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AUTHOR Nance, Teresa; Mackey-Kallis, Susan
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ABSTRACT

At Villanova University, the Senior Projects Course is designed to serve as a capstone course. Students are required to integrate the pieces of the discipline acquired from previous course work into a comprehensive, fully developed research project. This paper looks critically at one aspect of effectively managing a group project course: conflict resolution. The paper contends that the Senior Projects course is effective because: learning goals are stated precisely; administrative detail when preparing and creating the groups is attended to; the groups are monitored diligently; intervention is undertaken when necessary; and fair and clear evaluation procedures are established. According to the paper, success in the course depends not only on a student's ability to complete the required work individually, but also on students' ability to work together--Senior Project fits well into the category of cooperative learning. The paper discusses in detail how to prepare for and carry out the course. It concludes that teachers need to prepare an array of information-gathering tools and conflict management strategies to enhance their ability to facilitate their groups effectively. (Contains 16 references.) (NKA)

Can't You Just Talk to Them?: Small Group Work in a Senior Thesis Course.

by Teresa Nance and Susan Mackey-Kallis

Can't You Just Talk to Them?: Small Group Work in a Senior Thesis Course

Teresa Nance
Villanova University

Susan Mackey-Kallis
Villanova University

At Villanova University, The Senior Projects Course is designed to serve as a capstone course. Students are required to integrate the pieces of the discipline acquired from previous coursework into a comprehensive fully developed research project. The difficulty of the course is legendary.

Stories of trial and tribulation resonate in dormitories, libraries, assorted student hang-outs, and even alumni gatherings. At the same time, many graduates return to say that it was the best experience they ever hated in undergraduate school. How does one course develop such a reputation? How do we as educators come to understand the paradoxical reaction to the course?

The purpose of this paper is to look critically at one aspect of effectively managing a group project course: conflict resolution. The key to competent conflict resolution in group learning situations is anticipation and preparation. We believe that Senior Project course is effective because we state our learning goals precisely, attend to administrative detail when preparing and creating the groups, monitor our groups vigilantly, intervene when necessary, and establish fair and clear evaluation procedures.

Senior Project is unlike any other undergraduate course in the department or in the University. It is a group project course in which students design and execute a research project with a small group of students. Success in the course depends not only a students' ability to

complete the required work individually, but also on students' ability to work together. In the very best tradition of John Dewey's experiential learning, Senior Project presents students with an educational experience over which they control the direction and outcome.

As such, Senior Project fits well into the category of cooperative learning. Jacobson, Eggen, and Kauchak (1993) write that:

> Cooperative learning is a generic term for teaching strategies designed to foster group cooperation and interaction among students. . .to encourage students to work together and help each other toward common goals...(232)

Cooperative learning can take many different forms. Senior Project specifically takes the form of *group investigation*. Teams are formulated to investigate and solve a common problem.

According to Slavin (1990) cooperative learning ventures must share three necessary attributes: group goals, individual accountability and equal opportunity for success. In terms of group goals group members should share in mutually determined goals. Research seems to indicate the successful group take time to focus on what they want to achieve and how they want to do it. (Deering and Meloth, 1990; Webb, 1988) The intriguing paradox about effective work groups is that each individual must take personal responsibility for learning. The old maxim is true: a chain is only as strong as its weakest link. Finally, it is important that both high ability and low ability students have an equal opportunity to succeed. Teachers must carefully structure groups and provide the kind of assistance each grouping requires.

Preparing for the Course

A good course is one that matches student background and preparation with the content and requirements of the course. Students in a capstone, group project course in communication

need to be prepared in the following ways. First, students need to share a common understanding of the field's parameters. At Villanova all CA majors begin the major by enrolling in *Survey of Human Communication*. Besides providing students with an overview to the field, the course also introduces them to the language and thinking of the discipline.

Second, students also benefit from previous small group work experience. Many department courses require students to complete group assignments. Some of these assignments are informal (such as an interpersonal communication group exercise) while others are more significant (such as designing an advertising or public relations campaign). Since the group project is only one of many course requirements, students can learn good group management skills without their entire course grade depending on the outcome.

Finally, students also need adequate preparation in the task of doing research. All Communication majors at VU must take *Communication Research*. The purpose of this course is to acquaint students with the primary research methods of the discipline. Students are given a solid foundation in doing library and electronic research. Student writing also figures prominently in the course requirements.

Making sure students are well-prepared for Senior Project in terms of previous coursework helps to alleviate the likelihood of conflict in the initial phases of group life. This is because the course preparation, while certainly developing content expertise, more importantly in terms of group conflict, develops appropriate affect. What this means is that most students enter the course prepared to work hard, many often clear their schedule in order to take four courses in the Senior Project semester rather than five, or they take courses that have lighter work loads so as to leave extra time and energy for Senior Project. Students also enter the

course prepared to work with other students since they have done so in previous courses. Developing in our students the "proper attitude" towards group work by the time they get to Senior Project goes a long way towards heading off many conflicts related to students' differing perceptions of the appropriate time and energy commitment needed for the course.

Defining the Task and Equipping the Group

As teachers we know that the function of a good syllabus is to provide direction to both student and teacher. One of the first characteristics of an effective syllabus is a clearly stated goal and a set of measurable objectives. A good goal statement uses global language to express the ambitions, purpose, and direction of the course. It gives students the big picture. The objectives illustrate the way in which the goal will be fulfilled by explicitly detailing the work of the course.

The first piece of equipment the Senior Project student receives in a twenty-page syllabus. The syllabus includes:

- the goals and objectives of the course,
- evaluation and grading criteria,
- a listing of resources available to students to use during the project,
- a description of assignments,
- a listing of due dates,
- a series of forms designed to facilitate communication between the group and the project director
- and a series of forms designed to provide students with assistance in managing issues common to all groups.

Our lengthy syllabus is the result of more than ten years experience with course and multiple instructors. In many ways it anticipates student concerns and seeks to address them. In a group project course it is critical that the task be defined explicitly. Ambiguity in the task could lead group away from its main task. Group members will spend debating the parameters of the project rather than engaging themselves in the process of completing it.

In a group project course it is important that designers pay attention to several competing concerns. Students want to know to what they will be held accountable as individuals and as a group. It is important to realize that these objectives provide the criteria for evaluation. Consequently, if the ultimate outcome of the course is to have students give their best individual effort to complete an exhaustive research project, then the objectives ought to lay out explicitly the path students follow to achieve success. Equal emphasis must be given to tasks required of individuals and tasks required of the group.

Being explicit in the syllabus about what counts as a individual grade and what counts as a group grade also helps head off potential conflict. It has been our experience that the biggest source of group conflict in this course has to do with perceptions of unequal contributions by group members to both the process and the product. Conflicts often arise, for example, over the perception that one or more group members is "blowing an assignment off." Although more will be said about this in the next section, suffice it to say that clear guidelines regarding due dates for work and how much each assignment counts helps group members to anticipate conflicts, as deadlines draw near, and to distinguish between those incidents when "blowing it off" will effect only the individual and when it will effect the entire group.

Creating the Group

Composing the work groups is one of the first most important challenges of the course. Two primary methods of groups selection exist: self section, criteria-based teacher selection. Each method has advantages and disadvantages. We have often found ourselves using a variety of methods within a single course.

Self-Selection

Students frequently come to the instructor with the request to work with friends or acquaintances with whom they've worked successfully in the past. They argue that because time is short to create and execute a research project of merit it is important that they work with people familiar to them. Students also argue that they have begun research in other courses with a particular group of students and they now want to take the project to another level. Teachers, however, need to weigh these arguments against the fact that such groupings may focus on socializing, tend to cluster together strong or weak students, or may exclude students not in the mainstream (i.e. newer students, commuting students, racially different students, students with disabilities etc.)

The benefit of self-selection, from the stand point of group conflict, is that it often reduces the likelihood of divisive conflict occurring. This is because individuals who have elected to work together have either worked together successfully before or have friendships based, at least in part, on compatibility of interpersonal styles. The only problem with self-selection when it comes to conflict is that students who are friends sometimes do not get along. The reasons are quite varied, but a frequent complaint is that the "friend" is "blowing the assignments off" and the other friend has finally gotten tired of "covering for him/her." Often

the source of a potential conflict is unaddressed out of fear of "damaging the friendship" and rather than letting the conflict occur and be resolved. This sometimes results in smoldering resentments between individuals or between the group and one individual. This, of course, unless addressed, can only undermine the group process and product further.

Criteria-Based Teacher Selection

Teachers can decide to use any number of indicators to arrange the groups. Such indicators include previous academic achievement, expressed interests, and personality traits. A balanced group is one in which all students can contribute equally toward a strong result. Using a criteria-based approach allows teachers to balance group ability and achievement levels. A disadvantage to criteria based teacher selection is that group initiation time is increased. The group must spend time getting to know one another and identifying the respective strengths. The

From the standpoint of group conflict, criteria-based selection for groups also increases the potential for pre-existing relational difficulties to surface. By the time our students reach Senior Project they have already worked with countless numbers of others in other major courses. This means that "track records" and group preferences have already been established. The professor who fails to take this into account should be prepared for the possibility of some serious conflicts. As a result, the combination approach is best, both from the perspective of creating groups that will produce a quality project and from the perspective of trying to create groups that will get along reasonable well with each other.

Combination Approach

The combination approach gives all stakeholders input into the process. Students can complete request forms listing group mate preferences along with information about their

favorite topic area or research method. In accepting the request forms, the teacher cautions the students that their input, though valuable, will be weighed together with criteria important to the teacher. Students, on the request form, not only indicate students with which they have worked successfully together before, they can also list any students in the class with which they have not worked well before. This last heads off the possibility of any major personality based conflicts and keeps "track record" conflicts from occurring.

The bottom line in any educational endeavor is student learning. Teachers must structure groups in ways that a positive learning experience is possible for every member of the class.

Monitoring the Group

In any cooperative learning situation the teacher plays an invaluable role: facilitator. With smaller, in-class group projects, teachers facilitate group projects by wandering around the class offering assistance, and observing how well the group is performing. Golub (1988) puts it best when he labels the role of the teacher in cooperative learning situations as the "guide on the side." In monitoring both the task and maintenance functions of the group, the teacher is continually guiding the process and making certain sure that the goal of student learning is being met.

In the Senior Project course, students are given enormous autonomy. After receiving their initial instructions during the first weeks of the semester, each group meets with the teacher on a weekly basis. As facilitator a teacher's primary task is to help the group complete its assigned task well. To do that the teacher-facilitator needs to have information.

Two valuable tools developed for Senior Project are our *Group Briefing Form and Individual Diary Form*. Taken together these forms generate information useful in guiding the

group. *The Group Briefing Form* is completed by the group's selected secretary. On it, the secretary reports on meetings held, members present, work assigned, work accomplished and work to do. The information given on this form tends to be concise and task related.

Over the years of teaching the course, it became clear that a focus on task alone could not provide teachers with enough information. It was particularly not enough information when conflict situations arose. Consequently, the *Individual Diary Form* was created. Now each individual in the group, completes a form listing the meetings attended, the work personally assigned and accomplished. The form also asks the individual student to identify a new understanding about the project as well as a great frustration for the week. A teacher carefully tracking the IDF's can quickly discern productive and unproductive patterns of behaviors.

Students will often indicate, in the area of the form entitled "Greatest frustration for the week," a conflict or incipient conflict with another group member. A comment might range from "So and So missed another meeting this week, this makes four meetings since we've started." or "So and so didn't turn in her assignment so the group couldn't integrate it into the larger document," or "So and so acts as if this is his personal project and no one else's opinion matters." This is a cue to us, as instructors, to either monitor the situation more closely, or directly intervene by talking to one or more individuals in the group about the potential conflict brewing.

Knowing what to look for on these forms is essential. In terms of process concerns, Johnson and Johnson (1984) list four elements necessary for cooperative learning: positive interdependence, face-to-face interaction, individual responsibility, and appropriate interpersonal skills. Evaluating the forms in terms of these four characteristics helps teachers identify and

address the most serious process needs of the group effectively. In terms of task, the forms provide information about how well the group is moving through the assignments on the syllabus. When a group has fallen behind schedule on task often the key to understanding the reasons why lie in the information about process. Taken together these two forms generate a meaningful source of information about how the group functions.

Intervening

Conflict is small groups in inevitable. Hocker and Wilmot (1985) define conflict as the interaction of interdependent people who perceive incompatible goals and interference from each other in achieving those goals. Many people perceive conflict negatively. This is a limited perspective. Differences of opinions, competing viewpoints and conflicting facts can contribute positively to the group's project.

If the ideas in a group research project have not been tested in difficult discussions then the overall quality of the project is bound to suffer. The task for the group project facilitator is to twofold: create a climate in which conflict can be constructive and manage the personality and process issues that may arise.

Creating a positive, supportive climate requires that group members consider how they interact with one another. A supportive climate is more likely when group members use behaviors that:

- **describe** problems rather than offer an **evaluation** of them
- assume issues can be understood and resolved, a stance of **problem orientation** rather than **control**.
- are **spontaneous** and authentic rather than **strategic** and manipulative.

- **empathize** with others feelings and values rather adopt a **neutral** interest.
- willing to participate and share in work and decision making **equally** rather adopting a know-it-all **superior** stance.
- able to push personal boundaries of behavior, attitudes and ideas, is **provisional** rather than unchanging, dogmatic, **certain**. (Gibb, 1961)

One of the best ways teachers can foster the development of supportive climates in their project groups is by modeling these supportive behaviors during all interactions with the group. As expected, groups often work out their conflicts on their own. Sometimes we will get reports in the individual diary forms that indicates that a problem has been solved and that things are either "back to normal" or they have in fact improved as a result of the group really working through their differences. Occasionally, however, we find ourselves playing the role of mediator in a conflict situation. The biggest problem we often face is finding a point of entry into the group conflict. This is because one or more members of the group have usually confided in us about the problem. Although they may desire our intervention they are also leery about being pegged by the rest of the group as the "tattle tale." It is then up to us to couch our intervention as self-initiated rather than at the request of another group member. We will then often sit down with the group as a whole, if relevant to the conflict, or with the two individuals involved in the conflict if it is of a more personal nature. Once again, in group sessions about the conflict we attempt to create a positive supportive climate where finger pointing is avoided and where an empathetic stance is role modeled for all participants. Paramount to the resolution of the conflict is demonstrating the interdependent relationship shared by group members, allowing differences of opinion to emerge and be aired, and focusing on the conflict as a problem to be solved rather

than a battle to be won or lost.

Students in cooperative learning situations need to understand what constructive conflict can accomplish. The task of the teacher is to plan for conflict, know when to intervene, and have strategies in place to address conflict situations as they arise.

Evaluating the Group

So often conflicts situations get presented to the teacher with such words as, "He/she is not doing . . . and its my grade too." While ideally our students should find themselves at odds over ideas, more often than not the issue is who is doing what work for what grade. One of the ways Senior Project seeks to avoid some of these issues is by making a student's final grade a combination group and individual grade. Dividing the grade in this way places value on the group work involved in the project while still holding individuals accountable for their individual behavior.

Another important issue frequently asked about group project courses is whether the group is graded against an external standard measure (norm-referenced criteria) or graded against itself and its peers (criteria-based reference)? University and department policy notwithstanding, criteria-based evaluation is the most appropriate way to measure the progress made by students in the course. If the group being addressed were graduate students, readying themselves for a professional life in the discipline, then norm-referenced criteria would need to be applied if the student is to excel. For many Senior Project students this is their first and last academic research project. The lessons they learn and the skills they develop are meant to help them in their careers as communication professionals and as resourceful citizens in the world at large. Criteria-referenced evaluation provides students with the level of feedback most in keeping with

the lessons they learned in the semester.

Conclusion

Whenever people and ideas gather together, conflict is inevitable. We believe that the best way to manage conflict in a cooperative learning situation is through effective course planning and preparation. We also believe that teachers need to prepare an array of information gathering tools and conflict management strategies to enhance their ability to facilitate their groups effectively.

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Printed Name/Position/Title: Susan Mackey-Kallis, Assoc. Prof

Organization/Address: Comm. Dept Villanova University Villanova PA 19085

Telephone: 610-519-7460

FAX: 610-519-7749

E-Mail Address: SUSAN.Mackey-Kallis@VILLANOVA.EDU

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