

**Training for Success:
Building Productive Work Teams through Group Dynamics Education**

Action Research Project

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Pilot Course: SPC 1600 – Fundamentals of Speech

Identification of Problem and Clear Goals:

In this action research project, I will focus on building stronger student work teams through instruction about group dynamics and decision-making. I seek to educate students about basic group processes including roles, problem solving and decision-making, and effective meeting strategies. After participation in this instructional unit, students will demonstrate more effective group communication strategies, have a stronger knowledge base about group dynamics, and produce a stronger group persuasive speech. After implementation, I will assess the results and focus the strategies further to ensure healthy, cooperative learning communities exist in my classroom.

Adequate Preparation

The previously stated goals of this project have been determined over several semesters of experience with group activities that have not been successful. I have examined this goal through the four lenses of a critically reflective teacher.

Through the lens of my students:

I have surveyed students about group assignments and they report that, when they hear the words “group work” or “group project” mentioned as part of a course, they feel anxious about completing the requirements. There seems to be a lack of trust and goodwill among students in group activities. Specifically, students report being frustrated by “slackers” that do not participate but take credit for the work and by “dominators” who overtake the group process and railroad students through the project. In observing students, I have seen that they do not have the communication skills to deal with these negative roles in their groups so they just “put up with” students who interfere with smooth group processing. Through conversations with students, I have learned that students are busy outside of class and have little time to meet with their peers to complete group assignments. In addition, students have shared that groups of six or seven students are too large to manage and add to the anxiety they feel when presenting their group speech. In a survey conducted in my summer 2003 class, I found that none of my students had received training in group communication and dynamics in any classes. However, each student reported that they are required to participate in group projects and discussions as part of their college class work.

Through the lens of my peers:

My peers are frustrated. Informal conversations with them reveal their commitment to group activities and collaborative learning but also highlight their frustration with the overall negative attitude associated with group work. My peers see value in group assignments and view group communication skills as essential, as indicated in a brief survey conducted in the Summer of 2003. In this survey, I also learned that their experience is that students don't have the communication skills to handle a large group project and the resulting group dynamics issues. They also acknowledge that students are not receiving training in group dynamics elsewhere in the curriculum but are being asked to perform in groups as a regular part of instruction. Most of my peers address group dynamics at least briefly but find it is difficult to include significant training due to time constraints.

Through the lens of the related literature:

Across the curriculum, students are placed in groups and asked to brainstorm, share their knowledge and opinions, and work collaboratively to produce papers and projects. As educators, we are encouraged, through workshops, grants, and other training, to include peer-to-peer learning opportunities in our curriculum. We know that students can learn more and learn better through working with one another. Barker, et al. (2001) suggest the following benefits of group membership and collaborative work efforts:

1. Participants will achieve a common understanding and an information base resulting in a greater understanding of the complexities of the problem under discussion.
2. Groups can legitimize a variety of viewpoints and move toward the best ideas.
3. "Given even a minimal level of trust and goodwill, a group is capable of producing a greater quantity and variety of ideas than the average individual."
4. Good experiences in a group can generate enthusiasm and individuals can pride themselves on their contributions.
5. Groups can brainstorm and generate a number of ideas, far more than may be possible individually.

We also know that group work skills are important to the future success of the student as most employers list "team work skills" or "group skills" as major criteria for employment. In fact, over two-thirds of U. S. companies use formal work teams to accomplish objectives (Gamble, 2002). In addition, we are members of many groups in our everyday lives. "When several students took time to list the number of groups in which they participate, most of them found that they were a part of twenty to thirty small groups" (Barker, et al., 2001 p.2). Learning about group dynamics and engaging in group activities may have far reaching consequences as the student continues to develop new relationships and group memberships.

Currently, I allow students to "self-select" their teams for this major group project. This selection process takes place at the beginning of the semester and the group works together for twelve of the sixteen weeks in the term. I have tried several strategies for forming and developing groups, including numbering students off and grouping all the "1's" together and the "2's" together, using True Colors or other personality inventories, and allowing students to self-select their groups. None of these strategies have been

successful. Ledlow (2001) suggests that teams should be formed by the teacher and be heterogeneous. Based on her suggestions, I know that I need to employ a more focused strategy to place students in groups where they are more likely to be successful and learn from and with their peers.

Additionally, I use teams of six or seven students. Most research in group dynamics suggests that groups of five to seven members work best (Gamble, 2002). However, this number seems to be too high for the work my students are completing. Ledlow (2001) states that groups designed for cooperative learning experiences should be no larger than five. Barker, et al. (2001) state that “the maximum size (of the group) depends on the maturity of the group members, the style of leadership, the personalities of group members, and a variety of other variables. When the potential for face-to-face interaction ceases among all group members, then the size of the group has exceeded the upper limit for a small group (p. 7).” Students have busy lives outside of the classroom and, when surveyed about their group experience at the end of the semester, note that it is very difficult to coordinate six or seven schedules so that they can meet and work on their project. In addition, even experienced public speakers have difficulty speaking in a panel or in a group presentation with six or seven members. The students in my class do not have the public speaking experience to manage such a situation and report increased communication anxiety about presenting with such a large number of people. I need to reduce the number of group members so that each group has a greater chance for face-to-face interaction, leading to greater group success.

“Group decision making can be valuable if the group members have learned to work together effectively. One of the major reasons for ineffective group decision-making is that the group members have not learned to work together efficiently as a unit. If this is the case, the leader might want to spend some time on improving the efficiency of the work group.” (Barker, et al. 2001). As the group’s overall leader, it is my responsibility to set them up for success. In the past, I have not educated the students about group processes or dynamics. I have given them the major project assignment and expected them to reach the final product with little oversight from me. However, through reading and experiencing the Ledlow workshop, I’ve learned that I need to be a more “hands-on” guide rather than just an evaluator at the end of the semester. Ledlow (2001) offers four benefits of using team building exercises, including forming social cohesiveness, developing roles and norms, establishing effective interpersonal communication patterns, and processing and reflecting on work. I need to develop the groups through team building and education about group dynamics and processes.

I have consulted several sources in preparation for this action research project.

Anderson, R. S. & Speck, B. W. (Eds.) (1998). *Changing the Way We Grade Student Performance: Classroom Assessment and the New Learning Paradigm*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Angelo, T. A., & Cross, K. P. (1993). *Classroom Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for College Teachers, 2nd Edition*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Barker, L. L., Wahlers, K. J. & Watson, K. W. (2001). *Groups in Process: An Introduction to Small Group Communication, 6th Edition*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon Publishers.

Cross, K. P. & Steadman, M. H. (1996). *Classroom Research: Implementing the Scholarship of Teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Gamble, T. K. & Gamble, M. (2002). *Communication Works (7th Edition)*. New York: McGraw-Hill Publisher.

Johnson, D. W., Johnson, R. T., & Smith, K. A. (1991). *Active Learning: Cooperation in the College Classroom*. Minnesota: Interaction Book Company.

Ledlow, S. (2001). Cooperative learning in higher education. In Ledlow, S. (Ed.) *Active/Cooperative learning: Best practices in engineering education* [CD-ROM]. Tempe, AZ: Center for Research in Education in Science, Math, Engineering, and Technology at Arizona State University. [Also available online: <http://clte.asu.edu/acl>].

Newstrom, J. & Scannell, E. (1998). *The Big Book of Team Building Games: Trust-building activities, team spirit exercises, and other fun things to do*. New York: McGraw-Hill Publisher.

In addition, I have attended several seminars:

<i>Introduction to Action Research</i>	
<i>Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher</i>	Stephen Brookfield
<i>Technology Showcase</i>	
<i>Assessment Roundtable</i>	
<i>Core Competency Seminar</i>	
<i>Learning Communities Seminar</i>	Ed Dolan
<i>Inclusion Seminar</i>	Susan Ledlow
<i>Diversity Seminar</i>	

Through my own lens:

Recognizing that group communication skills are critical to the student in the college classroom and beyond, I have included a major group research project and thirty minute group presentation in my Fundamentals of Speech curriculum. The project has several of the key components of collaborative learning, as addressed by Susan Ledlow in her workshop, including positive interdependence (students earn individual as well as group grades), individual accountability (students are required to submit individual assignments as part of the team process), equal participation (each student is responsible for part of the final project), and simultaneous interaction (students are given the opportunity to participate in group discussions monitored by the instructor). This project has been met with limited success, in part I believe, due to the lack of clear training in group communication techniques and skills. Over the three semesters I have used this project, I have observed that students do not work effectively in groups and lack basic group

communication skills. Students regularly complain to me that they do not like group work and, in a class discussion about the advantages and disadvantages of groups, are able to create an exhaustive list of negative aspects of team work but are unable to come up with more than three or four positives. Yet, as confirmed by Susan Ledlow in the workshop on collaborative learning, group work opportunities are excellent ways to increase student learning and confidence.

After a good deal of frustration with group work, I am excited about implementing these new strategies. Susan Ledlow sparked many ideas and provided a wealth of knowledge, insight, and reassurance about the group process and how it can be an effective teaching and learning tool. I think that including a unit on group dynamics before the groups really begin to function and work on their project, I will eliminate many of the issues and concerns that arise later in the semester.

Outcomes

The goal of this action research project is to increase student abilities and success in collaborative learning efforts. In addition, this project will focus my efforts to better prepare students for group communication activities, train them in collaborative learning techniques and strategies, and more clearly focus and direct their group activities to help the students achieve greater success in their group project.

This action research project will focus on the following specific course outcomes, as stated in the course syllabus:

- Students will have the ability to work in groups toward a common goal and purpose.
- Students will have the ability to present a persuasive message to a targeted audience.

In addressing these two course outcomes, the project will address the following Valencia Core Competencies:

- ACT: Act effectively and purposefully in a group setting. Students will learn strategies that will guide their actions in group work.
- COMMUNICATE: Students will communicate interpersonally with their groups and publicly with their audience. Strategies will be introduced to help students become better communicators in a group setting.
- VALUE: Students will value the contributions of their peers and will learn to value the group process as a way to increase success and achieve greater goals.
- THINK: Students will think about the group process and exercise good communication strategies to engage each group member in the process of creating their project.

Appropriate Methods

After attending the workshops, reading the books, and talking with peers associated with the grant, I have a clear plan for implementing this action research project. I will incorporate a new unit on group dynamics into the semester. The focus of this unit will be two-fold. First, the unit will educate students in effective group communication strategies. Second, participation in the group dynamics unit will require the students to actively participate and communicate with their groups, using the strategies that they are learning about.

Pre/Post Testing

An instrument will be developed to seek student knowledge of and attitudes about group communication (see attached). This instrument will be administered before the unit on group dynamics and again after the unit is complete. Results should show increased knowledge about the group process and confidence in communicating with peers in a group setting.

Group Dynamics

Students will be given the “Roles and Gambits” cards (Ledlow workshop) as well as a series of readings on several aspects of group dynamics including goals and roles, communicating effectively in small groups, problem solving and conflict resolution, and running meetings. These reading assignments will be given as homework and students will return to class and engage in a “jigsaw” learning exercise. One reading will be assigned to each member of the group. When the students return to class, all students that read the same article will get together in an “expert group.” After discussing their article and developing the key points, they will return to their base group to teach them about their article. Groups will be observed and encouraged to use their roles and gambits cards in their discussions.

Once each group member has been taught about each article, the groups will develop a paper titled “Strategies for Effective Groups” and present their conclusions to the class. The paper and the presentation will be evaluated for content and delivery and the group will be given feedback on their performance as a formative assessment tool. As a final measure, the group persuasive speeches will be evaluated as a summative assessment.

1. Learning Outcomes <i>What learning outcomes are you seeking?</i>	2. Performance Criteria <i>How would you know (the outcome) if you saw it? What will the student be able to do?</i>	3. Assessment Techniques <i>How will you measure the criteria listed in #2? How will you know?</i>	4. Instructional Strategies <i>How will you help students prepare for the assessments in item #3?</i>
Students will have the ability to work in groups toward a common goal and purpose.	1. Increased scores on the post test instrument. 2. Use of group roles and norms,	1. Tabulate results on pre and post tests and compare data.	1. Thoughtful team selection. 2. Provide “Roles and Gambits”

	<p>including the use of role cards and gambits (Ledlow).</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Successful completion of the “jigsaw” exercise. 4. Accurately and thoughtfully developed “Strategies for Effective Teams” paper and presentation. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Observe groups functioning and listen for roles, gambits, and other turn-taking and inclusion strategies. 3. Evaluate papers on “Strategies for Effective Teams” (formative assessment) 4. Evaluate “Strategies for Effective Teams” presentation for quality and depth of knowledge (formative assessment). 	<p>cards (Ledlow) for guiding group discussion.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Provide rubric for “Strategies for Effective Teams” paper and presentation.
<p>Students will have the ability to present a persuasive speech to a targeted audience.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Increased scores on student group presentations as compared to the base group in Spring 2003. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Evaluate student group presentations using the Team Presentation Evaluation Form (summative assessment). 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Provide evaluation form for student group presentations.

Effective Presentation

The plans for/results of this project will be shared in the required grant showcase. Additionally, the plans for/results of the project will be shared at a departmental meeting

in the Fall of 2003. Finally, the project will be submitted to the Florida Communication Association for inclusion in their Annual Conference program.

Significant Results

In order to measure the outcome and success of this project, the scores on the final group presentation in Fall 2003 will be compared to a base group of student presentations in the Spring 2003 course. I expect students to score higher individually and as a group in the Fall 2003 courses due to the inclusion of this unit on group dynamics and successful group communication strategies.

In addition, I will review the pre/post survey data to see if students demonstrate clear knowledge of group processes and report increased confidence in their group communication skills.

After reviewing the results of the pre/post survey and the overall project scores, I will reflect on the inclusion of this activity and determine its value. If the project is valuable in helping students learn and become more effective communicators, I will fine tune the plans and continue to implement the project in future semesters.

I will share the results of this project with my colleagues in the Spring of 2003 in a departmental and/or discipline meeting.

Reflective Critique

I would be satisfied with the inclusion of this project if students reported greater confidence in group communication skills and knew the terminology and strategies associated with group dynamics and roles. If, after reviewing the results, I find that students are more confident and do have greater knowledge of the group process, I will continue to implement the project.