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The Case for Group Grades

It appears that the use of group activities is continuing to gain momentum in both mainstream education (Gillies, 2007) and L2 education (Jacobs & Goh, 2007), based on support from theory, research and people's own experiences with groups as teachers and students. However, the use of group activities brings with it a host of questions that educationists must address. One of the most pressing of these questions asks how to grade the students who are members of the same group. Three options are to: (1) give all group members the same grade, (2) give each group member a separate grade and (3) base each member's grade on some combination of group and individual grades. Of course, another option is not to give grades for students' work in group activities. The present article briefly describes three arguments for option 1, the use of group grades: practicality, motivational power and the teaching of life skills.

A first reason for using group grades lies in practical issues. Teachers cannot possibly have a comprehensive picture of how much each student has contributed to their group's final product. For example, imagine lone teachers of classes of 30-40 students who are working in groups of four. Yes, teachers can use tools such as observation, peer feedback, progress reports and student journals to gain insight into the inner dynamics of groups. Nevertheless, as teachers cannot monitor each group simultaneously, not to mention the fact that students may sometimes work together outside of class Crookall, Lopez-Nerney, Teng, Wu, Toh, Norhayati, Meyer, & Jacobs (2000), much information on individual contributions remains missing.

In addition to practicality concerns, another reason to use group grades lies in their potential to motivate students. One theory that attempts to explain motivation among group members is Social Interdependence Theory (Lewin, 1935; Deutsch, 1949; Johnson & Johnson, 1999). This theory posits that individuals' motivation to help groupmates depends on their perception of whether their individual outcomes are linked to those of their groupmates, i.e., do the group members believe that they 'sink or swim together'. Social Interdependence Theory uses the term 'positive interdependence' for this perception of linked outcomes.

Teachers have many ways to encourage groupmates to see themselves as positively interdependent with each other. These ways include group members establishing common goals, having unique resources and taking on different roles. Another means of promoting positive interdependence lies in rewards, grades being among the rewards teachers most frequently have on offer. Via group grades, groupmates' outcomes are linked, e.g., if one receives an A, all receive As. This might motivate students to help each other and to push each other to contribute to the group.

Preparation for life outside the classroom constitutes a third reason to use group grades (Johnson & Johnson, 2003). In so many areas of life, group members do sink or swim together. Sports teams provide well-known examples. Teams win as a whole, not as individual members. A losing team's top players cannot demand a first-place trophy, claiming that they were excellent but were dragged down by their unskilful, lazy teammates. Instead, if these top players want to win, they must improve the skills and enhance the motivation of their teammates or face the fact that, being positively interdependent, they have sunk together.

The same 'win together or lose together' relationship exists among people engaged in a wide variety of group settings, for example, non-profit organizations, families and businesses. More broadly, the issue of global warming seems to present the entire species of homo sapiens with a situation that should be perceived as one of positive interdependence, i.e., if we do not halt global warming, many of us may literally sink together, while the rest experience other climate-induced disasters. Thus, given the inescapably social nature of modern humans' lives, the use of group grades might provide students with opportunities to experience and practice for this win together or lose together situation. For instance, a friend of the author of the present article was studying for an MBA, and many lecturers used group grades. When students complained of being penalized for having 'bad' groupmates, lecturers replied, "That's life in the real world" (Mai, personal communication). Similarly, Martin Luther King, Jr. has been quoted as stating that, "We are caught in a network of mutuality. We are tied in a single garment of destiny".

In conclusion, group grades provide an attractive option for teachers because giving the same grade to everyone in a group can be practical to use, may motivate students and models situations frequently encountered outside the classroom. Nonetheless, important reasons also exist for group members receiving individual grades and combination grades, as well as for group activities to be ungraded. In the final analysis, however, teachers will decide which grading option to use based on their teaching context and their views on education and its impact on the wider world.

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