**Examining the Effectiveness of Group Work in Education:  
Does it Work?**

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Group work has seen a rise in popularity in education in recent years. Eighty-two percent of respondents to a recent survey indicated that they have used group work in their teaching practice. The premise is that group work develops co-operative skills that are required in the work force and results in higher achievement. Research to support this premise is still in its infancy but Chiriac (2014) states “…group work is used as a means for learning at all levels in educational systems. There is strong scientific support for the benefits of having students learning and working in groups.” This paper looks at current research and includes quantitative and anecdotal data from a survey conducted with practicing educators as well as educators pursuing graduate studies. It addresses the perceived advantages and challenges faced by participants and facilitators when incorporating group work into their practice. Do the advantages negate the challenges of group work? This paper argues that group work does result in higher achievement by learners and contributes to the development of collaborative skills and cooperation.

Group work presents several challenges. Roberts and McInnerney (2007) list 7 frequent problems with group work. These include student antipathy, group selection, lack of group work skills, the “free-rider,” inequalities in student abilities, withdrawal of group members and assessment of individual contributions. Student antipathy may be more pronounced in online learning environments as “anonymity has been cited as a reason students choose to learn in an online environment.” (Cameron, Morgan, & William, 2009) These students may have a preference for working in isolation and be particularly adverse to the idea of collaboration and group work.

When asked what they disliked about group work several respondents identified “free-riders” as the largest deterrent. Free-riders are members of the group that do “little or no work, thereby contributing almost nothing to the well-being of the group, and consequently decreasing the group’s ability to perform to their potential.” (Roberts & McInnerney , 2007) Garbett (2014) reports that some students are apprehensive to have group work included as part of their educational program because

*“high achieving students worry that their marks may be adversely affected by poor performance from other members. Conversely, they may feel that under-performing members of the group may get ‘a free ride’ from the work of others.”*

Explicit instruction, modelling of effective group work skills and incorporating check points are strategies to help prevent the detrimental effects potential freeloaders can have on group work. Making assessment criteria transparent is an important strategy to help prevent the occurrence of “free-riders.” Roberts and McInnerney (2007) suggest that “it is essential that assessment rules be made explicit prior to the commencement of all group work.” They also recommend the inclusion of peer and self-assessment and a marking scheme that penalizes free-riders by rewarding the “suckers” who end up doing the work of the free-rider and the bulk of the project. Roberts and McInnery (2007) reason that “if the rewards are sufficiently high, for example better marks, every group member will want to be a sucker, and the group may then out-perform expectations.” This author prefers the more pro-active approach of explicit instruction and modelling of group skills, presentation of a clear criteria for assessment that recognizes individual contributions, and the inclusion of frequent check points to monitor progress. Allowing a “sucker” to do all the work denies other group members the opportunity to acquire and apply knowledge and skills.

Only one individual amongst the admittedly modest number surveyed identified themselves as a sucker. While multiple respondents indicated a dislike of “free-riders” none identified themselves with this role. Whether this is the result of the demographic surveyed, professionals accustomed to working in a collegial atmosphere, or a function of self-denial is not known.

Group dynamics are complex and impact on the effectiveness of group work. Along with free-riders and suckers facilitators are likely to encounter “taskmasters” and “the invisible man.” Taskmasters are individuals who help maintain order by ensuring that work is delegated equitably, deadlines are set and enforced and lines of communication are established. The majority of respondents identified with this role so recognizing these individuals and supporting them appropriately may improve the success of the group. “The Invisible Man” is the quiet and shy individual that acts largely as an observer in group discussions. They make equitable contributions to the project but do not have a significant voice in its development. As over 25% of respondents identified with this role it would behoove facilitators to identify these individuals early on and model strategies to assist them in having their voice heard.

*Figure 1: Roles Identified With In Group Work*

Assessing individual contributions presents an additional challenge when utilizing group work in one’s instructional design. With over eighty percent of respondents citing assessment as a perceived challenge of group work, this challenge tied with student reluctance or antipathy as the biggest obstacle to utilizing group work in delivering instruction. Roberts and McInnerney (2007) suggest self -assessment as well as various forms of anonymous peer and group assessment as methods of addressing this challenge.

Implementing group work in an online environment has the additional challenge of physical separation of participants and facilitators. (So & Brush, 2007) Creating authentic learning activities that provide for interaction and collaboration among learners requires instructors to consider availability and access to online tools, processes for monitoring and assessing individual contributions remotely and assembling groups with little knowledge about participants’ interests, skills and learning styles. Cameron et al (2009 suggest that when facilitating an online course it “may be necessary to make creating a sense of community in the online environment intentionally visible early in the course and prior to assigning students to smaller groups.”

The multitude of challenges presented by group work may seem to preclude the use of group work in one’s instructional design. These challenges, combined with an instructors’ entrenched attitude relating to traditional instructional delivery models may explain the reluctance of many to utilize group work. So why bother?

Research as well as anecdotal comments from participants suggest that the advantages to group work validate its utilization in instructional design. Williams et al (2012) states “Group work has been used to enhance student learning in online classrooms. It has been also been found to create a sense of community, thereby contributing to increased learning and satisfaction.”

Group work helps participants develop the skills necessary to collaborate and co-operate with others. Mastery of specific skills may be necessary to obtain a certain job. It is not my intention to diminish the importance of these skills. Garbett (2014) states that “Employers, however, welcome ‘team players’ who can work in groups.” This sentiment is echoed by Morgan et al (2014) in the statement “Instructors believe that group work is an essential tool for students’ future lives and, therefore, a key component of the online classroom.”

Community building is another benefit of the incorporation of group activities in an online or face to face learning environment. Garbett (2014) states “Distance Learning students often report that they feel a sense of isolation in their course. Group projects can foster a sense of inclusiveness, and overcome the feeling of isolation. However, the group work has to be well-designed to avoid the problems identified above.” Community building may contribute to the retention of students. Students who have built relationships with their peers and instructor may be more likely to seek help to overcome challenges rather than quietly withdraw.

Collaboration also provides learners with an opportunity to learn from each other. When asked what they enjoyed about group work, the majority of respondents cited sharing and exchanging ideas with others. This is illustrated by the following comment from one respondent “I love to learn from others, I love hearing other perspectives - group work allows for this and for great discussions.

Does community building and development of the skills required to collaborate also translate to higher achievement? The evidence is not conclusive. Garbett (2014) reports that “marks for the group work are consistently high.” The same does not necessarily hold true in face-to-face environments where Garbett (2014) reports “The results of the group project were very disappointing. 9 out of 38 (24%) of students failed the group work.” The results of my survey suggest that group work is seen as resulting in higher achievement as 64% of respondents indicated that they believed group work resulted in higher levels of achievement.

*Figure 2: Perceptions of the Impact of Group Work on Achievement Levels*

In closing the benefits of group work do appear to negate the challenges presented by group work. There are many strategies that facilitators can employ to increase the effectiveness of group work (Williams , Cameron , & Morgan, 2012) (Roberts & McInnerney , 2007) These strategies include but are not exclusive to employing explicit teaching and modelling of group work skills, providing clear, comprehensive and transparent criteria for individual assessment and identifying dynamics that may be detrimental to effective functioning of the group early on and apply appropriate interventions.

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