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The Changing Nature of Workplace Literacy as a Rationale for the Use of Groups in ESP

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Abstract

A trend toward the use of groups can be seen both at the workplace and in education. The growing presence of groups at work provides one motivation for groups in educational context, especially ESP, because students now need to acquire a higher form of literacy to participate in groups at work. Involved in this broader literacy are such skills as exercising initiative, peer-training, group problem solving, and interpersonal communication. Such literacy will be especially difficult for second language learners to achieve. The author discusses the nature of this trend toward groups and the reasons for it.

Next, groups at the two sites are compared in areas such as the changing roles of managers/teachers and employees/students and the degree of commonality of interests between employers/teachers and employees/students. The author concludes that the use of groups in education is valuable for helping students acquire the skills and attitudes of cooperation and complex thinking. Such preparation will serve students well regardless of what they encounter in their careers and beyond. Additionally, the content of education must also be considered in preparing students for the situations they may experience with employers and others.

Introduction

There is a growing trend internationally toward the use of groups at work. This provides an important rationale for the use of groups in ESP instruction. For example, the authors of an ESP text on technical and professional writing (Huckin & Olsen, 1991) added more group activities to their new edition, stating that this change was in response to the increased use of groups in workplace writing and publication. A Malaysian example of the growing presence of groups in the workplace is that the national petroleum company now includes team work as part of their management style and work culture (Editorial Board ESP Malaysia, 1993). The present article first provides some of the background to the increased use of groups in the workplace. This is followed by background on groups in education. The main focus of the article is a comparison between groups in the two spheres, with an emphasis on ESP.

Workplace Groups

At the workplace, several different names are used to describe groups: self-managing work teams, self-directed work groups, quality circles, autonomous work groups, cross-functional teams. They form part of a larger trend toward worker participation in management (Strauss, 1982).

Workplace groups represent a shift from the trend that dominated most of the 20th century. This was a trend toward greater specialization of tasks and tighter control of workers, which was pioneered by Frederick Taylor and Henry Ford. Case studies and survey research suggest that use of such groups is associated with increases in productivity, product quality, cost-efficiency, job satisfaction, and employee morale and motivation (Dumaine, 1990; Wellins, Byham, & Wilson, 1991). Nevertheless, although not denying the trend toward groups, some observers (Economist, 1994; National Center of Education and the Economy, 1990) report that groups are still the exception.

Groups in Education

In education, approaches which use groups include cooperative learning, collaborative learning, peer tutoring, and small group work. Such efforts go back at least to the project approach of John Dewey (1966) in the early 20th century. Much research has been conducted on such approaches. In general, they have been associated with increased proficiency, more higher quality thinking, greater liking for school, fellow students, and teachers, higher self-esteem, enhanced interethnic relations, and more acceptance of handicapped students (Johnson & Johnson, 1989; Slavin, 1990). (See McGroarty, 1989 and Olsen & Kagan, 1992 for reviews of L2 research.)

For our purposes, we will use the term cooperative learning for all these approaches, although the other terms mentioned above has its unique meaning(s). Cooperative learning is congruent with other changes taking place in education. Inspired by cognitive and humanistic psychology, as well as generative and functional linguistics, many educationists see learning not as primarily a process of teachers transferring knowledge to students, but of students constructing knowledge by relating what they already know to new learning. The student, not the teacher, is key to the enterprise of learning. Rote learning is deemphasized and replaced by approaches which encourage thinking and creativity.

Why the Trend Toward Groups

While groups at work and in education have been around for many years, they have attracted increased attention recently (Salem & Banner, 1992). One reason for this lies in the changes wrought by the information age and the ease of multinational trade. Companies need the knowledge and imagination of all their employees, not just that of a top managers and other elite employees. Groups provide fertile grounds for generating the creative thinking and new ideas that companies seek (Hilt, 1992; Yeo, 1993).

This change in global corporate thinking is emphatically illustrated in the remarks of Konosuke Matsushita, Executive Director of Japanese industrial giant Matsushita Electric:

We are going to win and the industrial West is going to lose out: there's nothing much you can do about it, because the reasons for failure are within yourself ... for you the essence of management is getting the ideas out of the heads of the bosses into the hand of labor. ... for us, the core of management is precisely the act of mobilizing and pulling together the intellectual resources of all employees ... only by drawing on the combined brainpower of all its employees can a firm face up to the turbulence and constraints of today's environment (cited in Tjosvold & Tjosvold, 1991:169).

Particularly in developed, high-wage countries, information age technology and global trade have resulted in the loss of unskilled jobs. Today, companies need workers at all levels to be able to think. Employees with strong backs and weak minds are becoming less valuable. Futurist Alvin Toffler (1990) says that the day is no more in which the workplace is separated into "heads" and "hands."

Giselle Mawer (1991) has done research into the changing needs of ESP students entering the Australian workforce. She defines the principles of the traditional workplace as including:

- 1) a strict hierarchical organisational structure
- 2) narrowly defined jobs
- 3) a narrow range of skills required to perform each job
- 4) the standardisation of methods by precise specification of every task
- 5) workers cut off from decision-making
- 6) the discouragement of social interaction among workers
- 7) authoritarian relations within the hierarchy
- 8) the strict supervision of workers.

In contrast, for the current information age, Mawer believes ESP students need to develop such skills and attitudes as the following:

- 1) initiative
- 2) cooperation and the capacity to work in groups
- 3) communication and reasoning
- 4) peer-training
- 5) obtaining and using information and planning
- 6) problem solving and decision-making
- 7) capacity to learn new knowledge (Mawer, 1991:5)

Candlin (1993) suggests that the changing demands of workplace literacy should substantially impact the ESP curriculum in terms of content, design, process, and outcome. Unfortunately, few ESP coursebooks exist to help prepare learners for the contemporary workplace. One exception in the series English at Work (Byrnes &

Candlin, 1991). The series includes units entitled "Working Together (Participative Management)", "Communicating Change", "Resolving Conflict at Work", and "Solving Problems at Work (Total Quality Management)". The authors cite another coursebook, ESL for Action (Auerbach & Wallerstein, 1986), as an inspiration for their work.

Comparing Groups at Work and in Education

The rest of this paper compares groups at work and in education on a number of factors, focusing mostly on similarities. Here, we will be considering the prototypical workplace and educational institution. The former is privately owned, while the latter is publicly controlled and financed mostly or completely by the government.

Roles of Managers/Teachers

Both managers and teachers have to learn new roles when groups are used. Manz, Keating, and Donnellon (1990) studied the transition process from the standard hierarchical arrangement to the use of self-managed teams among blue collar workers at a warehouse facility in the U.S. They focused on the changing roles of the managers. Problems at the facility included racial tensions, absenteeism of about 10 per cent, high employee turnover, low productivity, and high error rates. These factors were important in motivating the company to take the risk of trying self-managing work teams.

The researchers found that the managers initially felt threatened and resentful toward the change to self-managing teams for three reasons. One, they felt the change would be seen as due to their past shortcomings. Two, the managers saw the change as coming from the outside consultant who would get the credit should it succeed. Three, they believed the new plan would not work, in part because their young subordinates were too immature and irresponsible to handle self-management. These objections mirror some of those we have heard from teachers who are hesitant to use cooperative learning. They defend the traditional, teacher-fronted way of teaching, especially for L2 learners. They view the change as imposed from outside and assert that cooperative learning will not succeed because students will not know how to make good use of their new freedom and will waste valuable learning time by, for example, speaking in the L1.

However, as the new system was implemented at the warehouse, the managers' views began to change. They saw that their subordinates could handle the higher level of responsibility. The managers recognized that this also was a major innovation for the workers who had never experienced such a flattened hierarchy before and, therefore, would need time to adjust.

Managers realized that their role had to change from an autocratic style, with heavy use of punishments in an attempt to tightly control workers, to a facilitative style, which sought to support the teams by asking questions instead of giving answers, by encouraging teams to overcome their own problems without punishing them for mistakes, and by fostering the skills needed to interact effectively in groups. Similarly, Roe (1993)

calls for ESP teachers to exchange their accustomed dominant classroom role for one of facilitation.

At the warehouse, this change in management style entailed not just changing a few behaviours, but a major philosophical transformation. The transformation was accompanied by changes in managers' conception of workplace relations, the language they used with subordinates, and their repertoire of skills for managing. Palincsar, Stevens, & Gavelek (1988), Rich (1990), and Thornbury (1991) also cite philosophical issues as the key obstacle in encouraging teachers to adapt learner-centred approaches, such as cooperative learning methods. Hours of training in actual techniques are worthless if collaboration among students runs counter to teachers' foundational views of education.

Setting aside time for managers to meet regularly to discuss their new roles was another important element in the change process reported by Manz et al. In training meetings, managers role-played situations, learning to use responses such as, "I'm not here to solve the problem. I'm here to help you solve the problem" (p. 24).

Similarly, many experts on cooperative learning stress the importance of collaboration among teachers, as they move to more facilitating, less controlling roles in the classroom (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1993; Kagan, 1992). Such collaboration not only helps teachers/managers learn and come to believe in their new roles, it also provides an important model for students/employees. By working together among themselves, teachers/managers show through their actions that they really value collaboration.

One reason that managers/teachers need this peer support is that their new ways may be criticized by others. In using groups, thus giving some power to their subordinates, they may be seen as not doing their job, as being weak. For example, teachers may worry about what administrators, parents, or colleagues will think if they are observed out of their normal place and role, in front of the classroom lecturing the students. However, Tjosvold and Tjosvold (1991) point out that empowering employees/students does not mean depowering managers/teachers. They are sharing, not abdicating, power. Power is not a zero-sum game. When managers/teachers give up power and employees/students gain it, managers/teachers can also gain. Power is seen as expandable, both sides can become more powerful through working together. Shared power becomes fortified and more effective by being shared.

An important question remains: In using groups are managers/teachers giving power to employees/students or merely recognizing and seeking to direct the power which they already possess (Riseborough, 1985)? For instance, Hoerr (1989) found that some auto workers felt antagonistic toward their company and saw groups as just a company ploy to get them to work harder. Those at the top of the power hierarchy must heed the feelings of those below. Employees can strike, slow or spoil production, and in multiple other ways exert the power they hold as indispensable elements in the work process. Similarly, students are what education is all about. If they do not learn, the education system is a failure. Teachers can lecture, give assignments, threaten and cajole all they want, but

unless students meaningfully engage in the learning process, there is no point in opening the doors, except for babysitting purposes.

Helping Students/Employees Adjust to New Roles

Students and workers often lack the skills and attitudes necessary to work together well. They need to adjust to their new roles just as do managers. Thus, many experts on groups in education and at the workplace advocate that time be spent to learn this new role. For example, Brauchle and Wright (1993) describe a 10-step procedure which they used to train teams of production workers at a General Electric facility. Included in their training procedure are ideas which will sound familiar to educationists, such as providing clear models and demonstrations, connecting the training to workers real-world experiences, allowing workers to set their own goals, and teaching about effective group processes.

Sapon-Shevin and Schniedewind (1991) are among the many educationists who encourage teachers to spend class time helping students develop such collaborative skills as encouraging others to participate, handling disagreement productively, and reflecting on their group process. Collaborative skills and attitudes not only help make cooperative learning activities more effective, but they also prepare students for collaboration outside the classroom. Employees/students are often unaccustomed to the increased freedom that groupwork provides and may, at least initially, resist assuming more control and doing more thinking (Smith & Johnson, 1993; Thavenius, 1990). For instance, many students have become accustomed to cognitively undemanding activities, such as retrieving information directly from texts at their teachers' orders. When they are encouraged to do more complex thinking, such as applying and evaluating information or teaching it to others, students may lack confidence. Thus, most advocates of cooperative groups believe that time and practice are necessary if these adjustments are to be made.

Short-term Thinking as an Impediment

Groups at work and in education often have trouble getting off the ground because time pressures provide little space for managers/teachers and employees/students to make the necessary adjustments to their new roles. Companies and stockholders, as well as education administrations, parents, and governments, want to see quick, measurable results in terms of high profits and increased productivity at work and completed coursebooks and high standardized test scores in education.

Such pressures lead to a short-term, crisis management orientation which works against spending the time to learn and to cooperate, a change designed to bring long-term benefits. For example, some ESP teachers feel that they can cover more material with a lecture, "chalk and talk", method than via more learner-centred approaches, such as cooperative learning. They see time spent getting accustomed to and using groupwork as time lost from learning.

Because of such an attitude, even when groups are used, it may be done in an incomplete way, leading to failure and negative attitudes toward further use of groups. Tjosvold and

Tjosvold (1991) believe that a longer view produces the best results, arguing that time spent to train managers and employees in how groups function will bring long-term dividends. They ask, "If you don't have time to do it right the first time, when will you find time to do it over?" (p. 29) Similarly, some advocates of cooperative learning attribute reports of problems with groups to lack of planning and preparation (Johnson & Johnson, 1993).

Do Mutual Interests Exist at Both Sites?

Although we have highlighted the similarities between groups at the workplace and at school, clearly, there are differences in the relationship between companies and their employees, on one hand, and educational systems and students, on the other. Perhaps the biggest difference between workplaces and educational institutions resides in the relation between people at the upper and lower ends of the hierarchies at work and in education (Kohn, 1993). While employers might wish to limit employees' income even if groups cause overall profits to expand, educational systems would seem to have no interest in limiting the amount students learn. Indeed, it reflects well on schools and teachers when their students learn a lot or otherwise succeed.

All this is not to argue that no identity of interest exists between workers and management. Clearly, there are areas where, at least in the short term, what helps one side also helps the other, and what hurts one hurts the other. For example, as mentioned above, the literature on workplace groups suggests that groups increase workers' job satisfaction at the same time that they increase the quantity and quality of their work.

In education, the relationship is not so clear either. One problematic area in the relationship between educational administrations and students is the What, not the How Much, of student learning. Social critics (e.g., Aronowitz & Giroux, 1985) charge that education tries to mould students to adopt the thinking and ways of the dominant culture. This concern is particularly crucial for students from ethnic groups and social classes that hold less powerful positions in society. For example, Tollefson (1989) criticized the vocational ESP training of Indochinese refugees bound for the U.S., claiming that they were being channelled toward submissive roles in unskilled jobs. Students sometimes resist such moulding, e.g., Willis (1977) reported on working class students' resistance to efforts at socialization into the dominant culture.

Thus, the question arises again in education, just as in business: Are groups a means of empowering those at the lower end of the hierarchy, or are they merely a more efficient means for the powerful to achieve their ends? To answer this question for schools, educationists will need to examine their own goals and practices. How much of our formal power do we want to give students? Does the content of the classroom relate to students' needs, and who defines those needs (Sapon-Shevin & Schniedewind, 1991)?

Conclusion

There are many similarities between groups at work and in education. In the two contexts, people on both sides of the power hierarchies need to take on new roles and learn new skills and attitudes, as power is somewhat more evenly shared. Employees/students gain more control and a greater understanding of the work/learning processes. Given these similarities, a sharing of insights from groups at work and in education appears mutually informative and inspiring, especially in ESP, an area of education often closely linked to the work world.

Further, regardless of one's view of the degree to which companies and workers share common interests and whether or not the workplace has actually changed, the curriculum involved in helping students acquire the literacy skills needed to participate in workplace groups is worthwhile. Skills in problem-solving, decision-making, reasoning, interpersonal communication, peer-teaching, and cooperative conflict will serve students well whatever their views on the degree of mutual interest they share with those above them in the power hierarchy and may increase their ability to influence the relationship. Indeed, such skills will help students/employees judge for themselves how much mutual interest exists.

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