Running head: A CRITICAL RESEARCH PAPER

A Critical Research Paper: Philosophy of Facilitation

Assignment 3

Daniela Slater

4396875

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Susan Byrne, Professor

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Why do students fear group work?

Introduction

Group work is the "in" thing for today's classroom (whether it's a bricks and mortar environment, or online). Why is it so popular, and yet why do students fear it and despise it? In order to find some answers to these questions, we will look at a number of factors contributing to this fear and dislike. This paper will outline some facts about group work, the benefits of using group work, the challenges for the student and facilitator, the argumentative evaluation process, the right time for group work, how to set up a group, strategies that enhance effective group work and summarize the findings. We need to bring out the humanistic side of students and convince them that if given the opportunity and the right tools, the outcome will result in a grand wealth of diverse knowledge. This, along with a set of norms and well designed plan of action should, not only, encourage, but excite students to view group work from a positive standpoint. This paper will explore all of this to find the alternatives to student resistance to bland and less effective group assignments. First, we'll start with some facts.

   Facts about Group Work

Getting started is difficult and setting ground rules and guidelines should provide direction and avoid conflict. Conflict can happen when there is a difference of opinion or lack of contribution and must be dealt with. Building good relationships within the group is conducive to a good working environment. Roles and responsibilities are a must to avoid duplication or lack of required material. It also removes anxiety created by lack of direction. Research states that working in small groups allows students to absorb and retain information. Students are much happier when involved in the process of the group activities. Exchange of ideas and

knowledge between peers within the group is enriching. This paper will address some of these facts.

Benefits of Group Work

Students learn many skills in small groups, by participation, research, peer contribution, own contribution and discussions. In smaller groups, cognitive skills are put to work as students feel less intimidated versus a whole class. Assigning leadership, note-taking and time-keeping roles tests the skills in direction and delegation. Organizational skills are utilized as each member adheres to their specific tasks and how they are able to present it as one unit. Co-operative and decision-making skills are probably one of the most difficult which require patience, and if carefully attended to, are great skills that can be developed. The exchange of ideas and information is a very positive benefit for those who are eager to learn from their peers. This also results in a more productive outcome.

Group work invites discussion which brings out the social aspect. Students who are socially challenged may be able to speak up in a smaller group environment. Confidence increases as trust is built within the group. Each student brings their own experience and knowledge in a subject matter which, collaboratively, allows for shorter completion time and greater intensity to the overall outcome. Although it is a collaborative effort, and the assessment applies as a whole, it should encourage equal participation.

In the business world, when working on a project of any meaningful size, group work is necessary, which is why doing group work in school is important. Why teach students to work individually in school, when in the "real world", the vast majority have to interact with others, and work in a group to achieve results. IATA (International Air Transport Association) has many groups that oversee many facets of the airline industry, from Accident Classification Task

Force (ACTF), to Dangerous Goods Board (DGB). These are very critical areas in that they

affect human lives. Individual contribution to issues or projects has limited value. Consider the

outcome of decisions made in these critical areas if only one individual was involved!

Challenges

Initially, group work is frowned upon by students because they don't always feel

everyone has contributed equally and the members don't always agree. Isn't it also difficult

because they lose control, and have to rely on others instead of just themselves? This is when

groups begin to disband and become lop-sided. Some students welcome it in having a "shoulder

to lean on" where they are not held completely responsible for failure alone. Groups need to

become organized and a leader needs to be designated. This, along with a plan of action and

assigning tasks, takes time to develop. There is always an ongoing issue for students being

evaluated when equal contribution doesn't occur. Students feel it is unfair when the work is

distributed equally but not completed equally.

Groups fail when everyone conforms to one individual's ideas or when an individual

works in isolation and chooses not to be a team player. Personality conflicts can also affect the

performance, and ultimately, the group's poor end result. The facilitator is challenged when

dealing with differences within the group, lack of participation and conflicts. Students with

exterior and/or personal problems may find the group work too challenging and if not addressed

or brought to the facilitator's attention, affects the work and peer attitude.

Language difficulties can affect the performance of the group or an individual.

International students with little English often feel intimidated and the other members feel

uncomfortable trying to understand the language. This can form barriers and isolation.

Evaluation Process and its Challenges

The benefit to evaluating group work is that it reduces work for the facilitator, but the downside is evaluating unbalanced contributions. In many cases, all members receive the same mark. I'm not sure I completely agree with this or feel it is fair, if not monitored closely. The problem is that an individual may lack participation due to shyness, laziness, personal problems, procrastination or being left out from cliques within the group.

The Right Time for Groups

Group work is not always the answer but it does bring people together. It provides each member the opportunity to hear different perspectives from their peers, but it doesn't necessarily produce efficiency and individual ideas when "group think" occurs. Often, while brainstorming, specific ideas may be discussed but leaves little room to think of new ideas. The right time for groups is when there is a need to test students' abilities to, work as a team, delegate work, compromise and allow for social interaction. Social interaction is an important element to life long learning. Is the right time for groups when students need a break from lectures when boredom sets in? A variety of learning methods might help maintain interest. Group work allows for critical thinking and when the mind is stagnant from a lecture, then it may be the right time.

Setting up Groups

The initial startup of group work involves selection of members and identification of roles. Assigning group members can be accomplished in a number of ways: self-assigned, facilitator-assigned based on high/low contributors, gender mix, randomly assigning a number etc. Mixing student groups or "pedagogic bouillabaisse" as Brookfield classifies it, may work sometimes but may not when there is a need to accommodate individual interests. Students

normally prefer to work with someone they know but that is not always the best option as they

may be distracted by personal conversations and blocking out the other members. The roles of

each member can be designated by the facilitator or within the group. Examples of roles:

- **Leader -** leads group discussion; call on individual speakers for the group; ensure
  equal participation; reports group progress to the facilitator, calls meetings
- **Note Taker -** writes down details of the discussion, provides minutes
- **Time Keeper -** keeps the group on task; reports time left for finishing task

Other interesting roles can include Devil's Advocate, Umpire, Synthesizer etc. Without roles,

getting started could take longer, become unorganized and cause frustration.

Strategies that Enhance Effective Group Work

Students need to feel motivated when working in a group and this can be done by the

facilitator at the beginning. It helps to introduce the purpose and advantages of group work at

the start. Norms must be established at the beginning with or without the facilitator. Providing

the group with this task allows them to take ownership of their group as long as it is

accomplished without conflict. A set of rules or guidelines should be established by the

facilitator when necessary. I would strongly suggest that the facilitator oversee the norms set by

the group to ensure they are feasible.

The facilitator should be available to intervene as needed. The students should be made

aware of when to ask for help inside and outside of the group. By keeping the group size small

(4-6), it discourages the "lost syndrome" when certain individuals just tag along for the ride and

don't appear noticeable and don't contribute. As much as it is a nice offering when a facilitator

allows the group to select their own members, it may result in an imbalance of low/high

contributors and lack diversity.

The art of effective group work comes from the previous development of group work skills in order to achieve better results by the members. If this is not possible as a prerequisite, then guidelines should be provided. Some of these guidelines include good listening, helping each other with content, accepting and providing constructive criticism and discussing instead of arguing. Allow each person a say! Contracts can be used to provide a list of tasks and their due dates assigned to each student. Group members should spend time together to get to know each other, through small tasks; icebreakers.

Another process to gradually introduce each other is through a slightly elongated process called "scaffolding. The definition of scaffolding is "a temporary framework for construction in progress" and is put up for support and is taken away as needed. Scaffolding is used as a means to gradually introduce students to something new or difficult, in this case, through group work. Basically, it is a two-step process which slowly introduces the students to working together, thinking critically, assessing themselves and their peers anonymously etc. To support this idea, I came across an interesting study conducted by the ACU National in Australia (2006). In the first step, they were allowed to review the answers of their peers and write a reflection on the peer review process. The students indicated that the exchange of ideas improved the overall quality and allowed them to apply critical thinking in what they were doing and reflect on the process itself. Brookfield (2006) suggests scaffolding in the form of skeletal notes given to students ahead of time to prepare for lectures. He also presents it when encouraging participation by way of short discussion contributions, one line or word comments to introduce the concept of engaging in baby steps.

Assessment of group work should be designed to evaluate the product, group effort, interaction and co-operation, individual contribution and presentation of the group work. It

should encourage debate when observing group work in action and have the group provide their work as a presentation for the class to evaluate. This will encourage better production and results in knowing there is a mixed form of evaluation attached. The students should be made aware of exactly how they will be evaluated so they know what to expect and how to handle it. By attaching a separate form that requires each student to provide information would test their knowledge and uncover their participation to determine if they pulled their weight. Some examples of what each student would need to provide are: a list of their own and each members' duties and roles, answers to questions related to the project, a rough draft of their work, peer evaluation, a date/time log of meetings held etc. Students need to be made accountable for their actions and this individual report may indicate any inconsistencies.

Online learning may enhance the group learning experience for those challenged socially providing it is well organized. With less time constraints and well-defined roles, the student faces (no pun intended), less uncomfortable obstacles.

Conclusion

"The students in a group must perceive that they 'sink or swim' together, that each member is responsible to, and dependent on, all the others, and that one cannot succeed unless all in the group succeed. Knowing that peers are relying on you is a powerful motivator for group work". (Kohn, 1986). Although that may be easier said than done, I think it's an important message to convey.

For groups to be successful, they need to feel there is potential for accomplishment and a relevance to the course. Some believe there should be allowance for judgment (Johnson, Johnson, and Smith, 1991). I believe that group tasks should begin with simple activities at the start of the semester and allow the students to build on their group norms, confidence, social

interaction and peer habits. The level of difficulty in subsequent group assignments can increase while the concept of group work becomes easier and clearer and the challenges simpler to overcome. I would recommend keeping the same members of the group together throughout the course term. This may not seem feasible to some, but group work is difficult by nature, so why supplement the difficulty with constant change of social interaction. Staying with the same members helps to identify with their peers' behaviourist and humanistic sides. I have been involved in sports all my life, and when I see too much shuffling of team members, there is a whole new learning curve that happens. The need for social familiarization occurs time and time again, and this detracts from the main focus - the actual sport or game. What I think should change for each group activity is the group roles. Each member takes on a new responsibility and that in itself, is change enough and provides further learning. This tests the students in a variety of positions and allows the student to see what it's like from all angles.

Groups in education and in the workplace are undeniably effective, if administered properly. If students fear or dislike group work, we need to bring out their humanistic side by making them aware of the workforce's need for groups. As I see it, without the 3 D's: Discuss, Debate and Decide, it's only one-sided. It's time that more focus is placed on explaining why group work is important. With that in mind, students may find a clearer path and increased cooperation amongst their group members; and united, will produce dynamic results.

Barbara Gross Davis, summed it all up best with:

"Why Use Groups in College Classes?

Researchers report that students learn best when they are actively involved in the process. Students working in small groups tend to learn more of what is taught and retain it longer than when the same content is presented in other instructional formats. And we know from experience

that when students feel connected, engaged, and included, they feel more satisfied with their courses. In addition, group work provides students with more "real world" experience, because most of them will indeed be spending much of their working lives developing projects in groups. Groups also often provide more of a sense of "shared purpose" in a class, which means that students feel a greater sense of dedication to the material. Finally, groups where students meet other students they might not regularly associate with can provide new insights and ways of thinking."

  I will conclude this paper further by asking the question again "Why do students fear group work?" The answer is simple. They have not been guided properly, given the right tools, explained the concepts and benefits, and lack the experience. With the right direction and convincing argument, students will find the experience enjoyable, rewarding and ultimately successful.

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Appendix A

Date	Location	Notes
04Mar09	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=woNZzjJL9bQ	
04Mar09	http://www.jalt-publications.org/tlt/articles/2000/03/gray	**Group Work: Using Job Duties in the Classroom** **Jennifer Gray** *Nevada-California International Consortium (NIC), Japan*
04Mar09	http://www.flinders.edu.au/teach/t4l/teaching/groupwork.php	Flinders University, Adelaide, Australia
03Mar09	http://classroom-organization.suite101.com/article.cfm/how_to_work_in_groups	How to Work in Groups **Tips and Ideas for Getting Started with Cooperative Learning** © **Dorit Sasson** **Apr 17, 2007**
04Mar09	http://teaching.berkeley.edu/bgd/collaborative.html	**Collaborative Learning:** **Group Work and Study Teams** [From the hard copy book *Tools for Teaching* by Barbara Gross Davis; Jossey-Bass
04Mar09	http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/content/cntareas/science/eric/eric-7.htm	*Perspectives of Hands-On Science Teaching* *David L. Haury and Peter Rillero, 1994*
04Mar09	http://coe.nevada.edu/slefevre/Intro.html http://coe.nevada.edu/slefevre/grouprubric.html http://coe.nevada.edu/slefevre/evaluation.html	Introduction to Evaluation and the steps EXCELLENT ! Group Evaluation Rubrics Evaluation rules for above rubrics
05Mar09	http://teaching.berkeley.edu/classroom_groups.html	Berkley U of California Barbara Gross Davis, Jossey-Bass, 1993

05Mar09	http://www.utexas.edu/academic/cte/sourcebook/groups.html	**Using Small Groups to Promote Learning** Marilla D. Svinicki Center for Teaching Effectiveness University of Texas at Austin
05Mar09	http://www.fyhe.qut.edu.au/past_papers/papers07/final_papers/pdfs/1d.pdf Reasons why students dislike group work	Embedding group work in the first year experience Alanah Kazlauskas, School of Business and Informatics, ACU National (NSW) Sophie Gimel, Academic Skills Unit, ACU National (NSW) Leighana Thornton, Academic Skills Unit, ACU National (NSW) Theda Thomas, Faculty of Arts and Sciences, ACU National Tim Davis, School of Business and Informatics, ACU National (QLD)
11Mar09	http://www1.iata.org/workgroups/	IATA work groups
11Mar09	http://www.lib.uoguelph.ca/assistance/learning_services/fastfacts/group_work.cfm	Fast Facts on group work - U of Guelph