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2011

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Recommended Citation

Koshy, Swapna, Group Work Teaches Freshmen to Communicate, *Middle East Media Educator*, 1(1), 2011, 63-71.

Available at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/meme/vol1/iss1/12>

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Group Work Teaches Freshmen to Communicate

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Abstract

Group assignments have been used in university education for decades. However, their effectiveness in teaching communication skills to a class of freshmen from diverse educational cultures was a point of concern. This paper studies the effect of a group project on the learning habits and outcomes of freshmen students. Group assignments should be devised to promote collaborative learning and should not make the work easier. Especially with young students the instructor has to actively monitor groups' progress and ensure that work is divided equally to maximize learning for every group member.

Introduction

Two of the greatest challenges for educators in the undergraduate classroom today are the increasingly large classes and the heterogeneity of the students. This affects all aspects of teaching and learning and assessments in particular. More and more educators are using group assignments to assess students in large classes. In general, group work has been proven to have many benefits for students as it replicates the work place, develops communication and survival skills, encourages cross-cultural understanding and relationships, and so on. However, group work must be prescribed judiciously based on the maturity, skill level, and educational and cultural background of students. This study attempts to determine the feasibility of using group work to assess freshmen in a communication skills project.

The rise in student numbers has led to many revisions of course content and modes of assessment. The course initially planned for 20 students is now taught to more than 400 some semesters. Obviously, individual assignments had to be replaced with group projects as numbers grew. Diverse educational and cultural backgrounds of the students created apprehension for the instructor. The study addresses the following:

- 1) How ready are freshmen students for group assignments?
- 2) Can group work be successful for major assignments if students do not have prior training and experience?
- 3) Would students from different educational cultures have different levels of difficulty with group work?
- 4) Would group work be successful in a multicultural milieu with a majority of third culture students?
- 5) Will group assignments encourage freeloaders?

Literature Review

Studies and analyses most relevant to the five areas of concern stated above were examined. Johnson, Johnson, and Smith (1991) reviewed more than 600 studies conducted during the past 90 years "comparing the effectiveness of cooperative, competitive, and individualistic efforts" and conclude that "more is known about the efficacy of cooperative learning than about lecturing, departmentalization, the use of instructional technology, or almost any other aspect of education. The more one works in cooperative learning groups, the more that person learns, the

better he understands what he is learning, the easier it is to remember what he learns, and the better he feels about himself, the class, and his classmates." In *Tools for Teaching* Barbara Gross Davis (1993) remarks that the best way for students to learn is by being actively involved in the process.

It is necessary to understand the limitations imposed by previous educational systems and cultural patterns on the student population before subjecting them to any novel study pattern. Because freshmen are highly impressionable and they need to develop healthy study patterns, instructors should encourage good learning practices. Volet and Kee (1993) found that initial differences in the approach to learning between local Australian students and newly arrived Singaporean students disappeared by the end of their first semester of study in Australia. The initial year is thus crucial.

Though more than 100 nationalities are represented, the majority of the students are Asians and Arabs. Asian students are perceived as belonging to an education culture that does not encourage free thinking or communal learning. They are classified as passive rote learners. However, studies by leading authors like John Biggs (2000) have successfully challenged the stereotyping of Asian students. Gerstman and Rex (2001) realistically evaluating the status quo comment that "research on student populations to determine whether a particular culture has a predisposition to an approach to learning has provided mixed results."

Although students from the Indian sub-continent and the far East are stereotyped as rote learners who lack critical thinking skills, John Biggs explodes this myth in his book *Teaching for Quality Learning at University* (2000). He points out that Confucian heritage cultures like those of China, Korea, Japan, Singapore and Hong Kong "are typically lower on surface and higher on deep than those of Western students" (p.126). He explains that there is a need to distinguish between rote and repetitive learning. Repetition is to aid understanding "to ensure correct recall and here it works alongside meaning not against it" (p.127). This applies to Indian students too as the Sanskrit tradition has its roots in repetition. Memorization is the first step towards understanding in most oral traditions. Since the majority of the students studied are Asians, understanding the stereotyping is important.

Feasibility of group work in multicultural systems is considered next. Freshmen are used to working with homogenous groups in their schools and may find it discomforting to work with students from other cultures. However, one of the main reasons for promoting group work is to develop the cultural sensitivity needed in the work place. But students cannot pick it up simply by being in a multicultural environment. Summers and Volet (2008) note that "despite the increasingly multicultural nature of university campuses, the most typical pattern is one of minimal interaction between students of different cultures" (p.357). It is necessary then to find strategies that will enable students to perform in heterogeneous groups.

More than half of the freshmen in the context studied come from Indian and Iranian educational systems that do not practice progressive western learning strategies like collaborative learning. Practitioners and theoreticians agree that it is essential to educate new students about the need for group work before they begin it. As Robertson (1990) observes, "If cooperative work is to be successful, cooperative group skills must be taught, modelled and discussed" (p.126). This helps to bring on an equal platform students with different exposures to group work. Induction into group work also helps build the right attitude and develop much needed motivation.

The Centre for the Study of Higher Education (2007) in the resource called *Assessing learning in Australian Universities* provides five practical assessment guides, including one on assessing group work. Instructors are advised that "If students are informed about the basics, they are more likely to understand the rationale for group work in their subject. As a result, they will

also be more likely to enter their groups with the attitudes, expectations and motivation necessary to engage at a high performance level.”

Grading group work has always been a contentious issue. Often a hard worker bears the load of the whole group, and free loaders riding on others’ shoulders receive better grades than they deserve. When new students do not see a fair system of grading, it can affect their learning process. Heathfield (2000) in his article “Group-based Assessment: An Evaluation of the Use of Assessed Tasks as a Method of Fostering Higher Quality Learning” writes “the anecdotal history from students was that of high stress levels whenever assessed group work was encountered and unfair grades as a result of this process” (p.133). Many educators alleviate this problem by including an individual marking component or peer assessment of individual contributions. Students are sometimes asked to submit summaries which throw light on their contribution.

Research Context

The research was conducted at the University of Wollongong in Dubai (UOWD), a “western” university in the Middle East, after the rise in the number of freshmen necessitated the inclusion of group assignments in a study skills course. However, I was apprehensive about the students’ readiness for group work. The course was supposed to teach the academic skills needed to handle university level work, and the focus was on research and essay writing. The individual essay assignment was changed to a group essay, and a group presentation was introduced. To facilitate work distribution, I provided guidelines for the division of work among group members. Each student completed an allocated task that contributed to the final group product.

The assignment required students to choose a topic from those listed, research collaboratively, write an outline, and produce an essay of 2000 words as well as make a presentation to the group. Students were allowed to select their topics and the members of their group to give them a feeling of freedom and autonomy which it was hoped would motivate them and make them more responsible. Ultimately, the assignment would help students achieve desirable Graduate Attributes such as “informed,” “responsible,” “independent learner,” with “effective communication skills.”

First, students worked on an ice breaker that involved the whole class. An informal introduction to group work was given stressing the importance of getting to know their classmates as they would have to work together on group projects in many courses. Students received the course outline and learned that they had to complete group assignments. Informal cooperative groups worked on ungraded assignments throughout the course to make them team ready. The group project was divided into stages, and every week the students tackled the next stage.

After another orientation to cooperative learning, students were asked to form groups and choose a topic for the argumentative essay. Then they wrote a thesis statement and a brief outline. After outlines were corrected and suggestions made by the instructor, students had to submit completed outlines with in-text citations the following week. This was developed into a draft essay submitted for correction the next week. One week later, students prepared PowerPoint slides from the outlines for presentations. Only around 20 percent of the groups followed this pattern successfully.

Research Method

Qualitative data: A focus group interview with 8 students was conducted, and the responses were recorded and transcribed. Only one student had not worked in a group before. They were from diverse nationalities and skill levels as is reflected in their responses.

What do you think about group work?

Student A - Horrible - you can't be independent ... others would like to give their own opinion, you will have to agree with them ... you can't just do it on your own. If someone is inefficient, it brings the group down.

Student B - But that is not how a company works. When you get out of college unfortunately you have to work with a group...

Student A - I don't think you should become dependent on others ...

Student B - It is not becoming dependent, it is learning to work with a group, learning to compromise...

Student D - I have written many essays on my own so why do we need group now?

Student A, a highly motivated student, and student B who had worked in groups before and was currently in a "bad" group dominated the conversation. Both seemed to consider group work a necessary evil.

Do you prefer to work with friends?

Student A - No, they are my dear friends. I don't want to spoil my relationship with them.

Student C - Yes. It is easier to speak in my language.

Student A - Most of the people who prefer people who speak in their language are not good in English...

Student B - We will get ideas from other nationalities. They will look at the topic in a different way.

How do you feel about working with difficult people?

Student A - You have to be with a difficult person at least once so you will learn

Student B - You have to handle such people in future

Student C - If they don't learn, teach them the hard way, exclude them

Student A - Co-ordinate with them; they just have to follow what we tell them

It is clear that students had different perceptions of group work depending on their academic skill levels.

Quantitative data: Three questionnaires were given to 60 students enrolled in the course to evaluate their responses to group work. The first questionnaire was prior to the commencement of work on the group project to evaluate student perceptions and attitudes to group work in general and to determine if they were ready for collaborative work. The second came after the first stage of the group project – the outline draft submission - to monitor changes in perceptions. The third was after the group presentation, the last stage of the group project. The questions were all closed; students indicated their views anonymously according to a five point Likert scale.

Data Analysis Questionnaire 1

Table 1 – Analysis of Questionnaire 1

1. I have worked on group assignments before.		Yes – 73%	No- 27%
2. I enjoy working on group assignments.		Yes – 90%	No- 10%
3. I have anxieties about working in groups for the essay and oral presentation.	Strongly agree/ Agree 38%	Neutral 46%	Disagree/ Strongly disagree 15%
4. I am anxious about being part of the "wrong" group.	46%	23%	31%
5. I would prefer to choose my group members myself.	57%	30%	10%
6. I would prefer the teacher to choose my group for me.	14%	33%	49%
7. I would prefer my group members to speak the same first language as I do	24%	26%	50%
8. I would prefer my group members to belong to the same nationality as me	14%	35%	51%
9. I would prefer to work with students smarter than I am.	39%	46%	13%
10. I prefer to be the smartest person in my group.	13%	46%	39%
11. A group will function well only if it has a leader.	63%	23%	11%
12. A group will function well only if it meets regularly.	83%	10%	4%
13. Learning to work in a group is important.	87%	7%	2%
14. Working in a group will help me score better grades than if I worked alone.	63%	23%	14%
15. The teacher should monitor groups' activities.	60%	27%	11%

Although I expected the students to be unfamiliar with group work, 73 percent had worked on group assignments in school, and 90 percent of them had enjoyed it. It was reassuring that students were not totally new to collaborative work. However, 38 percent had anxieties about group work. One cause of the anxiety was the fear of being in the “wrong” group as 46 percent of students indicated. Linked to this, 57 percent said they prefer to choose their group themselves compared to 14 percent who want the teacher to do it.

Again, I expected most students would want to form groups with peers who spoke the same first language; however, only 26 percent said that and only 14 percent wanted to work with peers from the same nationality. These results were contrary to the norms discussed in the literature. Students did not care about forming groups with students who spoke the same first language or belonged to the same nationality. What was more important was that they were with “friends.” I observed that students congregated with friends in class or tended to make friends with those who sat near them. They sat in the same place throughout the course.

This could be because most students at UOWD are so called Third Culture Kids, not international students thrust into a new culture at university. The term Third Culture Kids or TCKs or 3CKs was coined by sociologist Ruth Hill Useem in the 1960s and refers to someone who as a child spent a significant period of time in one or more culture(s) other than his or her own. Such young people create a third culture that blends features of their birth culture and the culture in which they are raised. As most students in the study were children of expatriates residing in the Middle East,

growing up in a culture alien to their own and heavily influenced by the culture of their peers, they were open to working with students regardless of first language and nationality. Most students spoke English - usually as a second, third, or more language - and so language was not a barrier.

The majority of the students seemed to understand the benefits of group work; 63 percent agreed that a group would function well only if it had a leader; 83 percent believed a group will function well only if it meets regularly; 87 percent believed that learning to work in a group is important; and 60 percent agreed the instructor should monitor the groups' activities. So students had positive expectations about group work. In fact, 63 percent believed that working in a group would help them score better grades than if they worked alone.

This proved to be a self fulfilling prophecy as there was a significant increase in average grades after group work was introduced, as well as a decrease in the number of students who did not submit their work. It was not clear if this showed positive group dynamics or other forces referred to by Heathfield (1990). Heathfield remarks, "we had two primary concerns about the grading of assessed group work. Firstly, that weaker students were being carried by their group and receiving grades far beyond their individual capacity. Secondly, more capable students were responsible for 'working' the group and producing the assessment item and this extra burden was not reflected in their grades" (p.137). Group work can have a negative effect on capable students. It is also important to consider if this scenario replicates the kind of work place where you cannot expect to be "carried" by colleagues.

Data Analysis Questionnaire 2

Table 2 – Analysis of Questionnaire 2

1. I will be able to write an outline on my own.	Yes 73%	No 27%	
2. We met as a group outside class to work on the outline.	76%	24.5%	
3. We decided how to divide the work in tutorial.	83%	17%	
4. The work was divided equally.	85%	15%	
5. Working with my group was easy.	Strongly agree/ Agree 66%	Neutral 31%	Disagree/ Strongly disagree 2%
6. I could have worked better in another group.	11%	46%	42%
7. The teacher should have selected group members.	18%	26%	55%
8. It is good to be in a group with friends	51%	41%	8%
9. Group work makes students more responsible.	72%	20%	8%
10. It would have been easier to work on the outline on my own	33%	34%	33%

The second questionnaire was distributed when the outline draft had been submitted. Only 15 percent of the groups had submitted at least partially completed outlines, but 73 percent said they could write an outline on their own. That can be explained as the general student tendency to believe they know what is expected of them before they have done the work. However, 76 percent said they met outside class to work on the outline, but only 66 percent agreed that it was easy to work with their group, and 11 percent believed they could have worked better in another group.

In response to the question “I would prefer the teacher to choose my group for me” in the first questionnaire 14 percent agreed; this number rose to 18 percent in the second survey. 72 percent still believed that group work made students more responsible although 33 percent responded that it would have been easier to work on the outline on their own which raises concerns about the pressure that groups exerts on participants.

Data Analysis Questionnaire 3

Table 3 – Analysis of Questionnaire 3

1.I will be able to write an essay on my own.	Strongly agree/ Agree 63	Neutral 28	Disagree/ Strongly Disagree 4
2.Working in a group has helped me to learn better	78	25	7
3.It would have been easier to work on my own	17	39	44
4.We met as a group outside class to work on the presentation.	69	15	16
5.The work was divided equally.	62	23	13
6.It is important to learn to work in a group.	86	11	2
7.My group members did not listen to me.	6	26	67
8.I had the best ideas in my group.	16	67	17
9.I look forward to working with the same group.	50	32	17
10.I enjoyed working on the group assignment	70	22	9

The third questionnaire was given to students after the project was completed. When asked if they would be able to write an essay on their own, 63 percent answered in the affirmative as opposed to 73 percent who responded that they would be able to write outlines on their own. Moreover, 78 percent believed that working in a group had helped them to learn better. Although 33 percent responded that it would have been easier to work on the outline on their own, only 17 percent had a similar response about the essay, probably since it was a longer and more complicated process.

The effectiveness of group work isn't entirely clear: 31 percent did not meet in their group outside class to work on the presentation, a 7 percent increase from the response on Questionnaire 2. Crisp et al. (2007) cite a similar situation in their study “Pros and cons of a group webpage design project in a freshman anatomy and physiology course.” Students were supposed to add their pages to those of the other group members, but one student said, “I never saw what my group members’ pages looked like.” This defeats the whole purpose of collaborative learning.

Only 13 percent complained about the unequal division of work in the group. And just 6 percent said that group members did not listen to them. There was overall unity, and positive group dynamics. In spite of this, only half look forward to working with the same group. Some 16 percent claimed they had the best ideas in their group, and 9 percent did not enjoy working on

the group assignment which suggests the problem was with the group, not the project. Though 90 percent of students had enjoyed working on group projects in high school, by the end of the first group project at university, that number fell to 70 percent.

Summers and Volet (2008) observed a similar trend in their study of freshmen: “the experiences students are having as they progress through their tertiary studies are not leading them to view mixed group work more favourably” (p.362). It is essential for students to have positive feelings about group work as it is inevitable in higher classes and in their career. Steps should be taken to alleviate the pressure on students that group work produces as it mars their learning experience.

The most positive outcome of the project was that unlike in previous semesters, no student failed in the assignments. It was not clear whether they were motivated or coerced by group members. Every student who failed the course had problems with the group, either not submitting work on time or doing no work, even though the instructor constantly advised groups to report slackers before the due date. Indeed, 15 percent of groups complained about under performing members.

Conclusion

The results of this study allayed most of my doubts about the feasibility of group work for freshmen students. However, it is vital to ensure that group projects encourage collaborative learning and not just division of work. Learning together, not collating individual work must be ensured. It could be done through supervised work in the classroom with the instructor continually monitoring groups’ progress and redressing grievances. Without that involvement, students tend to feel that they are learning from peers, not from the instructor.

Work should be divided equally and rationally so that all students learn all parts of the process. This will help to avoid burdening motivated students and exert pressure on freeloaders. To gauge their understanding, students could be asked to submit short individual pieces of work. The exam should contain questions pertaining to the group project to ensure active learning by all students.

The drawbacks were not with the group assessment method, but with the process which should be streamlined to ensure contribution from all group members. This would require completing part of the work in class and a better division of work among group members. Future research should examine whether the popularity of group work and the increase in grades was due to division of work or because students actually learned from and motivated each other.

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