gardner and Korth 1998, p. 32). Although students feel most comfortable in roles that are congruent with their learning styles, they should also be introduced to roles that are divergent. In this way, students not only come to understand the strengths and weaknesses of their own particular style, but expand their knowledge and appreciation of the ways of others on the team (ibid.).

Offer Assistance, But Relinquish Control

Effective facilitation requires the teacher to place the responsibility for learning in the hands of the learners and concentrate on functions that can help the group do its work—guiding, clarifying, elaborating, summarizing, and giving feedback. The facilitator also helps the group maintain its cohesiveness, which includes encouraging, monitoring, mediating, inspiring, and relieving tension (Imel and Tisdell 1996). These skills are designed to help the group increase its effectiveness by improving its ability to solve problems and make decisions. Duttweiler (1997) offers the following suggestions for helping teachers improve their facilitation efforts and maintain group process: (1) *coordinate* team building activities to enable members to know each other; (2) *guide* the group's work agenda so that students are kept on task; (3) *clarify* the group's goal; (4) *monitor* discussions to ensure that they remain focused; (5) *challenge* the group to initiate equal participation; (6) *encourage* feedback; and (7) *promote* collaboration and testing of decision agreements.

Model the Behaviors You Expect of Students

Teachers must practice what they preach. By creating work teams and deciding to serve as a facilitator, the teacher shares with students the responsibility for achieving the group's goal through collaborative work. This places the teacher in the role of partner and as such requires the teacher to assume the behavior expected of all group members. In keeping with this practice, McKendall (2000) offers the following tips (pp. 280-281):

- If you are going to teach collective processes, then you must require and reward collective processes.
- Design a team project that is meaningful and relevant, having purpose beyond the classroom.
- Recognize, and make sure that students recognize, the time commitment involved in group work.
- Be prepared for a lot of disgruntlement over the project grade as some students will think their extensive time and effort should be rewarded, failing to recognize that they have made mistakes and poor choices.
- Use the dynamics of the team as a point of analysis when building a semester-long team project into an existing course.

Work groups serve a learning tool as they actively engage the learner, build community and consensus, and draw upon diversity to expand learning. As you attempt to follow some of the suggestions given in this *Brief*, remember to include reflection as part of your assessment and to draw upon the information you learn from your experiences when planning subsequent group activities. Collaborative learning, so important in teamwork, requires continuous lifelong learning from all participants in the team's efforts—teachers and students alike.

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