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The Problem with Group Work: Engagement of all Students in Group Assignments

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Introduction

The premise of this research project was to attempt to find solutions to eradicate the problem of disengagement in the classroom when conducting group work and employing the use of group assignments in order to assess student learning. I wanted to propose a way teachers can strive to ensure all students within the group contribute to the groups' success and learning without having some students disengage from the situation and rely on others do the work of the group. The problem with group projects is too often the division of work becomes unfair, and only some members of the group are actually engaged in learning. The accountability for learning and progress forward shifts from the individual to the group, and this too often results in only part of the group making any learning contributions while the other part of the group has checked out and become disengaged from the learning.

Abstract

The purpose of this research project is to investigate what students' attitudes are towards group work and if group work has a positive or negative impact overall on the class' engagement with the content they have to master, to find out if students have any reoccurring issues or concerns when completing group work, and to seek ways to improve the use of group work activities in the classroom to have all students engaged in learning and working with the material. This research project's methods included research gathered from my teacher-as-researcher journal and data gathered from a survey about group work administered to students in response to increased monitoring by the instructor of the way a group operates, including at the outset of a group project to assign roles and responsibilities to all members of the group along with having a group members turn in a individual copy of the assignment rather than one copy per group. The findings of my research project were that with this increased monitoring by the instructor, almost all student responded their feelings toward group work were mostly positive but felt the most significant problems was still only partial participation by group member and would like to choose their own groups more often in an effort to eliminate some of this problem.

Context and Participants

- High School Setting: 12th Grade
- Total Participants: 26 Students
- Total School Population: 428 Students in 6th-12th Grade
- Class #1: 9 Students, 0 Non-Native English Speakers, 0 Individualized Education Plans
- Class #2 : 15 Students, 0 Non-Native English Speakers, 0 Individualized Education Plans

Data Collection Methods

Teacher-as-Researcher Journal

- Journal Recorded in on a Weekly Basis due to Group Work Implemented on Average of One to Three Times a Week
- Examine Personal Thoughts on What Group Problems were Occurring Most Often and Their Effects
- Reflect on Overall Level of Student Engagement when in Groups

Student Survey

- 8 Forced Choice Questions

- 7 Open Ended Questions

- Trends in Open Ended Answers Analyzed

- Frequency of Closed Responses Examined Ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree

Example of Student Survey

Survey over Group Work

1. I would describe my feelings toward group work in the classroom over the past two weeks as mostly positive.

Strongly Agree Mostly Agree Somewhat Agree Not Sure Somewhat Disagree Mostly Disagree Strongly Disagree

2. I feel like I didn't learn as much working in groups as I do would have done if I was working on my own.

Strongly Agree Mostly Agree Somewhat Agree Not Sure Somewhat Disagree Mostly Disagree Strongly Disagree

3. When working in groups in the classroom in the past two weeks I feel I was mostly on task.

Strongly Agree Mostly Agree Somewhat Agree Not Sure Somewhat Disagree Mostly Disagree Strongly Disagree

4. I preferred working on projects or assignments in groups rather than individually.

Strongly Agree Mostly Agree Somewhat Agree Not Sure Somewhat Disagree Mostly Disagree Strongly Disagree

5. I found it easy this past two weeks to NOT pay attention and disengage from the class and material when I was working with my group.

Strongly Agree Mostly Agree Somewhat Agree Not Sure Somewhat Disagree Mostly Disagree Strongly Disagree

6. I concentrated more and put more effort into assignments when I was working in a group because I don't want to disappoint them.

Strongly Agree Mostly Agree Somewhat Agree Not Sure Somewhat Disagree Mostly Disagree Strongly Disagree

7. When I was working in my group I felt like everyone was almost always contributing equally in working on an assignment or project.

Strongly Agree Mostly Agree Somewhat Agree Not Sure Somewhat Disagree Mostly Disagree Strongly Disagree

8. I sometimes would become anxious at the idea of group projects or assignments.

Strongly Agree Mostly Agree Somewhat Agree Not Sure Somewhat Disagree Mostly Disagree Strongly Disagree

9. Tell me about some of your experiences with group work.

10. Do you generally like working in groups? Why or why not?

11. Do you feel you work harder than normal when you work in groups? Why or why not?

12. Did you have any reoccurring problems or issues with group work? If yes, what were they?

13. How did you think learning in groups could have improved?

14. Why do you think group work and assignments are used in classrooms?

15. Overall, did you think you learn more or less when you worked in groups and why?

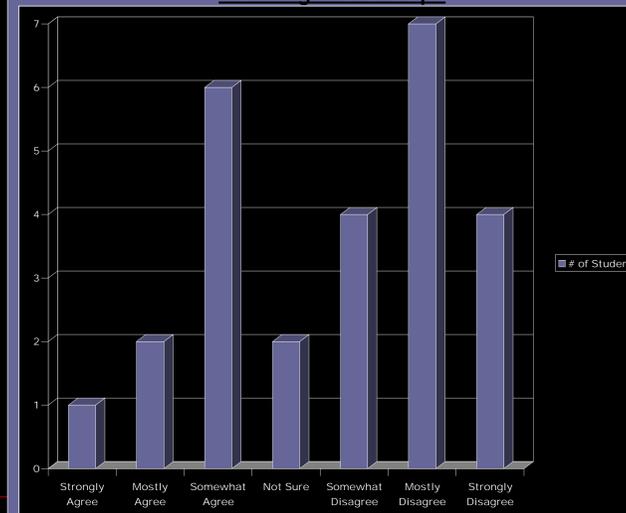
Results

- 95% of students responded that their feelings toward group work were mostly positive
- 76% of students responded they felt they were mostly on task when working in groups in the classroom
- 73% of students responded they preferred working on projects or assignments in groups rather than individually
- 30% of students responded they would become anxious at the idea of group projects or assignments

Results (Continued)

- 34% of students responded that they found it easy to stop paying attention and disengage from the class and material when they were working with their group

"I Find it Easy to Stop Paying Attention and Disengage from the Class and Material When I am Working in a Group"



- 35% of students responded they did not feel everyone was contributing equally in working on an assignment or project

- 69% of students responded they put more effort into assignment when they were working in a group because they don't want to disappoint their group members

Students' Most Commonly Occurring Group Complaints

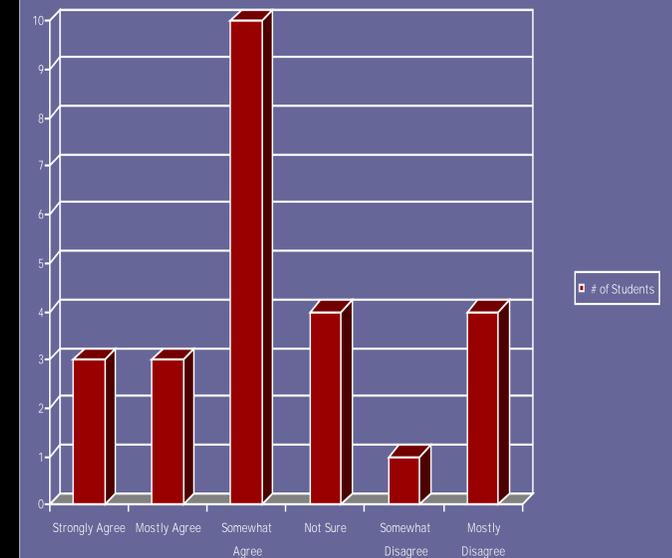
1. Usually only one or two people do a majority of the work
2. Not all group members contribute and some are too passive
3. Some students feel pressured to teach others and catch them up and can't move forward on an assignment as a result

Top Student Suggestions for Group Work

1. Vary the group members they are placed with more frequently
2. Let them choose their own groups
3. Use groups for more discussion oriented work rather than written assignments
4. Use small groups but not too small

Results (Continued)

"When Working in a Group I Felt Like Everyone Was Almost Always Contributing Equally to the Assignment or Project"



Conclusions and Implications

A majority of students did have fairly positive experiences with group work when I as the instructor more closely monitored their group dynamics by having them set goals and responsibilities for group assignments and liked when it was used in the classroom for two major reasons. Firstly, students said they finished their work more quickly than if they were trying to do it on their own, and secondly they liked being able to talk through any errors in understanding with their group members.

However, some students did report anxiety over group work with the most commonly occurring complaint being that often only one or two group members do a majority of the work. One of my key findings was students really wanted the option of choosing who their group members were, and not just because they wanted to work with their friends but because they reported wanting to be put in groups of students they could trust would pull their weight on the group assignment. The implications for this are teachers in their own classrooms should give the option to students to choose their own groups more often, especially on more complex assignments to eliminate anxiety over group projects and to discourage dependence of indifferent students on the students who do care more.

Contact Information

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