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Guiding Group Work: Activities to maximize student learning from group projects

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Summary

Educators in many disciplines recognize the value of incorporating group learning into their curriculum. Unfortunately, over 80% of instructors give modest, little or no support to students working in groups (Bolton, 1999). In many cases, this can lead to student frustration and resentment of group work. This will also reduce the amount of course content that students will retain from group projects. This workshop is designed to equip you, the instructor, with specific activities to help you guide your students through the stages of group development and the hurdles associated with each.

Keywords
group work, higher education, sciences

Objectives

By the end of this workshop, you will be able to:
- Recognize the intrinsic advantages and disadvantages of using group projects in your classes.
- Implement in your own classrooms, specific in-class activities to help guide learners through the common challenges of working as a group and increase their development of transferable group work skills.

Reference summaries

1. Bacon, D. R., K. A. Stewart, et al. (1999). "Lessons from the best and worst student team experiences: How a teacher can make the difference." <u>Journal of Management Education</u> **23**(5): 467-488.

    • Conducted a survey of 116 BMA students to determine their level of learning and satisfaction in different group learning situations.
    • Draws very clear conclusions about how to control the following variables for maximum group productivity:
        • group selection, longevity, size and evaluation, instruction given on project objectives and on group management techniques

2. Bolton, M.K., *The role of coaching in student groups: A "just-in-time" approach to learning.* Journal of Management Education, 1999. **23**(3): p. 233-250.

    • Advocates strongly for a higher degree of instructor guidance in improving group work strategy
    • Suggests the use of 3 "just-in-time" modules, which are delivered to students at the beginning, middle and end of their group projects. The modules are:
        • Getting groups started on the right foot
        • Helping groups manage diversity and conflict
        • Helping students learn from their group work experience.

3. Hicks, K., *Discussion of stages, characteristics and activities for team learning*, C. Hicks, Editor 2010: London, Ontario.

    • Managing the 4 stages of group development (forming, norming, storming, performing)
    • How to manage group conflict
    • Suggested activities for teaching group work

4. Kahn, W.A., *The Student's Guide to Successful Project Teams,* 2009, New York, New York: Psychology Press. 238.

    • A student guide for successfully managing their student groups. Includes suggestions on developing healthy groups, group roles and responsibilities and conflict management strategies.

5. Vik, G. N. (2001). "Doing More to Teach Teamwork Than Telling Students to Sink or Swim." <u>Business Communication Quarterly</u> **62**(4): 112-119.

• Juxtaposes the advantages and disadvantages of group work
• Discusses the factors that influence group success
• Suggests more instructor guidance in undergraduate group learning experiences

Content and Organization

Total Time: 120 minutes
**Note: The word "participant" refers to instructors taking the workshop.
The word "student" refers to learners in the classes offered by "participants".

Duration	Subject	Activity	Purpose
10 minutes	Introduction to group work	Group gift wrapping challenge	Experiential activity to show group dynamics
5 minutes	Characteristics of successful groups	Group brainstorming: *"Think of a time when you were part of a successful group project. What characteristics did your group possess? What about a less successful group experience?"*	Have workshop participants reflect on exactly what characteristics are part of good and bad group experiences. ***Application to your classroom:*** Your students too, will learn more from their group projects if we have them reflect on their experience.
5 minutes	Characteristics of successful groups	Lecture: • John Baird's 10 characteristics of high performing groups	Participants will see that their brainstormed ideas are characteristic of the research.
5 minutes	Advantages and disadvantages of working in groups	Lecture: • Advantages and disadvantages intrinsic to working in groups	It is important to understand that every form of learning, including group work, has a tradeoff.

Duration	Subject	Activity	Purpose
5 minutes	Four stages of group development	Lecture: • Four stages of group development: Forming, storming, norming, performing	Participants will understand the stages of development that students groups in their classes will pass through and the common experiences associated with each stage.
30 minutes	How can instructors maximize student group efficacy?	Group work: • Divide participants into groups of 2-5 depending on class size (this "group" will be their group for the remainder of the workshop). Each group will be given a primary research article on how one of the following factors impacts group efficacy: • Instructions given on group management • Instruction given on project objectives • Group longevity • Group size • Use of peer evaluations • Methods of group assignment	This will help participants see, in an objective, scientific way, that their input as instructors has the ability to significantly change the student group work experience. ***Application to your classroom:*** By incorporating some of these strategies into the group projects you design, you are much more likely to offer your students a healthy, enjoyable and productive learning experience.
5 minutes	Creating a group charter	Lecture: • What is a group charter and how do we make one?	Having groups make their own group charter will help to clarify the expectations of each member and provide group cohesion and direction.

Duration	Subject	Activity	Purpose
20 minutes	Creating a group charter	Group work: • Have participants return to their groups and work together to create a group charter using chart paper and markers. They will be given a handout with a suggested structure for their charter. Groups will share their charter with the class.	***Application to your classroom:*** This same activity in can be used in your classroom. Having students create a charter, including the consequences if a member doesn't fulfill their responsibilities, will help clarify individual expectations and the conflict resolution process.
10 minutes	Managing conflict	Lecture and Role Playing • Common types of conflict and techniques for resolution	Group conflict is normal and when properly managed, can actually increase group productivity. ***Application to your classroom:*** Students will be reassured that their experiences are normal and healthy. You can arm students with tools to deal with conflict, including a handout with 'scripts' that can be used to deal with various types of conflict.
20 minutes	Reflection on group learning experience	Individual reflection: • Given a list of suggested reflection topics, write a journal about what you learned about group work and your role within a group.	***Application to your classroom:*** Having students write a guided reflection on their experience will help them with think critically about and retain what they've learned.
5 minutes	Summary plus participants will leave with a copy of the handouts used to guide each activity. These can be used as a guide in designing group work activities in their own classes.		

Presentation Strategies

The structure of the workshop is meant to walk participants through a series of activities that they can implement in their own classrooms, right down to the handouts used to guide participants' group work. Group activities were used as much as possible, to mimic the conditions of a student project group. Short segments of lecture styles were chosen to introduce the topic of each group work activity. This will give participants the background knowledge they need to complete the activity properly.

Appendix

Handout #1: Group Charter: Determining group direction
Handout #2: Scripts for Managing Difficult Situations in Groups
Handout #3: Reflecting on your Group Experience
My incorporations of Bolton's (1999) ideas

Group Charter: Determining group direction
Handout 1   **Page 1**

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What is/are the goal(s) of our group?
(Remember, goals should be SMART: Simple, Measurable, Attainable, Results oriented, Time bound)

What are our pressures? (ex: Money? Time?)

How will we deal with/compensate for our pressures?

What are the strengths of our group and its members?

Group member	Strength(s)

How will we capitalize on the strengths of each member?
(Hint: Think about your group goals. How might each person contribute to achieving them?)

Group Charter: Determining group direction
Handout 1   **Page 2**

What communication strategies will we use to communicate?
(Email? Facebook? What is the maximum expected response time?)

What process will we follow if someone does not live up to the responsibilities? Be specific.

Are there any other commitments, responsibilities, roles, goals, etc that your group has agreed upon?

Signatures

Member 1	Member 2	Member 3	Member 4	Member 5

Scripts for Managing Difficult Situations in Groups

Handout 2   **Page 1**
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Introduction

Conflict is a normal and healthy part of all group development. In fact, studies have shown that when groups lack conflict, they can develop 'groupthink', whereby group members are so cohesive that they make quick, unanimous decisions and ignore alternative information. Groupthink reduces creativity.

While conflict *is* normal, it must be addressed when it arises and handled in a healthy way. Below are examples of conflict situations you may encounter in your groups and some suggested phrases you can use to address them.

Situation	Phrase
A strong view is expressed but no supporting evidence or logic is given to support it.	*"You may have a good point, but I want to understand your view a little better. Why do you believe..."*
You're at a meeting and discussion becomes unfocused.	*"That's an interesting point. Can we talk about how it relates to* [insert relevant topic]*"*
More than one view is presented at the same time.	*"OK, so we've just heard three unique ideas.* [If you can summarize the ideas in a few seconds, do so.] *Can we discuss them one at a time before we move on?"*
You sense that someone else is unhappy with an idea you've presented.	*"It seems that you aren't completely satisfied with the approach I'm proposing. What would be your suggestion?"*
Someone is being stubborn and refuses to change their position.	*"I see you feel strongly about your position. What would it take to change your mind?"*
One person does most of the talking, possibly drowning out the views of other group members.	*"So Sue, it's clear that you're view is* [insert summary]. *I'm wondering what John and Mary think about this issue."*
One person is particularly shy and doesn't usually offer their opinion.	*"We've heard a few ideas on this subject, but I'm wondering if you had any other ideas Sue? The more input we can get, the better."*
Someone is continually not fulfilling their responsibilities to the group.	*"Bobby, I know you're busy, but the rest of the group is counting on you to achieve our goals. If you can't contribute, perhaps we need to...* [insert the consequence your group agreed upon in their charter]*"*

Reflecting on your Group Experience

Handout 3   **Page 1**

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1. **How did you do in completing the 'task'?**
    a. Did you meet the objectives your group set in the group charter? Explain.

    b. What changes would you make to your group's processes in order to produce an even better final product?

2. **How did you do in creating a healthy group environment?**
    a. What did your group do well to ensure your group environment was productive? Inclusive?

    b. What changes would you make to your groupwork process to improve the group environment? Explain.

Signatures

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My incorporations of Bolton's (1999) ideas

Similarities	Differences seen in my activities
- Real time delivery of 3 modules for group work development	**I agree that the real time delivery of skills is something lacking in most group projects. By researching a variety of other other sources and incorporating my own group learning experience, I used Bolton's model as a platform on which to build a my own activity.
- Getting groups started on the right foot	- Groups do not assign "roles" to members based on a group-player survey. Instead, they discuss their respective strengths and decide how they will divide work accordingly. - Replacement of Bolton's personal "Behavioral Contract" with a much more comprehensive Group Charter. Group Charter is focused on recognizing individual value/strengths, setting a common vision for the group and laying a specific plan for how to deal with someone not fulfilling their responsibilities.
- Helping groups manage diversity and conflict and the provision of a handout with scripts for dealing with common conflict situations.	- I have used Bolton's handout with conflict resolution scripts as a template to create one of my own. - I don't use any of the activities that Bolton uses for this module. Instead, I include discussion about the IMPORTANCE of conflict in groups and give students practice resolving conflicts by role playing.
- Helping students learn from their group work experience	- I incorporate a reflection activity, but one that is completely different from the one Bolton proposes, including a customized handout to guide my activity.
	- In addition to providing my own specific suggestions for activities in each module, I also provide modifications for larger class sizes (very common in my department) or for instructors who don't feel that they have enough time to do in-class activities.