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IMPROVING GROUP WORK: VOICES OF STUDENTS

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Group work is increasingly being used in a variety of college courses. A number of strengths have driven the increase in the use of this form of collaborative learning. Still, a number of problems potentially limit the use of group projects. In this study, we report on research in which we examined how students recommended changing group projects. Results are categorized into student-centered themes and faculty-centered themes. Implications are provided.

Introduction

For those who use group projects, the teaching strategy is particularly appealing because of its versatility. Group projects can be organized as short-term or long-term projects. Short-term group projects might have students work together for a class period or part of a class period in an effort to learn more about a particular topic. Long-term projects could be spread out over several class periods, or the entire semester. Regardless of how long the projects are designed to last, research shows a number of benefits of group work. Among others, those benefits that have been identified in the literature include the following: (1) students learn teamwork skills, (2) students improve their critical thinking skills, and (3) students gain more insight about a particular topic.

As far as teamwork skills go, surveys of employers show that employers want college graduates to have developed teamwork skills (Blowers 2000). Advocates of group projects suggest that the pedagogi-

cal strategy affords students a firsthand experience to gain teamwork skills (Colbeck et al. 2000; Davis and Miller 1996; Young and Henquinet 2000). In this regard, it is believed that group projects "can effectively serve as a bridge between the academic community and the business world" (Lordan 1996: 43). Ideally, working with their peers, students will learn decision making skills and how to communicate with one another (Dudley, Davis, and McGrady 2001).

In addition, the symbolic interactionist in many of us would likely not be surprised by research that shows that group work helps students develop social skills (Andrusyk and Andrusyk 2003). By working with others, students are able to assign meaning to the actions of their peers as well as their own actions. They also receive feedback--formal, informal, or both--from their peers. The feedback combined with their own interpretations of group work should foster growth in terms of students' social abilities. Under the right circum-

stances, the well designed and implemented group work should also help students develop their critical thinking skills (Colbeck et al. 2000; Dudley et al. 2001).

While we are not aware of any studies that have examined how group projects foster the development of critical thinking skills, general findings about group work from past research tacitly suggest that the strategy could be successful in this regard. For instance, some research suggests that group projects help students to address ethical and societal considerations that arise when students work together (Roberts-Kirchoff and Caspers 2001). If the student group is diverse, students will learn about one another's backgrounds, values, and beliefs. Indeed, others have also suggested that group projects can help students learn about multicultural issues they would otherwise not learn about (Doyle, Beatty, and Shaw 1997).

Researchers also suggest that students may learn more about whatever topic is being considered if they work in groups. For example, Adams and Slater (2002) suggest that group work supplementing lectures helps make courses more interesting to students, and subsequently helps students learn more. Most instructors have stood in front of a class only to wonder if their only purpose on that day was to serve as a sedative for the majority of the class. Group work advocates argue that most any topic can be made interesting by actively involving students in the topic through some form of collaborative learning, of which group work is just one strategy.

While a number of strengths for this form of teaching strategy have been noted

in the literature, potential drawbacks have limited its use. In this study, we consider how students believe group projects should be changed in order improve their pedagogical success.

METHODS

Surveys were distributed to 145 students who had just recently completed a group project. The group project was a semester long group research project that students completed. A survey composed of both open-ended and close-ended questions was distributed to the students at the end of the semester. The results of the open-ended questions have been addressed elsewhere. In one of the close-ended questions, students were asked what they would change about future group projects. The results to this answer were content analyzed using standard rules of content analysis.

FINDINGS

The students had a number of recommendations for future group work. These recommendations were divided into student centered and faculty centered themes. Student centered themes were those recommendations in which respondents seemed to be offering advice to future students participating in similar projects. These included (1) communication as a value to improve group work, (2) leadership and teamwork, and (3) goal development. Faculty centered themes were those recommendations in which respondents were citing things faculty members could do to improve group work.

The following four faculty centered themes were uncovered in the analysis: (1) oversight, (2) grades, (3) situational themes, and (4) anomic themes.

Student Centered Themes

Communication as a Strategy to Improve Group Work.

Several students, recognizing the importance of interpersonal communication, recommended that fellow group project participants hone their communication skills. Students offered tips such as "Listen to everyone's idea--No matter what it is;" "Make sure everyone understands the information and the process;" and "Communication is key. When a group fails to communicate, the group as a whole suffers." Another student recommended, "just bonding more" while another cited "people keeping in touch" as a step to improve group work.

Leadership and Teamwork.

Students also provided advice suggesting the importance of leadership and teamwork in future group projects. In terms of leadership, students made comments such as the following:

- Assigned leaders are needed.
- Assign more specific roles.
- Need to have defined task assignments for members.

Some students provided a bit of detail describing the importance of leadership in group projects. For example, one student made the following comments:

It was easier to get the project done

by dividing up the work. We worked well together for the most part. One individual has considerable leadership talents and he kept our group on track. Others just deferred to his ideas and we did what he told us to do. He assigned our tasks and made sure they were completed.

Another student who made the following comments also described this leadership process:

[You need to] learn the habits of others and learning who has the qualities of taking charge of a group. I thought it was interesting to watch who would become the leader and which group would members would follow the leader.

With regard to teamwork, students also suggested that, while groups may need a leader, members of the group must be willing to work together. Students made comments such as "Everyone has to do their part;" "Everyone working together and doing their part;" "Teamwork;" and "Spread around responsibility." The need to work together appeared to be an especially salient recommendation in this sample. One student emphasized this need in the following manner: "Everyone has to work together!!"

Indirectly indicative of the need to work together, students recognized the need to share all aspects of the project. As an illustration, according to one student, future students doing group projects must remember to "bring calculators to the restaurant or bar to figure out a fair tip for the bartender divided five ways."

Goal Development.

Some comments made by students also implied the importance of goal development for future group projects. For example, one student advised, "We all had the same motivation and ambition." Other students made comments such as "clarity of goals" and "commitment to goal" as suggestions for future group.

In considering their goals, some students seemed to define their grade as the goal. Said one student, "If everyone was equally dedicated to getting good grades, or if groups were assigned based no dedication." Another student recommended that students "take their job seriously, not just for their grades, but for others' grades."

Faculty Centered Themes

Oversight.

In terms of faculty centered themes, some students suggested more faculty input in future group projects as a strategy to improve group work. Some students recommended more guidance in the beginning of the project. One student, for example, said, "The instructor should assign the topic instead of letting the group pick a topic." Another student said, "The teacher could have taught more in the beginning." A third student called for "more direction from the instructor," implying that direction would help in the beginning of the project. Other students recommended assistance in motivating group members. For instance, one student said, "Specific deadlines may help group members turn in their material in a timely manner."

Grades.

Several students offered recommendations for how professors overseeing group projects should grade the projects. One student, for instance, recommended that professors use grades to "to force the students to participate." Another student expanded on this recommendation:

[You should have] mandatory meetings, groups should be graded on how often they come to the group when they meet. It would make a person show up more to group meetings because a percentage of his or her grade would depend on it.

Other students also resented the fact that "free riders" were getting the same grade they got and recommended changing this policy. One student said that "having some of the project reflect individuals so that everyone is not getting the same grade" would help group work. Another student said, "I didn't like relying on someone else and having it effect my grade point average." A third student who made the following comments seemed even more concerned about "common grades"

[You need] more accountability for individual work. When my grade depends on the intelligence and responsibility of other people, I get nervous, especially when some don't bother to come to class.

Interestingly, when students talked about grades, they were not concerned with what they were learning or doing; rather, they were concerned with almost solely with their grade and whether it was fair.

Situational Themes.

Situational themes refer to comments that reflected specific dynamics of the group project that instructors could possibly influence. Three situational themes that arose included the number of meetings, time, and location. In terms of the number of meetings, one student recommended that "Members should meet as frequently as possible." To be sure, faculty members could require a certain number of group meetings.

With regard to time, a student said that "longer class periods" would improve group work. Another student suggested that "time...and less stress from other courses" would improve group work. While faculty cannot control the amount of stress students feel from their other courses, they can control the amount of class time devoted to a group project.

In terms of location, students also made recommendations regarding where the group project work should be done. For example, one student said the following: "I have trouble doing group work where there are many groups working on different projects in the same room. I like that we were able to meet at different locations outside of school." Another student also said she had problems meeting in class and recommended "more discipline from other groups that are in the same vicinity."

Anomic Themes.

Some students made comments which we characterized as "anomic themes" because the students were unable to suggest anything positive about group work, or improving group work. In effect, they

seem to exhibit a sense of normlessness or an enormous aversion to group work. For example, when asked what could be done to improve group work, some students made the following comments:

- Getting rid of it
- Nothing can be done to improve group work. It is inevitable.
- There's always going to be problems.

Other students provided a little more detail describing their aversion to group work. One student, for instance, said that it is important to remember for future projects "that there are some people who will never be reliable and some that always have to be the bomb." Perhaps the most pessimistic comment made was the following:

I didn't like anything. We shouldn't have to do group projects or any kind of individual research projects. I don't think research projects will help us in our jobs in the future. It isn't needed and is a waste of time.

It is important to note that the vast majority of students had favorable impressions of the project.

DISCUSSION

Based on what our students learned, a number of suggestions can be made for future group projects. These recommendations include: (1) overcoming faculty resistance to group work, (2) overcoming student resistance to group work, (3) ensuring students realize the purpose of the project, (4) providing appropriate oversight for students, (5) scheduling the group work appropriately, and (6) helping groups

set and attain goals of the project. These suggestions are addressed below.

First, enough research has been done to show that group projects, in various forms, can be an important part of students' undergraduate curriculum. Faculty must come to appreciate and realize the importance of these group projects. Of course, group projects are not a panacea and some faculty hold these projects in complete disregard (Ashraf 2004). However, students have much to gain from group projects. Not only will they learn about the topic, but just as important, students will learn important skills, and they will learn about themselves. Certainly, group projects are not appropriate for all courses or all instructors. Still, group projects should be integrated into all majors' coursework in one form or another to ensure that majors are learning how to work together, how to learn from one another, and how to communicate with one another.

Second, faculty who implement group projects in their courses will need to overcome student resistance to group efforts. This aversion likely stems from the fact that students are accustomed to traditional pedagogical strategies in which instructors lecture to students, who are tested on the lectures. Over one hundred years ago, in *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Thorstein Veblin (1899) commented,

The aversion to change is in large part an aversion to the bother of making the readjustment which any given change will necessitate.... A consequence of this increased reluctance, due to the solidarity of human institutions, is that any innovation

calls for a greater expenditure of nervous energy in making the necessary readjustment than would otherwise be the case.

Indeed, based on our experiences, we have seen many students expend "nervous energy in making the necessary readjustment" that makes the accustomed to group work.

Imagine for a moment if group work were the traditional and customary teaching style for students. Then, what would happen if we pulled the group out from under them and asked them to do an individual project? Many students would likely have the same aversion that they now have to group work. They'd have to learn new strategies of doing things, and this is something many of us resist. In the end, it seems what is best is to find a blend of teaching strategies in which students are encouraged to work *both* individually and in groups.

Third, and on a related point, faculty should stress to students what they have to gain from group projects. Typically one would expect that the goals of the group project are not just completing the project, but gaining the experience of working together. This aspect of group work should be included on the syllabus so that students realize that the faculty member empathizes with students' concerns. At a minimum, students should be told how group work improves their communication skills, enhances their critical thinking skills, allows for reciprocal learning, and teaches them to work together.

From a symbolic interactionist per-

spective, communicating openly with students about the purpose of group projects will help to give meaning to the students' experiences. Assigning meaning to their experiences before the projects begin will also help better understand one another's actions. They will learn that conflict is possible and that they can overcome this conflict by working together. Moreover, their interactions with members of their groups will help to develop them as novice social scientists (See Berg 2004).

Fourth, faculty members should provide appropriate oversight over the groups as needed. It's not just our students who noted the need for oversight. Research by Livingstone and Lynch (2000) finds that the degree of faculty guidance will play a role in determining whether the students find value in team-based learning. Oversight is especially important in the beginning stages of the group project when group members are still in the process of the defining their own roles and tasks as well as their peers' roles and tasks. Part of this direction should be instilling within students the importance of learning teamwork skills (Page and Donelan 2003).

Direction may be needed to make sure that students are attending group sessions and working towards the ideals of the group. While group members may do things themselves to encourage participation by fellow group members, ultimately, the instructor has the greatest leverage over students. Describing the direction that faculty members should provide, Lordan (1996: 45) writes, "Like supervisors in the professional world, the teacher should strike a balance between letting students work out their own problems and stepping

in to keep them on track." As well, instructors need to provide oversight inasmuch as they are helping students find suitable places on campus to do their group work. (They may also want to remind students how to do division long hand so they are able to divide up the tip for the waiter or waitress at the bar or restaurant where they meet with their calculators).

Fifth, instructors should make sure students are clear on how they will be graded on group projects. Here, as noted earlier, there is great disagreement among those using group projects as to the best way to assess group projects. Some instructors prefer to give all group members the same grade for the group project. Others see this process as inherently unfair (cites) and call for individual grades. Whatever grading method is used, it is important that students understand the grading process and its rationale.

Finally, instructors should play a role in helping groups to define, and refine, their goals. Our experience has been that students tend to define their goals in three stages. First, they begin with aspirations of getting a good grade. The next stage replaces the goal of a good grade with the goal of completing the project successfully. This stage is ultimately replaced with the goal of a good grade. Instructors can foster better goal attainment by encouraging students to focus more on learning and less on getting a good grade. If groups can define the group's goals, and the members' goals, in a way that they focus more on tasks (e.g., developing a good research question, gathering literature, developing a methodology, doing the research, analyzing the research, and writing a final

paper) and learning rather than getting a good grade, then the likelihood of a successful group project increases. Tying individual goals in with group goals is a central aim of collaborative learning (Johnson and Johnson 1994). Students in this study at least indirectly recognized the importance of meshing their own goals with those of the group.

Our intent in this paper is not to be prescriptive but to simply generate thought and discussion about a common type of active learning strategy. We recognize that professors vary in their teaching strategy preferences. We do not expect all professors to want to use group projects in their courses, nor do we expect all courses to be amenable to group projects. Still, it is hoped that all undergraduates will participate in at least some group projects during their undergraduate years. While there are flaws with group projects, the benefits of getting students to work with one another are meaningful enough to rely at least somewhat on group projects in some courses.

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