

Group Work: How to Use Groups Effectively

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Abstract

Many students cringe and groan when told that they will need to work in a group. However, group work has been found to be good for students and good for teachers. Employers want college graduates to have developed teamwork skills. Additionally, students who participate in collaborative learning get better grades, are more satisfied with their education, and are more likely to remain in college. This paper will discuss the use of group work in higher education.

Keywords: Group work, collaborative learning, higher education pedagogy.

Teaching and learning in higher education are changing. Active learning has become an important focus in this time of pedagogical change. While the term encompasses a broad array of practices, collaborative learning, or small group work, remains an important element of active learning theory and practice. Research suggests that students learn best when they are actively involved in the process (Davis, 1993). According to Wasley (2006), “Students who participate in collaborative learning and educational activities outside the classroom and who interact more with faculty members get better grades, are more satisfied with their education, and are more likely to remain in college” (p. A39). A collaborative learning environment, as opposed to a passive learning environment, helps students learn more actively and effectively (Murphy, Mahoney, Chen, Mendoza-Diaz & Yang, 2005). Additionally, research also shows that employers want college graduates to possess the ability to work in groups and have developed suitable teamwork skills (Blowers, 2000).

This paper is designed to offer suggestions on how to use small groups in order to facilitate learning and instructional diversity in face to face classes. It will begin with an overview of the advantages and disadvantages of working in a group and then discuss some of the methods available to enhance group learning and communication. It will also provide some suggestions for evaluating and assessing group work. While many people detest the mere suggestion of group work, it can be an effective tool if used appropriately.

Groupbate: What’s there to love?

Many people cringe and groan when told that they will need to work in a group. This phenomenon is called “groupbate.” Groupbate has been referred to as the dread and re-

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pulsion that many people feel about working in groups or teams (Sorenson, 1981). However, these feelings diminish among group members who have received proper instruction about working in groups. One way to overcome group hate is to form realistic expectations of group work. According to Beebe and Masterson (2003), there are advantages and disadvantages to working in a group. By understanding the benefits and potential pitfalls, a group can capitalize on the virtues of group work and minimize the obstacles that hinder success.

Advantages: There are six advantages to working in a group:

1. Groups have more information than a single individual. Groups have a greater well of resources to tap and more information available because of the variety of backgrounds and experiences.
2. Groups stimulate creativity. In regard to problem solving, the old adage can be applied that “two heads are better than one.”
3. People remember group discussions better. Group learning fosters learning and comprehension. Students working in small groups have a tendency to learn more of what is taught and retain it longer than when the same material is presented in other instructional formats (Barkley, Cross & Major, 2005; Davis, 1993).
4. Decisions that students help make yield greater satisfaction. Research suggests that students who are engaged in group problem solving are more committed to the solution and are better satisfied with their participation in the group than those who were not involved.
5. Students gain a better understanding of themselves. Group work allows people to gain a more accurate picture of how others see them. The feedback that they receive may help them better evaluate their interpersonal behavior.
6. Team work is highly valued by employers. Well developed interpersonal skills were listed by employers among the top 10 skills sought after in university graduates (Graduate Outlook Survey, 2010).

Disadvantages: Although working in groups has its advantages, there are also times when problems arise. Beebe and Masterson (2003) list four disadvantages.

1. There may be pressure from the group to conform to the majority opinion. Most people do not like conflict and attempt to avoid it when possible. By readily acquiescing to the majority opinion, the individual may agree to a bad solution just to avoid conflict.
2. An individual may dominate the discussion. This leads to members not gaining satisfaction from the group because they feel too alienated in the decision making process.
3. Some members may rely too heavily on others to do the work. This is one of the most salient problems that face groups. Some members do not pitch in and help and do not adequately contribute to the group (Freeman & Greenacre, 2011). One solution to this problem is to make every group member aware of the goals and objectives of the group and assign specific tasks or responsibilities to each member.

4. It takes more time to work in a group than to work alone. It takes longer to accomplish tasks when working with others. However, the time spent taking and analyzing problems usually results in better solutions.

Overall, effective student participation in group work is an important learning outcome for higher education courses (Elgort, Smith & Toland, 2008). Although many students feel as though they can accomplish assignments better by themselves rather than in a group, instructors find that group work helps the students apply knowledge (Elgort, Smith & Toland, 2008). However, merely assigning a group does not itself create critical thinking outcomes. Therefore, the instructor must be cognizant of how best to facilitate effective collaborative learning environments.

There are four stages of group work. First, the instructor must decide that he/she wants to incorporate group work into the class. The group work should be designed into the syllabus. The second stage involves teaching the students to work in a group. Instructors cannot assume that students know how to work together, structure time, and delegate tasks. The instructor must be able to teach the students how to work proactively in groups. This leads to the third stage, which involves monitoring the groups. The last stage, and the most important to the students, is the assessment of the group. The instructor must develop a concrete rubric for grading the students.

Getting Started

The best place to start group work (much like anything else) is at the beginning. When developing a course syllabus, the instructor can determine what topics and theme lend themselves to group work. This is the time that instructors can think about how they will form their groups, help negotiate the group process, and decide how to evaluate the final product.

Johnson, Johnson and Smith (1991) suggest that group tasks should be integral to the course objectives. This means that the group work should complement the learning objectives outlined in the syllabus. If one of the learning objectives is to promote critical thinking skills or writing enhancement, then the group work should support these areas.

Group Size

The dynamics of group size is an important component of group work. A small group is often considered to consist of three or more people (Beebe & Masterson, 2003). Groups of two are called dyads and are not encouraged for group work because there are not a sufficient number of individuals to generate creativity and a diversity of ideas (Csernica et al., 2002). In general, it is suggested that groups of four or five members tend to work best (Davis, 1993). However, Csernica et al. (2002) suggests that three or four members are more appropriate. Larger groups decrease each members opportunity to participate and often results in some members not actively contributing to the group. In situations where there is a shorter amount of time available to complete a group task, such as an in-class collaborative learning exercise, it is suggested that smaller groups are more appro-

priate. The shorter amount of time available, the smaller the group should be (Cooper, 1990; Johnson, Johnson & Smith, 1991).

Group work can be especially beneficial for large classes. Wright and Lawson (2005) found that group work helped students feel that the class was smaller and encouraged them to come to class more often. They felt more invested in the course and in the class material, which promoted active learning in a large class environment.

Assigning a Group

Assigning the members of the group is integral to the success of the group. Some faculty members prefer to randomly assign students to groups. This has the advantage of maximizing heterogeneity of the group (Davis, 1993) and is an effective way of assigning group members in large classrooms. If the class size is small and the instructor is familiar with most of the students, the instructor can select the group members based on known attributes of the class. For example, the instructor can form the groups while taking into account performance levels, academic strengths and weaknesses, ethnicity, and gender (Connery, 1988).

Additionally, some instructors allow the class to self-select their group; however, this has some disadvantages. Self-selected groups often gravitate toward friends and roommates (Csernica et al., 2002). This can result in the students self-segregating and spending more time socializing than working on the group project (Cooper, 1990). Research suggests that groups which are assigned by the instructor tend to perform better than self-selected groups (Felder & Brent, 2001).

Teaching Students

It is difficult for teachers to design and implement group work effectively, and it is difficult for students to foster the group process, especially if they do not have the skills to make effective use of group work. Many students have never worked in a group before or lack the skills to work with others. Instructors cannot assume that students know how to work together, structure time, or delegate tasks. There are several ways that instructors can help.

First, the instructor should make certain that each student understands the assignment. Students should know the purpose of the project, the learning objective, and the skills that need to be developed through group work. Successful group work is easier if the students know how the assignment relates to the course content and what the final product is supposed to be (Davis, 1993).

Second, the instructor needs to reinforce listening skills and the proper methods to give and receive constructive criticism. These skills can be discussed in class and modeled during class activities. Some faculty use various exercises that are geared toward helping students gain skills to work in groups (Fiechtner & Davis, 1992). Small in-class group activities help reinforce cohesion and group unity.

Third, the instructor needs to help the students manage conflict and disagreements. The instructor should avoid breaking up the groups (this will be discussed in more detail later in this paper). When a group is not working well together, the students need to learn how to communicate effectively and establish goals for a successful group (Davis, 1993).

Monitoring the Group Process

One method to help groups succeed is to ask each group to devise a plan of action (Davis, 1993). The plan of action involved assigning roles and responsibilities among the group members. Each member should have a role, such as the note take or the group spokesman. The instructor can review each group's written plan of action or meet with each group individually and discuss their plan.

Another method to help monitor a group's progress is to ask them to submit weekly progress reports. These reports (or weekly meeting notes) should outline what the group discussed, who attended the meeting, and the objectives set for the next week. In this manner, the instructor can monitor the group's activities and progress throughout the semester and assess the level of involvement from each member.

Group Dissonance

Groups will not always work well together. Some groups lack motivation, strong leadership, or simply have personality conflicts. Even when it appears that a group is falling apart, it is important to avoid breaking up the group. Not only will the group dynamics of the original group be affected if the members are reassigned, but the addition of members to other groups will disrupt their dynamics as well (Davis, 1993).

One way to help prevent conflict and group members who shirk duties is to keep the group small. It is difficult to be a "loafer" or a "slacker" in a small group (Davis, 1993). Additionally, matching work assignment to skill sets will help separate the "loafers" from the students who are generally struggling (Freeman & Greenacre, 2011). Freeman and Greenacre (2011) suggest that instructors should help the students understand the benefits of working together as a group for the group as a whole, which will help students who are struggling (Freeman & Greenacre, 2011). Furthermore, the group should be encouraged to have assigned roles and responsibilities. It is more difficult to be a slacker if the goals are clearly outlined for each member.

It is necessary to help a group work through disagreements and find resolution. Simply breaking up the group does not encourage the students to work through differences. Freeman and Greenacre (2011) suggest that group interventions should be aimed at the destructive group member, focus on the behavior and not the person, and address the benefits of the group process for the group as a whole. Barkley et al. (2005) recommend designing the coursework in such a way that the success of the individual relies on the success of the group. The instructor should assist the group in creating ways in which to handle unproductive members and foster communication skills.

Evaluation

Evaluating a group is a difficult task and the instructor should have a clear idea of how he/she wants to evaluate the group work. First, the instructor should decide what is being evaluated: the final product, the process, or both. Next, it is necessary to decide who assigns the grade: the students, the instructor, or both. Some faculty members assign each member of a group the same grade, which may promote unhappiness if some members devote more time and effort to the group and get the same grade. Some instructors assign each group member an individual grade, which may or may not foster competition within the group and may undermine the group solidarity (Davis, 1993). If the group is graded as a whole, it is suggested that the project or presentation should not count for more than a small percentage of the student's final grade (Cooper, 1990; Johnson, Johnson & Smith, 1991).

If the aspect of process is going to be evaluated, it is important to give the students an opportunity to assess the effectiveness of their group. At the end of the process, they should be able to list their contributions, their group member's contributions, and the process as a whole. They should be able to identify the aspects that worked and the aspects that did not work. The student's group assessment allows the instructor to evaluate the group process and apply the most effective methods to future group projects.

In the aspect of assessment, it is vital that the students know and understand how they will be evaluated. One method used to convey this information is with a structured grading rubric. A rubric is a scoring tool which lists the criteria by which a paper or presentation will be graded. The rubric lists, not only the criteria by which the work is judged, but also the student's mastery of the material (Finson & Ormsbee, 1998). Stevens and Levi (2005) advocate the use of rubrics because they: convey expectations to the students, help students focus their efforts, improve student achievement, reduce grading time for the instructor and improve the effectiveness of feedback

If the instructor is interested in assessing the group process and final product, two separate rubrics need to be created. For the process, the evaluation criteria should represent the learning objectives for class and for the group. Process evaluation might include: attendance and participation in meetings, time management skills, active listening, evidence of cooperative behavior, and professionalism and engagement with the task.

For evaluating the effectiveness of the product, a more concrete grading rubric might be necessary. The criteria can be outlined based on content, structure, organization, accuracy, thoroughness, and general mechanics. Rubrics can be helpful for both students and instructors; they outline expectations and allow instructors to assign grades on a more objective basis. Rubrics provide detailed breakdowns of points that are awarded for each criterion and how those points are awarded. Additionally, rubrics are useful beyond grading; they also help students conceptualize the assignment (Mckeown, 2011).

The instructor knows what the end product should look like, and it is his or her responsibility to effectively convey that expectation to the students (Finson & Ormsbee, 1998).

Herman, Aschbacher, and Winters (1992) suggest that a good rubric consist of clear and logical categories that explain what the instructor is assessing and the point value for each response. This practice ensures that both the student and the teacher are satisfied with the end result and makes the group process a more objective learning experience. Rubrics are very useful for evaluating group work and increase the chances of student success (Finson & Ormsbee, 1998). Mckeown (2011) asserts that rubrics should be locally relevant and culturally appropriate. In this way, they cannot be a “one size fits all” approach and must be modified to fit different classes, disciplinary perspectives, and learning objectives.

Conclusion

There is a well of information about group work and the benefits of collaborative learning. When students spend time meeting in groups, they are able to achieve a deeper learning themes covered in class as well as develop skills, such as writing and communication (Light 2001). Wright and Lawson (2005) found that the bridging of in- and outside- class work encourages students to spend more time preparing for class, and having conversations with team members outside of regular class time.

One of the most recent trends in collaborative learning appears to be the use of technology to advance group work. Elgort, Smith and Toland (2008) utilized the use of wikis in a class and found that most wikis encouraged student participation and group involvement, but did not counteract student preference to work alone rather than in a group. Additionally, many instructors use online discussion forums in their face to face classes to foster participation and engagement (Wright & Lawson, 2005). This has the advantage of engaging commuter students and students who have jobs in addition to taking classes. Utilizing online or web based might help resistant students engage in and benefit from group work.

Overall, it seems clear that when it comes to group work, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. While creating, monitoring, and evaluating groups is a recursive process, active learning techniques are beneficial for students. Supplementing lectures with group work helps students feel engaged and subsequently learn more (Payne, Monl-Turner, Smith & Sumter, 2004). Group work helps students develop teamwork skills and social interactions as well as learning about various backgrounds, culture, beliefs, and attitudes (Payne et al., 2004). Group work does not have to yield “group hate” and as long as the instructor is properly prepared to introduce and facilitate group involvement and participation, group work can produce very positive and lasting results.

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