

Why don't your group activities work well?

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Abstract

When we put students into groups, we sometimes find that the tasks work well, while at other times they fail to live up to their full potential. Does the problem lie within the design of the task, does it depend on the physical environment of the classroom, is it a result of the individuals in the particular group or is it something about the formation of the group itself? This presentation examined the elements included in a good group task, the theoretical background behind the stages in the formation of groups and what lessons we can learn from the literature in terms of why groups may not function effectively in classroom tasks. The literature will then be compared to responses gathered from action research conducted on what learners feel about participating in cooperative group tasks and why they think such tasks are effective or not.

Introduction

Consider the following two quotes and think about your own experiences in the use of 'group work' (which will also be referred to interchangeably with 'cooperative learning' for the duration of this paper). First is a quote from learner, Greg Bernhardt, a physics student (2006):

'The closest I ever came to failing a course was actually my high school physics class. Every day we did group work, so obviously nothing ever got done.'

<http://www.physicsforums.com/showthread.php?t=118616>

The following quote comes from the perspective of an educator, Richard M. Felder, Department of Chemical Engineering, North Carolina State University (1994)

‘The proven benefits of cooperative learning notwithstanding, instructors who attempt it frequently encounter resistance and sometimes open hostility from the students. Bright students complain about being held back by their slower teammates, weaker or less assertive students complain about being discounted or ignored in group sessions, and resentments build when some team members fail to pull their weight. Instructors with sufficient patience generally find ways to deal with these problems, but others become discouraged and revert to the traditional teacher-centered instructional paradigm, which is a loss both for them and for their students.’

<http://www4.ncsu.edu/unity/lockers/users/f/felder/public/Papers/Coopreport.html>

The first thing you might say is, *‘well, these are both related to the teaching and learning of science, which must surely be different to the way students interact when learning a language.’* I hope you can get past that and look at what is actually being said, both from the learner and the educator. For me, the subject matter isn’t that important; what is important is the notion of ineffective group interaction and the reasons for it.

Did anything said in those quotes above strike a chord with you? Some of them are immediately familiar. Indeed, some of them go through my mind every time I set up a group task in my classroom.

So, do cooperative group tasks have to fail on least at some level? Well, personal experience has shown that some students like to work in groups while others do not. Some will adopt a leadership role while others will have little to no involvement, regardless of the people they are working with or the encouragement given by the teacher. Nevertheless, I feel that there are more fundamental reasons why group work is not always as effective as we’d like and these are to do with what we allow to happen, or rather don’t allow to happen.

Traditionally in ELT we have examined 1) the task, 2) the people in the group and 3) the physical environment. In my presentation I aimed to show the audience that there is one additional factor. We will consider the first three, before examining the fourth and how it relates to classroom research conducted in 2011-2012.

The Task

The task itself is, naturally, of paramount importance. Cooperative learning should involve students working in teams to accomplish a common goal, under conditions that include the following elements (Siltala (2010) (Brown & Ciuffetelli Parker (2009)) :

Positive interdependence

Team members are obliged to rely on one another to achieve the goal. If any team members fail to do their part, everyone suffers consequences.

Individual accountability

All students in a group are held accountable for doing their share of the work and for mastery of all of the material to be learned.

Face-to-face promotive interaction

Although some of the group work may be portioned out and done individually, some must be done interactively, with group members providing one another with feedback, challenging one another's conclusions and reasoning, and perhaps most importantly, teaching and encouraging one another.

Appropriate use of collaborative skills

Students are encouraged and helped to develop and practice trust-building, leadership, decision-making, communication, and conflict management skills.

Group processing

Team members set group goals, periodically assess what they are doing well as a team, and identify changes they will make to function more effectively in the future.

For many teachers, it would be interesting to examine how many of these actually happen when we set up cooperative learning situations in class. I suggested that the audience should not feel bad if they don't see all of them happening. Even though I've been giving this matter some thought, I doubt that all of the group work that goes on in my classes includes all of these elements. In fact, getting to the point that we as a profession recognize each of these factors has been a long and arduous journey, as Jacobs and Ball (1996) suggest:

'In some ELT coursebooks, group activities appear to have been created merely by putting the words 'in groups' or 'in pairs' in front of what were formerly individual activities, without making any changes to encourage learners to co-operate with one another.'

This quote comes from 1996, the result of a detailed investigation into how the course books of that 'generation' were dealing with group work. Jacobs and Ball suggested at that point that the advent of communicative language teaching and TBL were having a positive influence on how group tasks were being implemented in books. We can probably see that this change has occurred and group work, in terms of the task, is catered for more effectively these days as a result of such advances in methodological pedagogy.

The learner

Not only do we need to think about getting the task right, we also need to ensure that we have taken the learner into consideration. For example, Reid (1987) advocates developing a 'culture-sensitive pedagogy'. Group work, Reid notes, is particularly desirable in certain cultures. Flowerdew (1998) reiterates, noting that '*group work is a useful methodological tool for Chinese learners*':

- ⌘ It exploits the cultural value of co-operation, which would seem to foster a style conducive to learning;
- ⌘ It can be used to counterbalance the concepts of 'face' and self-effacement, which could be considered as aspects which impair the learning process.

Although this exemplifies how group work is affected by one particular culture, we can easily imagine how such considerations might have an effect in our contexts, too.

In addition to cultural factors, we also have to accept that in a group that is given free reign over its own destiny unchecked, certain personalities will more than likely dominate the processes that take place. Given that we often put learners in groups for the purpose of promoting spoken communication, we must consider that certain personalities thrive in groups while others fare less well. As Underhill (1987) notes, in groups there is, *'danger that a discussion/conversation technique will reward extrovert and talkative personalities rather than those who are less forthcoming.'*

The physical environment

What does your classroom look like? How does the furniture lend itself to doing group work? These may seem like simple questions, but they can often lead to problems if you don't, or can't, rearrange for group tasks. Kelley (2012) advocates the *'independent-nation-state'* seating model (see figure 1).

Through use of this seating arrangement, the teacher is making it clear to students that they want them to operate independently from the rest of the class, forcibly separating them into small clusters, so that their desks are pushed together and individual teams are able to face one another easily.

Group formation

Now, if you're thinking, *'how can all this happen in what is more than likely a one-off activity that may only last a few minutes'* you're asking a pertinent question. If you think that getting all of these things to happen is the key to successful group work, I've got some bad news. Not only should cooperative learning include each of these elements, you have to remember that well functioning groups don't just happen. It takes time for a group to develop to a point where it can be effective and where all members feel connected to it. Again, you might be wondering how a group can develop when the learners are only working together for a very short period of time. This is pretty much my point: why are we placing restrictions on how well a group can work together?

My interest in this was piqued by a brief exchange with one of my students at the end of a lesson in which we had ‘done’ some group work. This is what my student, Hazal, said:

‘We really like working in groups in your classes because you give us a chance to grow as a group. You don’t force us to work with people we don’t like and we can easily establish how our group will work.’

This interested me because it didn’t really seem to fit into what the literature was saying about cooperative learning.

The theories on group formation date back almost fifty years. Bruce Tuckman (1965) identified four stages that characterize the development of groups. Understanding these stages can help determine what is happening with a group and how to supervise what is occurring. These four group development stages are known as forming, storming, norming, and performing, as described below.

Forming.

At this stage the group comes together and members begin to develop their relationship with one another and learn what is expected of them. This is the stage when team building begins and trust starts to develop. Group members will start establishing limits on acceptable behavior through experimentation. Other members’ reactions will determine if a behavior will be repeated. This is also the time when the tasks of the group and the members will be decided.

Storming.

During this stage of group development, interpersonal conflicts arise and differences of opinion about the group and its goals will surface. If the group is unable to clearly state its purposes and goals or if it cannot agree on shared goals, the group may collapse at this point. It is important to work through the conflict at this time and to establish clear goals. It is necessary for there to be discussion so everyone feels heard and can come to an agreement on the direction the group is to move in.

Norming.

After the group has resolved its conflicts, it can now establish patterns of how to get its work done. Expectations of each other are clearly laid down and accepted by all members of the group. Formal and informal procedures are established in delegating tasks, responding to questions, and in the process by which the group functions. Members of the group come to understand how the group as a whole operates.

Performing.

During this final stage of development, issues related to roles, expectations, and norms are no longer of major importance. The group is now focused on its task, working intentionally and effectively to accomplish its goals. The group will find that it can celebrate its accomplishments and that members will be learning new skills and sharing roles.

After a group enters the performing stage, it is unrealistic to expect it to remain there permanently. When new members join or some people leave, there will be a new process of forming, storming, and norming engaged as everyone learns about one another. External events may lead to conflicts within the group. To remain healthy, groups will go through all of these processes in a continuous loop.

When conflicts arise in a group, this should not be silenced nor ignored. Allowing the conflict to come out into the open enables people to discuss it. If the conflict is kept under the surface, members will not be able to build trusting relationships and this could harm the group's effectiveness. If handled properly, the group will come out of the conflict with a stronger sense of cohesiveness than before.

A fifth stage.

In 1977, Tuckman, along with Mary Ann Jensen, added a fifth stage, *adjourning*, that involves completing the task and breaking up the team.

Method

Quantitative research was conducted with my two classes from the first semester of the 2011-12 academic year. The students' ideas were elicited through ethnographic research methods. During the sixteen week period, I allowed my students a large degree of self determination in deciding how group tasks should proceed and observed their responses during classes.

Students were interviewed towards the end of the semester, in groups of three. The interviews followed an unstructured format, in which the students were invited to give their thoughts on the group work that had occurred in our classes and how it compared with previous experiences of group work in their education. Their responses were transcribed and have been grouped according to how they relate to Tuckman's stages of group formation.

Results

Tuckman's stages of group formation served as the basis for categorizing the student's responses. Selected comments have been chosen to exemplify the themes that surfaced during the interviews.

In terms of *forming* students indicated that the way they are initially put together can effectively negate any possibility of a successful task before it has even begun:

- ⌘ 'We don't feel confident speaking with some people. If I don't talk with them normally why would I talk with them in a group?'
- ⌘ 'Sometimes we spread around class because we know the teacher will make groups and we know where to sit so we can be in a group together.'
- ⌘ 'Some students dominate and some hide and do nothing. It isn't like a group really.'

In terms of *storming*:

- ⌘ 'We like to work with people who are our friends.'

- ⌘ ‘When the teacher puts us in a group, I am mostly unhappy. Some people in class I don’t feel happy working with. If I am in a group with these people, I cannot work.’

In terms of *norming*:

- ⌘ ‘I prefer working alone. We can never distribute roles in a group.’
- ⌘ ‘If we are in a group with friends, we can easily say, ‘OK, I’ll do this and you can do that.’
- ⌘ ‘Sometimes you say to us we can work with the people we want to work with and this is effective. We can immediately divide the work and begin.’
- ⌘ ‘One time you gave us papers with different job descriptions and this was good. We could choose a job and stay with it in the group. Also, I knew responsibilities of others at this time.’
- ⌘ ‘I cannot work effectively in a group. We spend most time doing unimportant things, like ‘who is first to speak’ and other things like this. I always want to work alone and be efficient.’

In terms of *performing*:

- ⌘ ‘There is no motivation for us to perform: we know the group work will end and we will just return to our seat in the class.’
- ⌘ ‘Sometimes teacher moves us to join another group. This kills me, because I feel so uncomfortable. I need to really start again from nothing.’

In terms of *adjourning*:

- ⌘ ‘Sometimes we just wait for time to pass. Why? Because we can give an answer to the teacher easily at the end without working and we know the teacher will move on to a new activity anyway.’

While some of these comments overlap and can be placed in more than one of the stages, it is interesting to note that the students identified aspects of group work in class that related to each of the stages.

Discussion

Recognizing the different stages of group development is just a start. There are different skills and techniques needed to guide a group through the stages. Here are some questions that will help me teachers generate some thoughts on managing this.

Forming

As teachers we need to look at how groups come together and how we can make sure that everyone connected to the group is involved. Additionally, we should ask ourselves how we can create an environment that fosters trust and builds commitment to the group. Another consideration is about who should choose the members of the group and what our involvement should be in group formation.

Storming

One thing teachers must facilitate is ensuring that group members are open to other people's ideas and allow differences of opinion to be discussed. Furthermore, we should consider how we might keep everyone focused on the purpose of the group and identify the cause(s) of conflict. Another consideration is that of how we might identify and examine biases that may be blocking progress or preventing another member to be treated fairly. Finally, we need to discover if anyone finds themselves in a group with people they would never dream of working with in any other situation.

Norming

In terms of norming, we have to think of ways in which we may encourage group members to engage in collaboration and teamwork.

Performing

As far as performing is concerned, we need to look at ways that we as teachers and the learners themselves can celebrate accomplishments, as well as making sure that we – and they - encourage and empower members to learn.

Adjourning

To enable effective adjourning, we may perhaps need to look at how we can sustain group involvement beyond the short-term task. Furthermore, we might want to consider using the same groups for subsequent cooperative learning situations, rather than abandoning the formed groups as soon as they have started working well.

Current practices

Here are ideas being used by myself, as well as research being conducted by others.

In my classroom.

I don't see any problem in allowing my learners to have input in the choice of their group members, nor do I ever insist on a 'magic number' of group members, although the literature strongly indicates that 3 or four members work best. Bearing in mind that I am with my classes for approximately four months – I know not all teachers are in a similar situation – I allow a couple of weeks of *feeling the way* in which the learners try out different groups to see who they work well with.

Once I see that a particular group is working well I encourage those people to work together regularly if not necessarily all the time. Any potential benefit from working with a fresh group is usually offset by having to go through the stages of formation from the start. Consequently, allowing groups to repeatedly work together enables them to get to a point where they are able to norm and perform quite quickly.

I make sure that the cooperative learning situation doesn't just end with an adjournment that hasn't resulted in completion of something worthwhile. An adjourning group will either end with a recognizable finished product, such as a poster or a presentation, or they will be aware that they will come together again to continue work in a subsequent lesson.

Ideas from current research.

Turner (2012) is doing some exciting work with *restricted Facebook groups* to enhance and speed up the process of group formation, and has written about this on her blog. Turner suggests that, by facilitating an online environment in which learners are able to form and storm, group work in class can become more effective.

Seburn (2012) has also been conducting research into collaborative learning in academic environments, suggesting the adoption of what he terms ‘Academic Reading Circles’. The basis of his work is that clearly defining roles within the group and creating interdependency from the off will enable group activities to work more effectively and speed up the group formation process.

Conclusion

Fostering group formation is no easy task and yet is one that may increase the effectiveness of collaborative learning in our classes. The traditional view that allowing close friends to work together in groups may negate their ability to effectively complete the task in question overlooks the fact that students cannot collaborate fully if they have not gone through the stages of group formation. Contemporary research indicates that utilizing social media may enable individuals in a class to bond quickly online and use these connections to work collaboratively in class. Other research advocates the use of clearly defined roles for group members to sidestep the problems associated with forming and norming. Each of these processes highlights the importance of making allowances for groups needing to follow a process of coming together to work collaboratively.

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Other resources

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Figures

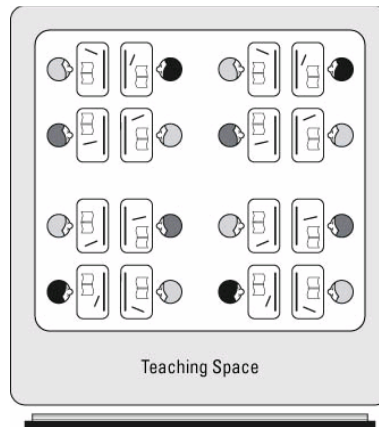


Fig. 1. The independent nation state model