

Transitioning from Group Work to Team Work: Conditions for Effective Team Projects

Background:

Any professor who has utilized group projects in her college courses knows all too well two prime challenges she thereby confronts: the challenge posed by negative experiences within the group (with consequences ranging from discomfort to dysfunction) and the challenge of ensuring the completed projects meet the targeted student learning outcomes. These two are obviously interrelated. The latter requires each individual member of the group to engage with the assignment and do his or her part. Since negative group dynamics and negative experiences with other individuals in the group have a tendency to cause students to disengage, they tend to reduce the pedagogical efficacy of working in groups on a project. Moreover, when students view the prospects of working with others on a project positively and anticipate it being a productive and enjoyable experience, they are more likely to engage. The desire to cultivate this outlook in students, therefore, is well justified. The question, then, is how we can do it. What can we do as teachers to make it more likely that students view group work positively and fully engage in the project?

Research in social psychology can help us to make some progress on this question. The key is to recognize that we want students to complete the project *as a team*, not merely as a collection of individuals—i.e., a group. Accordingly, we need to build effective teams in the classroom.

Research in social psychology indicates that two factors are essential to building effective teams: identity and interdependence. Team identity has to do with the extent to which an individual defines oneself as a part of the group or team. It is thus a psychological notion. Interdependence is achieved to the extent that team members believe that their own individual success is tied to the success of the team and the effort of each team member is integral to the success of the team. The literature suggests that by strengthening team identity and increasing interdependence, group work will be more enjoyable, students will be more committed to the project, and thus greater numbers of students will be likely to achieve the targeted student learning outcomes. Despite this, to my knowledge there is currently no literature in the scholarship of teaching and learning in philosophy that applies this social psychological research to group work.

I have been using group projects in my introduction to philosophy classes each semester for six years, and I have accumulated two semesters' worth of detailed data on students' perceptions of and experiences with this group work, as currently employed. The data covers the extent to which individual members of the group were committed to the project and involved in producing the final product, and it also provides an indication of the level of student satisfaction with the experience. While the data is incomplete, it does provide some evidence that the way in which I employ group work in my classes is effective in the ways indicated above.

Session Proposal:

This proposal is for a workshop session focused on utilizing group projects in introductory philosophy classes. It will cover both the relevant social psychological research on teams and team building and the specific techniques I use in my introduction to philosophy classes to foster team identity and interdependence.

I will begin the session by guiding participants through a mock experiment in order to introduce them to some of the social psychological research on team building and some of the surprising effects of team identity and interdependence. Then, I will lead a discussion about ways in which we can foster team identity and interdependence by utilizing my experience and my courses as an example.

Finally, since fostering team identity and interdependence is not by itself sufficient to ensure the success of team projects, I will end the session by discussing how we can apply the intentional learning model to teaching teamwork skills. By making instructor expectations clear, explicitly discussing the various styles people use when they interact in groups, and encouraging students to apply those styles to themselves and their interactions with their team, students will be better prepared to contribute effectively and ultimately to produce good philosophical work in the context of the team.

Session Goals:

The session has three main goals. First, it seeks to introduce participants to the importance of fostering team identity and interdependence when assigning group projects in introductory philosophy classes. Second, it seeks to introduce participants to some techniques for doing this. And third, it seeks to stimulate thought about other techniques that we, as teachers, can employ to make group projects more effective.

Handouts:

I will make available a packet containing (1) a description of the techniques I currently use in my own classes, (2) a handout I utilize both to make clear my expectations and to identify the various styles people employ when working in groups, (3) a team evaluation form I require each individual to complete for each project, and (4) some sample group projects I have assigned.

Equipment:

No equipment will be needed for this session.

Bibliography:

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