

Benefits and Challenges Facing Students Working in a Group for a Freshman-Level Course

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Introduction

Data for this explorative study were collected over three academic semesters at a large northeastern university. The students were enrolled in a freshman level course in the Business Management Program. The purpose of the study was to determine if students benefitted from participating in a group within a classroom setting. A secondary purpose was to determine if students had challenges/problems while working in a group. A survey designed by the researcher was given at the end of the semester. The outcome of this initiative was that student reported many benefits and some obstacles while working in a group. Data reported by students may suggest that group work can help with student learning and retention.

Method

Participants

The data for the present study were drawn from students enrolled in the freshman level course entitled, Introduction to Business in the Global Environment. A total of 155 students for three academic periods participated in a survey that asked them to respond to the benefits and challenges/problems of working in a group. A total of 41 responded in fall, 2007; 59 for fall, 2008, and 55 for spring, 2009. Each group consisted of 3-5 students. Students were allowed to self-select which group they wished to join. Two course sessions were surveyed for each of the academic years; one class met on Monday/ Wednesday/ Friday, and another met on Tuesday/ Thursday.

Procedure

Students were given a survey that was developed by the researcher to collect data. The survey was an open-ended questionnaire that asked, "What were the benefits you enjoyed from working in a group for this class (Most beneficial to least beneficial) (Use short responses)." Students were also asked, "What are the challenges/problems you encountered while working in your group (Most problem to least problem) (Use short responses)." Surveys were distributed at the end of the semester. The researcher collected the survey and summarized the data. The data were summarized utilizing two

questions: 1) What are commonalities that emerged as the benefits of group participation? and, 2) What are commonalities that emerged as problems/challenges that students had while working in a group?

Students worked in groups for quizzes only. Quizzes were given at the end of a lecture. A total of 10 quizzes were given throughout the semester. For group structure, student were given rules for participation as follows: 1) all students must participate or belong to a group, 2) students were given individual grades rather than group grades; thus, they were permitted to disagree with the group's answer, and 3) All quizzes were graded by the researcher at the end of class. A total of 15-20 minutes were allocated for completing and grading the quizzes.

Results

Three commonalities that emerged over the three semester period for benefits are: 1) Improvement on grade; 2) Multiple Points of Views, and 3) Getting to Know Students. The challenges/problems that emerged were: 1) Disagreements, 2) Attendance, and 3) Unprepared students. Some comments are:

For commonality for Improvement on Grades, students wrote:

- "When working in a group, I have good scores"
- "You are able to work as a team to earn a grade"
- "Higher chances of receiving higher grade"
- "Better grades, more ideas, better learning skills"

For commonality for Multiple Points of Views, students wrote:

- "Discussion, shared knowledge, different perspectives"
- "Learn from other views"
- "Get more ideas, I learned more, you have help"

For Commonality for Getting to know Students, students wrote:

- “Talking with classmates”
- “Enjoyed working with people”.
- “Socializing-meeting my classmates”.

For commonalities for Disagreements, students wrote,

- “Conflicting ideas, not working well”
- “Arguing over answers”
- “Some disagreement on quiz answer”

For commonalities for Attendance, students wrote,

- “Group wouldn’t go to class”
- “Group members didn’t show up”
- “People not attending class”

For commonalities for Unprepared Students, students wrote,

- “Some people don’t study”
- “People would be absent then copy”
- “Non-participating students”

Discussion

From comments made by students, it is evident that students enjoyed working with other students and did benefit from the connections they made. The main benefits most commonly cited for all three semesters were: 1) Improvement on grades – students felt they could improve their course grade by participating in a group, 2) Multiple points of views – students felt that they benefited from having different opinions on quizzes, and 3) Getting to know students – students felt socializing and getting to know other students helped them to succeed in the class.

The most reported problems/challenges for students were: 1) Disagreements – students felt they were not able to agree upon some of the quiz answers, 2) Attendance – some students were absent for group discussion and not able to contribute to assignment, and 3) Unprepared students –

some students felt others were not fully participating or engaging in social loafing. The overwhelming cited reason for challenges/problems had to do with attendance.

While the majority of the students reported many benefits of working in a group, some did report problems as well. The data collected in this exploratory study support the use of student groups as an evaluation technique for freshman level courses. Further, since students appeared to have enjoyed working with each other, this instructional technique may be considered to help retain students.

Benefits/Implications of Using Groups

Group work is regarded as a positive activity in the classroom. As the classroom changes from the ground courses phenomenon to distance education, groups can be beneficial in designing the undergraduate and graduate course assignments. An example of the positive aspects of adding group assignments in the classroom is one that focuses on collaboration and learning the steps of group development (cohesive versus non-cohesive groups.) In most of the classes that choose to have group experiences, students will often state, "I do not want my grade to falter because Person A does not contribute to the group." If this occurs, the professor should utilize evaluation mechanisms that do not penalize students who are seen as the overachievers. One way to eliminate this phobia with students is as follows: do not count the group assignment as a large part of the grade. Instead of giving 100 points for the group assignment, one may lower it to 25 points. Of course, this is a mere suggestion.

Another technique that may be important in adding group assignments in the classroom may be to enhance participation among the students and the professor. For instance, if there is a journal assignment, the professor can require that students review journal entries as a group and require a grade. The professor can send the evaluation tool to each group to come to a group consensus. Then, the students can develop rationales for the grade together. Of course, clear rules should be established

such as give group members constructive feedback and do not demoralize the person in giving the feedback. There is a cautionary affect to allowing peers to grade other student's group work. The professor should note that it will be reviewed by him or her, and this will not be the final grade distributed. This group activity allows the students to learn more about one another and it stresses collaboration in understanding the rules and standards. This activity will also allow students to debate on issues that can be relevant to the course. The major point to remember is that the professor designs this activity and can note the learning outcomes that will be gained for the activity.

Conclusion

The data obtained from the questions are merely descriptive in nature. It is hoped that a larger study can be done to note the value and benefits of using group activities in the classroom.