

Teaching Small Group Communication: The Do Good Project

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This paper focuses on the parameters of a semester-long project called the "Do Good" project, geared towards developing small group communication skills in undergraduate students. This project highlights participation in a social engagement project that allows students to bridge concepts learned in small group communication lectures (e.g., team dynamics, project management, conflict resolution, decision making, leadership) with community outreach. Included are an overview of the project, and examples for how each component both challenges students' ability to communicate in groups and provides motivation that foster students' ability to link in-class knowledge with practical, real world application.

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While teachers have been making strides in connecting assignments to real world practice, (e.g., case studies; guided simulations; training modules), there is always room to motivate students to push student engagement a bit further. Students find interest in class assignments to be difficult, with only the threat of making the grade as a motivation to extend the effort. Wohlfarth et al. (2008) found that students worked harder and smarter when less emphasis was placed on measurable grades or on assignments like quizzes where students' main focus is memorization. Students who perceive an assignment as busywork do not find such assignments useful or fulfilling, particularly when the assignment takes a great deal of effort (Vandsburger & Duncan-Daston, 2011). Monge and Contractor (2003) demonstrate that prior to an individual making a group commitment, that individual considers the overall investment costs of participation in relation to the return received from their effort. Kemp (2010) found that disconnect from material can occur when students do not connect material toward practical applications, especially the workplace. Students who feel disconnected with assignments may wonder "What's in it for me?"

Challenge: Service Learning as a Motivator

Teachers can be aware of students' attention to social exchange by explicitly providing motivation for students. Williams and Williams (2011) outlined factors that motivate students' learning in the classroom ranging from student-driven, teacher-driven, content-focused, method/process focused, and environment focused. Overall, they conclude that "individuals who are motivated intrinsically tend to develop high regard for learning course information without the use of external rewards or reinforcement," (p. 3). Teachers who assign a service learning project can open dialogue with students about how focusing attention on the betterment of local neighborhood organizations can yield residents with stronger ties to each other and to their communities, resulting in an increase in the quality of life within that community (Lange, 2003). Highlighting efforts for the betterment and benefit of others as well as introducing elements that speak to the timely need of the effort may yield students who are more motivated and more engaged in creating worthwhile projects (Kiener, 2009). Creating opportunities for students to get involved in such a project can foster a bridge between academic classroom material and hands-on practice (Fritson, 2008). This paper outlines a complex group communication project titled "Do Good" that focuses on social engagement on a local level. Included are an overview of the project and examples for how each component both challenges students' ability to communicate in groups and provides

motivation that foster students' ability to link in-class knowledge with practical application.

Project Description: The "Do Good" Project

The "Do Good" project allows students to hone their group communication skills by working together to take on a small project that they can do well. By bridging the gap between theoretical concepts articulated during lecture and real world application of those concepts in practice, students can focus their skills through the lens of social awareness. College students typically spend the first portion of the semester (about six weeks) learning about the skills needed to successfully work as a team, including aspects of group structure and formation, decision making, shared leadership, conflict resolution, and the different types of tasks that predicate teamwork. Then the "Do Good" project is assigned. Each group is required to develop, create, and conduct a project, fundraiser or service project at the local level that does good (i.e., is philanthropic in nature). Conducting a fundraiser or service project can include: creating and hosting a community event; taking on a policy change (e.g., getting new desks in classrooms); making and disseminating a Public Service Announcement (PSA); hosting an event (e.g., a cultural event, hosting a speaker, collecting goods); sponsoring a family for the holidays; making a YouTube video that is uplifting or educational; hosting a community spotlight (e.g., elderly home visits, firefighters, local police, social work in some form); creating a teaching tool or an art exhibit; or sponsoring an event for children. Students have free range of options when determining the recipients of their efforts as long as local parameters are observed. Students can ensure that they are working in a local context by reaching out to organizations run within the neighborhood community rather than contributing to large nationally-well known organization. Williams and Williams (2011) found that giving students ownership and choice over the content of their projects serves two purposes. Students are more likely to be invested in the long term when they have autonomy over their projects, and students make connections to timely social issues occurring in the moment. Taken a step further, groups who are offered the opportunity to self-select their classroom work group members report higher levels of trust, relational satisfaction, and overall commitment (Myers, 2012).

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Each group is responsible for the development, promotion, and implementation of the plan, which includes the submission of a formal, written portfolio and presentation (see Appendix). The written portfolio should be a well-organized report reflecting the time and care the group will have put into the project. Likewise, the arrangement of the report should follow the criteria for effective communication in formal reports and proposals (e.g., executive summary, table of contents). The portfolio requires students to dedicate attention to process, process improvement, transparency, as well as an attention to the communicative steps towards implementation that they would have learned throughout the semester. An example of implementing material would be learning how to create an agenda and run a meeting and practicing those skills during "Do Good" project meetings.

The oral presentation should be organized based on the strategies and criteria for effective presentations either learned in skills-oriented courses (e.g., public speaking) or as described by the professor. Additionally, the presentation should be presented formally and professionally. Depending on the project, the instructor should inform students of the right to invite guests (e.g., the Dean, prominent community members, local legislators, beneficiaries of the project) to

these presentations in order to show off the accomplishments. The introduction of high-profile individuals beyond the scope of the classroom elevates the level of performance and as such, students may be more motivated to elevate their own and their teammates' performances (Liu & Olson, 2011). The combination of the formal portfolio, the presentation, and the responsibility of carrying out the event are necessary for encouraging students to think beyond directing the scope of writing or presenting to one audience (i.e., the teacher; Hastings, 2003). Additionally, preparing the portfolio and presentation provides a tangible takeaway that students can display during their post-graduation job hunt (Love & Mackert, 2013).

Parameters for the assignment require students to choose a project that is related to an underrepresented cause or issue. By selecting an underrepresented cause, students have the ability not only to assist with a monetary donation but also to include the bonus of raising awareness, a value which can be just as important as donations. Highlighting the benefit of raising awareness allows students to make additional motivational connections that include empowerment through giving voice to those who may have previously been underrepresented. When combining autonomy and timeliness of a project with a local requirement, students look to their own communities for inspiration. Hu and Liden (2014) find that pro-social motivation allows students to see firsthand that recipients of goodwill can increase the connectivity to the project and can enhance student investment.

Discussion

Students are challenged by the "Do Good" project in a variety of ways. First, the very nature of group work requires greater attention to both task and relational communication than solo endeavors. Students who successfully attend to both task and relationship are practicing communication competence (Canary & Spitzberg, 1987). Additionally, Meinecke, Smith, and Lehmann-Willenbrock (2013) suggest that students will likely experience working with coworkers from other cultural backgrounds upon graduation, so practicing a task with students who may be from culturally different backgrounds provides opportunity for competent intercultural communication practice. Naturally, logistical issues arise during group work that requires communication competence. Students should be encouraged to handle the creation of all deadlines and specifics concerning the group's plans and ideas without influence from the instructor. Consequently, difficulty arises during an undertaking as large as a semester-long group communication project, and although the instructor may offer to listen and provide guidance, the bulk of conflict resolution and problem solving should remain the responsibility of the students. Placing the onus on the students encourages them to work as a team and empowers them to work together to find appropriate solutions (Williams & Williams, 2011). An additional, yet optional parameter that teachers may employ is the requirement for the peers in the group to evaluate each team member's participation. The confidential completion of an evaluation speaks to external motivation in that participants who know they will be judged by their peers may abandon a common tendency to engage in social loafing, the phenomenon occurring when individuals slack during involvement with a collective (Harkins & Jackson, 1985).

Second, students must find ways to negotiate roles within the group. Because of the nature of a longitudinal project, the emergence of leadership must be self-managed by students as the project evolves. Unlike short-term, lab-based groups where one leader emerges for the duration (e.g., a simulated group activity that spans one class period), leadership emergence is a fluid process where individuals share leadership at various times during the project to assist the group in completing a range of tasks (Kramer, 2006). Shared leadership is a bottom-up process that relies on empowerment of members to co-create the goals and tasks of the group, rather than carrying out a directive assigned by a singular individual (Graen, 2003). One of the primary appeals of group communication is the opportunity to work with different individuals who bring a range of expertise to the

group. Students can learn ways to position their individual expertise in a meaningful way that can enhance the outcomes of the group (Minei & Bisel, 2013). Weick and Sutcliffe (2007) find that group members who practice deference to expertise allow decision making to be pushed down and around allow contributions from members who can contribute meaningfully in the moment. Decision making that spans the group allows all members the opportunity for meaningful participation. Pearce and Conger (2003) suggest that when students view leadership as participatory, they have greater influence over ongoing leading and decision making. When sharing or participation in process occurs, collaboration emerges among group members (Hiller & Day, 2003). One of the more prominent comments that students relayed during final presentations was benefits of a shared leadership approach during the “Do Good” project, with one or two students leading the event, another doing the presentation, another having control over the creative design, and so on.

Third, students must work within the parameters of the semester, which include developing a creative fundraiser or service project suitable for the time frame for the remainder of the semester. Given that a typical semester is about 14 weeks, students are limited in that the first six weeks of the semester are spent learning the skills needed to function successfully, and the last two weeks are spent giving the presentations; so students have roughly six weeks to complete the task. Students are encouraged to take into account the steps that they need to accomplish the task, including but not limited to:

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investigating the recipient of the service/funds; reserving a suitable location; advertising and promoting the activity; identifying the specifics concerning how funds will be ethically raised and delivered; researching city or county guidelines; contingency planning for unforeseen circumstances (e.g., weather); and carrying out the actual fundraiser or service project.

Often students underestimate the time they need to complete the project and overestimate the ease with which the project can be completed. Learning through the trial and error approach can sometimes result in non-linear but still productive learning opportunities (Brown, Armstrong, & Thompson, 2014). Guiding students through a strategic conversation about the pitfalls of poor time management during the “Do Good” project from the start can yield greater awareness of external factors that can hinder overall group performance. Upon completion of the project, students will be able to: (1) utilize group communication skills towards the completion of a philanthropic event, (2) navigate group dynamics and tensions occurring during long-term event planning situations, (3) communicate effectively with diverse group members, and (4) develop content geared towards public presentations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the “Do Good” project benefits students in a number of ways. First, students leave this project with a greater knowledge of group communication and the complexity of decision making and problem solving in small groups. Secondary benefits include the opportunity for individual benefits stemming from group effort that extend after the semester. Students can be encouraged to add completed projects and presentations to their resumes for job seeking upon graduation, a motivating factor that can answer the “what’s in it for me” questions. Beyond the practical use towards resumes, students have also described a range of unexpected takeaways, such as greater empathy for the plight of others (e.g., elderly, homeless, animals); newfound dedication towards service learning; and unexpected friendships. Lastly, tertiary benefits include the main purpose of this project: To Do Good. Real life examples of previous projects include: on-campus

educational events such as supporting the #X—Don't Text and Drive Movement; a Princess Party for local underprivileged children; PSA's for topics such as environmental awareness and nutrition; YouTube videos that outline how to get involved in a local No-Kill animal shelter; efforts towards decreasing homelessness; a documentary interviewing senior citizens in elderly care facilities; Thanksgiving food drives and Christmas coat drives; Social Media movements that support soldiers overseas (#Baruchthanksyou on Instagram) and gives others reason to smile (#SmilewithmeNYC on Facebook); and one project that, in a ripple effect, spanned the globe. One group of five did five random acts of kindness and then challenged five strangers to complete random acts of kindness (#kindnesseffect on Facebook) and post about those acts on a designated Facebook page. A professor in Sri Lanka heard about the project and challenged 500 of her students to do one random act of kindness for a total stranger. At the time of presentation, all 500 had met the professor's challenge.

Students have the unique opportunity to help individuals or a cause by raising funds, serving, and creating awareness. For those that have ever questioned the working-world applicability of assignments or class projects, then the "Do Good" project is an opportunity for them to embrace. Students who take the project to heart and get immersed in the cause and goal truly have the chance to take advantage of the opportunity and make a difference.

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Appendix

Portfolio Rubric 100 pts total:

The portfolio you will be evaluated on will require great attention to process, process improvement, transparency, and an attention to the communicative steps we have learned throughout the semester. The portfolio is a written component that you will create that keeps your group organized, and documents the progression of the project. The portfolio should be neat, organized, cohesive, and complete for submission on the day you present. Your portfolio should include the following pages, in order:

Checklist:

- Cover Page/Title of your project 5 pts _____
- Table of Contents 5 pts _____
- Introduction to team members (aim for a paragraph, include aspects of Personality Type and be completely creative with the design) 10 pts _____
- Calendar or Schedule including: Meeting Dates, Event Dates, Coordination Dates, Dates of Project Presentation, any other dates important to the group 5 pts _____
- Section of Meeting Agenda's and corresponding Meeting Minutes—including any correspondence between members pertinent to project. 10 pts _____
- The Mind Mapping/Brainstorming Document that you create as a group when deciding on your project focus 10 pts _____
- Advertisements/ Promotion Material 10 pts _____
- Visual Documentation (if any—This includes pictures from the event, pictures that you take during meetings, any kind of input that you want to include in the portfolio) 15 pts _____
- Professional, Neat, Adhering to the 10 writing tips, properly cited? (-1/5) pt _____
- An Executive Summary: The following questions should be answered in your executive summary in a detailed manner:
 - What organization/person/group did the fundraiser/service project benefit? Why did you choose this organization/person/group? How did you come to this decision?
 - What was your project, fundraiser or service project? How did you decide on this specific activity?
 - What organizational and practical issues did you have to consider in planning this event? How did you arrive at these considerations?
 - How did you promote the project, fundraiser, or service project? How was the project decided?
 - Was the project/event/fundraising opportunity a success? Why or why not?
 - What were some of the challenges your group faced? How did you deal with these challenges?
 - As a group, what were your strengths and weaknesses? How would you have approached group work differently knowing what you now know? 30 pts _____

Total: _____

Elizabeth Minei is interested in interpersonal communication within organizations. She specializes in team dynamics, leadership, and high-reliability organizations. She is also passionate about teaching and discovering ways to make learning interesting and most importantly, applicable for students.