

Group Work in Education: Addressing Student Concerns

Creating a culture of shared responsibility and ownership of the curriculum can be an important part of developing student agency.

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Besides the intended benefits for instruction and learning, group work is seen as helping students develop the teamwork skills that many jobs require (Yamarik, 2007). However, while group work is common in schools, many students indicate disliking the process (Gottschall & Bayonas, 2008; Moraes, Michaelidou, & Canning, 2016).

This brief resource highlights some of the most common obstacles to group work and some ways to enhance group participation. While the focus here is on university level classes, the discussion has relevance for other levels of education.

Why don't some students like group work?

Reluctance, negative motivation, and resistance to group work stem from a variety of sources. For one, some students are not motivationally and/or developmentally ready for group participation. For another, some experience social and performance anxiety or generally feel a lack of connection with those with whom they are grouped.

Motivation and capability differences. Group members may vary significantly in motivation and capability for participation and for facilitating each others participation. Variability among group members can be beneficial but also can interfere with group process. For example, students who are highly motivated and able may dominate group activity and may be pressured to do more than others. Without proper preparation, group members may not understand how to help others participate. Uneven participation can lead to resentment toward some group members and negative feeling about a group's activity.

Social and performance anxiety and lack of connection. This includes fear of social situations, concerns about embarrassing oneself, or being negatively evaluated by others. Connection concerns are amplified when a student is unacquainted with groups members.

Besides the common stressors associated with many instructional activities, groups raise concerns about ease and equity when the work load must be shared. They also add challenges with respect to handling interpersonal dynamics and nonparticipating members.

About increased workload and potential conflicts. Working alone can be less time consuming, easier to accomplish, and avoids interpersonal problems. For example, in doing group projects, decisions about project content and individual workload can take considerable time, and members often have conflicting views that engender disputes.

About free riders. For varying reasons, some group members don't contribute a fair share to the group's activity; they have been referred to as free riders. Noncontributors can make group work an unpleasant experience for the other participants and can lead to resentment toward them and negative feelings about the group activity. Concerns about such students are heightened when a group is involved in a graded activity (and when the grades for free riders are not lowered).

It should be noted that Vernon (2008) suggests some students are involuntary free-riders. Analyzing group dynamics, he noted that the status of group members became polarized over time. Individuals with higher status tended to obtain a strong sense of ownership and no longer trusted some group members, whereas individuals with lower status tended to draw back and allow people with higher status to lead and make decisions.

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Cultural and Language Differences

Among the many differences that groups must account for are cultural and language backgrounds. Researchers have suggested that multicultural groups tend to experience more difficulties than homogenous groups (Baldwin, Bedell, & Johnson, 1997).

Reid and Garso (2017) report findings supporting previous literature indicating that enhanced intercultural learning and satisfaction from working in a multicultural group are related to changes in group preparation, formation, and evaluation.

Strauss, U, and Young (2011) report that students whose mother language was not English displayed significantly higher levels of anxiety in groups than students whose first language was English.

Mental Health and Group Work

The Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors Annual Survey reported that anxiety was the top concern among college students: nearly half (41.6%) of survey respondents indicated feelings of overwhelming anxiety within the previous 12 months (Mistler, Reetz, Krylowicz, & Barr, 2012).

Clearly, various aspects of in- and out- of - college life can account for such findings, but group work can be a significant contributor (Cooper, Downing, & Brownell, 2018). And as noted, some students have significant social and performance anxiety problems that can be exacerbated by working in a group.

Qiwen Reports on Her Recent Online Group Project

Based on my personal experience, when professors asked students to form a group, students who sit with their friends just talk with each other. Students who don't know anyone in the group sit alone, often fidgeting in their seat, and are hesitate to reach out to those sitting next to them. They clearly feel uncomfortable and end up not really participating.

Too many people were disengaged and rarely took part in group activity. For example, when we discussed the details of the project, few of them gave their suggestions, and when I sent messages to team members, many didn't respond until the day before the deadline. At times, I felt I was basically doing the project alone. It caused a lot of frustration.

Addressing the Concerns

There are many online guides for improving group work. See, for example:

- >10 Recommendations for Improving Group Work
<https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/effective-teaching-strategies/10-recommendations-improving-group-work/>
- >Guide to Group Work <https://student.unsw.edu.au/groupwork>
- >Group Work (strategies and resources)
<https://citl.indiana.edu/teaching-resources/teaching-strategies/group-work/index.html>

For more, see the reference list.

Below are commonly cited practices:

- Establish groups that are not too big
- Clarify the immediate learning benefits and the longer-term workplace benefits of group work
- Teach teamwork skills and use team-building exercises to build cohesive groups
- As feasible, assign students to groups in ways designed to ensure good learning outcomes
- Clarify specific objectives and ensure the workload is reasonable and fair distributed
- Consider roles for group members (e.g., facilitator, time keeper, manager of interpersonal dynamics, scribe)
- Monitor to evaluate and improve processes and outcomes (include peer assessment in the evaluation process)

About forming groups. Groups can be formed by instructors (by design or randomly) or by students. Hilton and Philips (2010) report no significant difference in group project grades between student-selected groups and instructor-selected groups.

When students in a group already know each other, they do tend to have a higher level of ease and have quicker and smoother project start-ups. Others need to spend time getting acquainted.

Once formed, instructors need to focus on enhancing attitudes and skills for team work. Group contracts, for example, can be introduced to establish mutual agreements and norms for such matters as collaborating, communicating, facilitating group processes with equity, supporting each other, resolving differences, and so forth.

About monitoring the work. Group work needs monitoring to facilitate effective and equitable participation and counter problems such as free-riding, social anxiety, and inefficiency. Research suggests that formative peer assessment is one of the most effective means to improve student teamwork, and it can minimize the free-riding (Anson & Goodman, 2014). Periodic formal group surveys can be used, as can invitations to students to reach out to the instructor whenever concerns arise.

Concluding Comments

As a major active learning strategy, group work is increasingly implemented inside and outside the classroom. Group activities can promote learning and have the potential to help students develop skills that are useful in the workplace.

At the same time, it is clear that students vary in their attitudes about and abilities for working in groups. Every instructor who uses groups as an instructional practice has the responsibility to maximize positive group participation by pursuing the types of strategies that best practice guides advocate. From a motivational perspective, it is essential that group participation minimize threats to and maximize feelings of self-determination, competence, and connectedness with others.

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