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MAKING COOPERATIVE LEARNING VISIBLE WITHOUT THE GROUP GRADE

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Jenny Kindred wrestles in this chapter with a dilemma many of us have faced: how to grade group assignments. I suspect many people reading this have a memory of getting a lower grade than we deserved in a group project because a fellow group member didn't pull his or her weight. My experience with this has always made me shy away from giving group grades. And yet, others convincingly argue that group grades are required in order to build a cohesive group rather than a collection of individuals who happen to be working on the same project. Since group work is increasingly used in higher education, more and more of us are struggling to figure out how to grade these kinds of assignments.

Jenny's problem is exacerbated here since the group assignments in question arise in a Small Group Communication class, where the class spends time studying how groups succeed and fail. Jenny chose to use individual-only grades in her class, reflecting the concern about potentially downgrading students due to factors outside their control (such as the work of their classmates). But, rather than just making this decision, Jenny has engaged in a rigorous analysis of this decision. She carefully studies student reactions to the decision, and then uses a wide variety of evidence (including journals and videotapes of group meetings) to assess the quality of the group work she saw. I particularly like the conclusion of the chapter, in which Jenny attempts to "complete the circle" as she discusses how what she has learned from this investigation will change the way she teaches the course in the future.

Introduction

The typical Small Group Communication course is focused around significant group activities and projects; students work in groups and learning is generally assessed as a group (via a group grade based on a final project or presentation). Group grades, however, do not always reflect actual learning of group communication processes. Grading group projects and presentations therefore becomes problematic. In my own experience, I have struggled with assigning a below-average grade to a final group project when I suspected some of the group members worked hard but had to deal with the lack of commitment and effort of a few bad apples in the group. On the other hand, I might witness an exceptional “A” group presentation when in fact one or two of the members did little or no work. In addition to these apparent inequities, grading only the final project or presentation cannot account for the group processes and individual behaviors that occurred up until that point. Students become frustrated if they feel their hard work is not recognized. How then can small group projects be designed that satisfy both instructors and students? How can small group projects be designed that not only encourage cooperation and motivation but also truly measure learning about small group communication?

This project explores the impact individual-only grading (as opposed to group grading) has on learning, cooperation and motivation in groups working on cooperative assignments in the small group communication course. The project also investigates the level of student satisfaction with this type of grading structure. The following research questions guided this exploratory study:

- RQ1: How satisfied are students working on group assignments with individual-only grading?
- RQ2: How can we design group assignments that encourage cooperation and motivation without assigning a group grade?
- RQ3: How can we measure the learning of group processes without assigning a group grade?

These questions are important to the communication discipline, as we

are primarily responsible for teaching the small group communication course. Faculty and students across disciplines, however, will benefit from this exploration as group projects and presentations are frequently assigned in many different classes.

Review of Literature

To situate this study more specifically within the scholarly literature on teaching and learning, characteristics of cooperative learning and methods of group assessment will be reviewed.

Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning is a specific kind of collaborative approach to learning that essentially means learning in groups. This could mean students working together over time on some pre-determined class assignment (formal cooperative learning), or students participating in group activities and group discussion on a daily basis in class (informal cooperative learning) (Johnson and Johnson 1999). Both types of group goals are present in the small group communication class; thus the class becomes a “learning laboratory” for the semester, a place to see and experience many small group communication theories and concepts. The ability to work cooperatively together and work towards group consensus are the overarching goals of the course.

Smith and MacGregor (1992) discussed several essential elements of cooperative learning. First, having clearly defined group goals and establishing positive interdependence among group members is critical; each student must contribute to the task and work together in order to be successful as a group. Second, communication among group members is necessary so that students can help each other with the given task. Bruffee claimed that “students learn by joining transition communities in which people construct knowledge as they talk together and reach consensus” (1999, 84). Finally, individual accountability and personal responsibility are important because “the group’s success must depend on the individual learning of all group members” (Slavin 1992, 97). Group goals, interdependence, and communication are not only aspects of cooperative learning, but they are also the most important parts of the definition of a small group (Rothwell 2007). Therefore, the design of the assignments for this research took into

account the very definition of cooperative learning. In addition, considering the importance of individual learning as discussed above, all work was individually evaluated.

Because attention must be paid to individual accountability, however, situations can arise in classroom groups whereby students engage in “parallel” learning versus “cooperative” learning. These ideas derived from research on children involved in parallel versus cooperative play (Parten 1932). Parten first identified parallel play as that in which children play next to each other, doing similar activities, but do not attempt to influence each other. In contrast, cooperative play among children is illustrated by a group goal, designated roles, and leaders who coordinate activities during play. In cooperative play, children clearly influence one another within the group. These stages are developmental; younger children learn how to play cooperatively only after they have engaged in parallel play.

Rebecca Nowacek, Professor of English at Marquette University, has extended Parten’s (1932) concepts to the college classroom by experimenting with parallel versus cooperative play in her capstone courses (pers. comm., February 20, 2008). Nowacek explained that “parallel play” in college student groups is characterized by individual monologues versus true discussion, asking set-up or simple clarifying questions and commenting on others’ work through “back channel comments” (for example, “I agree” or “that’s cool”). Parallel play groups in Nowacek’s capstone course reported that they talked more about how to construct a final presentation than the actual content of the presentation, for example. They also reported that their groups were more interested in getting the project done than doing it creatively. Student groups engaging in “cooperative play,” on the other hand, make more sophisticated connections between their individual contributions, pose challenging questions, and often engage in extended disagreement. Cooperative play groups in Nowacek’s capstone course reported lengthy, challenging discussions before decisions were made.

Both parallel and cooperative play in college student groups, as defined by Nowacek, contain elements of cooperation and cooperative learning (group goals, interdependence, communication, individual responsibility), and therefore can lead to successful group work. Students engaging in cooperative play, however, demonstrate high levels of critical thinking, welcome extended dialogue and constructive con-

flict, and ultimately strive toward creativity. Cooperative play, then, might produce more creative and thoughtful final group outcomes. The context in which the group operates (e.g. the college classroom), the assignment itself, and even the ability levels of the students could all influence the extent to which students actually shift from parallel to cooperative play.

Group Assessment

Assessing learning in groups is a complicated task. When students work in groups, what is usually graded is the final project or presentation the group members have worked on during the semester. This might very well be appropriate for many courses (for example a business class, where creating a team product is the goal of the course). However, in the small group communication course, instructors are primarily concerned with what students have learned about small group theories and concepts. Thus the process becomes as important, or more important than, the product. Webb (1993) discussed this issue by describing the competing goals of collaborative work: group productivity (assessed through the outcome, whether quantitatively or qualitatively) and learning of individual members (evaluated through focus on the learning outcomes and not the final group outcome). Webb suggests using self-reports and observation in order to assess students' interpersonal and teamwork skills.

Kagan (1995, 1996, 2000) argued that group grades actually undermine motivation and create resistance to cooperative learning. In his own classes he has found that students were motivated to work harder as a group if they knew their peers and classmates were evaluating them (qualitative feedback only – not a grade or points). “Group grades are always an unfair reflection of individual achievement or performance because they do not reflect only the learning or performance of the individual who received the grade” (Kagan 2000, 4). He has found that students, in general, were more motivated without the grade (Kagan 1995). Ashraf (2004) argued that teachers should reconsider using groups at all because of the inherent problems with grading the final group project/outcome. When assigning a group grade, there is no way to assess individual performance. This line of thinking by both Ashraf and Kagan supports one of the most important tenants of cooperative learning, that of individual accountability. “Each student’s

performance is individually assessed and each student is held responsible for contributing to the group's success" (Smith and MacGregor 1992, 12).

Thus, in considering the elements of cooperative learning, the competing goals of collaborative work (group product versus individual learning) as discussed by Webb (1993), and the arguments against group grades advanced by Kagan (2000), the classes under investigation here focus on small group communication processes instead of focusing on group productivity as measured by the final group product. All work was assessed individually (no group grades were given), but the assignments were designed so that students would have opportunities to engage in both parallel and cooperative play (Nowacek, pers. comm., 2008). Students also received quantitative and qualitative feedback from the instructor and their peers regarding their final product.

Method

Course, Group, and Assignment Descriptions

Data were collected from two sections of the course "Small Group Communication," taught at Eastern Michigan University, during the winter 2008 semester. Fifty-two students were enrolled (28 in one section and 24 in the other). There were a total of 12 groups (6 groups per class); students worked with the same group the entire semester. In addition to working with their group during in-class activities, students also completed two collaborative projects with their groups.

As the instructor, I assigned students to a group based on a short survey they completed at the beginning of the semester. The survey asked students whether or not they prefer to take on a leadership role, what special skills or knowledge they could bring to the group (for example, technology skills), and what roles and behaviors they generally take on in groups. In addition to creating all mixed gender groups, I attempted to balance the groups by making sure each group had potential leaders and technology experts, and also tried to balance personalities (not putting all self-described "quiet" students in one group, for example).

The projects were designed so that students had to work together to complete a final task as a group (group presentation), but

they were graded individually based on their learning gained through participating in the group collaborative process. Students were assigned to write eight journal entries in which they were asked to reflect on themselves, their group members and their group experiences and apply relevant small group communication concepts. Since the journals were focused around the class group experiences, if students did not actively work with their group on the assigned group projects, they would have nothing to write about.

The first assignment asked groups to design a teambuilding activity to facilitate with the class. They had to work together to design the activity and decide how best to facilitate it with the class. In addition to writing about their group work in their journals, each student wrote a paper (at the completion of the activity) describing the small group communication concepts their activity was intended to demonstrate and evaluating how well the activity taught the concepts to the class. The actual teambuilding activity the group facilitated with the class was not graded.

The second assignment asked groups to analyze a film based on small group communication concepts. Groups then presented their overall film analysis to the class. The film chosen had to focus on some kind of task-oriented group; some of the chosen films included *Bring it On*, *Gone in 60 Seconds*, *Ocean's 12*, *Remember the Titans*, and *The Incredibles*. Again, in addition to writing about their group processes in their journals, each student analyzed the film from a different perspective and wrote his/her own paper and presented his/her own findings during the group presentation. Although students were doing individual work, they had to work together to make decisions on how best to analyze the film and who would analyze the film from which perspective, as well as make decisions about the content, structure and format of the group presentation. Students received an individual grade for the paper and for their portion of the presentation.

For both assignments, a competitive element was introduced. To encourage teamwork, each group was evaluated by their classmates. The members of the team with the highest evaluation by the class received 10 points added to their final point total at the end of the semester (there were 500 total points available in the course).

Students were told of the nature of the study at the beginning of the semester and that all class assignments and activities would po-

tentially be part of the data analysis. All students in both classes signed a consent form agreeing to participate – they were assured that there would be no consequences to their grade from not participating.

Data Collection

Journals. Students were required to keep an online journal consisting of eight separate entries for the semester. Journals #1 and #8 were worth 20 points each and the content was assigned:

Journal Entry #1:

Reflect on your assigned group and your first few group interactions; in addition, assess yourself as a group member. What are your impressions of and expectations of this group and the members? What are your personal strengths and weaknesses that you bring to this group and what do you hope to learn most this semester? Apply ideas and concepts from chapters 1, 2 and 3 to this journal entry.

Journal Entry #8:

Reflect on your group, the group activities, the group assignments and the grading system overall. How would you evaluate your group? How would you evaluate yourself as a group member? Were your impressions and expectations (see journal entry #1) met or not? Did your group work well together and cooperate this semester? Why or why not? Were you motivated to work towards group goals? Why or why not? What did you think of the activities and assignments? What are your thoughts on the lack of group grades? Apply ideas and concepts from any of the chapters to this final journal entry.

Journals 2 - 7 were worth 10 points each and were open; students were asked to reflect on their class group and group experiences and apply relevant small group communication concepts. The following definitions were provided in the assignment sheet:

REFLECTION - this is the affective part of the journal - record your feelings and experiences here. Reflect on yourself, group members and/or the group itself. Choose anything here that

you have experienced with your group to reflect on.

APPLICATION - this is the cognitive part of the journal - identify relevant theories or concepts from the reading and apply those specifically to your group experience so far in the course. Your application need not all be tied to your reflection.

If students did not actively work with their group on the group projects and class activities, they would have nothing to write about. A total of 349 journal entries were submitted. This research focused on and primarily analyzed Journal Entry #8 where students were instructed to report on overall satisfaction with the assignments and grading structure as well report on their motivation factors during the course. There were 49 final journal entries submitted.

Group observation. One of the journal entries assigned was an evaluation of a group meeting. Students were required to participate in one videotaped meeting during the course of the semester. They were instructed to watch the meeting and write a journal entry reflecting on the meeting and analyzing the meeting based on relevant course concepts. Students were encouraged to structure their videotaped meeting in one of two ways: meet to discuss various teambuilding activities, and then make decisions about which activity to use and how to facilitate it with the class (group project #1); or meet to discuss the film and the concepts that apply to the film, and then make decisions about how to analyze the film, who will conduct which analysis, and how the group will present the film analysis to the class (group project #2). Six groups recorded meetings and submitted their videotapes. Of these six recorded meetings, three groups discussed and made decisions regarding the first group project and two groups discussed and made decisions regarding the second group project. One group met to discuss the second group project, but had no real focus, made no significant decisions, and spent most of the meeting simply watching their chosen film.

Interviews/debriefings. Debriefing interviews were conducted after the first group assignment was completed and students' individu-

al papers submitted. Students were asked their thoughts on the first assignment, their motivation level to work on the first assignment, their impression of the learning gained and their opinion of the individual-only grading system. The interviews were conducted before students received a grade on their individual paper and before they found out which group was evaluated the highest by the class and won the extra ten points. All students who participated in the interviews received 10 extra credit points. The interviews occurred over two class periods for each class (one-half of each class was interviewed each day). A research assistant facilitated, digitally recorded, and transcribed the interviews. I did not listen to the interviews nor see the transcription until after the classes were over and final grades posted.

Data Analysis

The final journal entry (#8) and the debriefing interviews were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Strauss and Corbin 1998). The constant comparative method is a grounded theory methodology whereby data is broken down and conceptualized into key ideas and themes. The remaining journal entries were coded as either demonstrating learning (through average and above application of course concepts) or not demonstrating learning (through limited or no application of course concepts). The videotaped group meetings were examined for evidence of both parallel and cooperative play as defined by Nowacek.

Results: Student Satisfaction

The first research question asked “how satisfied are students working on classroom group assignments with individual-only grading?” Satisfaction was assessed at two different times: once at mid-semester (after the first group project was completed) through several group interviews and again at the end of the semester (after the second group project was completed) via the students’ final journal entry.

Satisfaction at Mid-Semester

A majority of the students expressed general dissatisfaction with the lack of group grades after the first group project was completed. Students overwhelmingly felt they did very well on their in-class

facilitations and felt “cheated” that there was no grade (reward) for the effort they put into this project. At the time, students had submitted only three journal entries and they had not yet received their individual paper grades. Some of the student comments from the interviews are below:

I don't like the fact that my grade from this whole thing was in the paper. We didn't get any credit for the work we put in to that project.

That whole project being graded with this paper really freaks me out, and I don't think it's fair because I know we put on a great facilitation. My grade probably won't reflect that because I'm not the best writer.

Students seemed to feel this way because at this point in the semester they were feeling good about their group and how their group performed on the facilitation activity. In other words, because they felt their group worked hard and presented well, they should all be rewarded with a good grade. For example, one student commented, “I have an awesome group, and I want a group grade!”

There were a few students, however, who did speak up in support of the grading structure, or suggested assigning both individual and group grades. For example, one student commented about the assignment that “I would like it if it were a combination of both. Individual for some of the writing stuff, but still get credit for the work we do in our groups.”

Perhaps students on one level like that they are individually graded but still want to be rewarded for putting forth effort collectively with their group. It is also important to keep in mind that at this point in the semester students had received very few grades, so there was a high level of uncertainty about how they would actually be evaluated for the individual work they turned in. Comments from the interviews also suggest that students were not connecting their journal entries to the group assignments. The journal entries were designed as a way for students to get “credit” for the work they were doing with their group, but this connection did not seem to be clearly visible to the students.

Satisfaction at Semester End

By the end of the semester, more students were satisfied with the individual-only grading structure of the course than was initially reported at the middle of the term. The final journal entry asked students specifically how satisfied they were with the grading of the group assignments. Students discussed their level of satisfaction for both group assignments, and mixed levels of satisfaction were seen in the responses as well. Because of the depth and reflective nature of the journal entries, multiple themes at times were found in a single entry. Four distinct themes were found that explained levels of student satisfaction with the individual only grading structure of the course.

Theme #1: Satisfaction based on grade expectations. Students explained how they would have been better or worse off with group grades. These comments were largely based on how well students thought their group did as a whole on the group presentations:

The lack of group grades actually worked out great for our group because if we had group grades we would not have done very well.

At the end of the day it didn't matter how good we actually did as a group it would not be reflected in my actual grade.

Additionally, some students suggested the two group projects should have been graded differently:

For the first project, if we would have had group grades I don't think we would have passed because we seemed unorganized. But for the second project I thought we worked really well together. The project flowed well and we had cohesion more so than the first project. So I think a group grade would have been ok.

For the most part, students who commented that they would have done better with a group grade were also the students who received consistently poor grades on their journals and on their individual papers that were tied to the presentations. Students who thought they did better with individual grades tended to have group member issues (for example, group members not showing up for the presentation or

dropping the course mid-way through planning a project).

Theme 2: Satisfaction based on accountability. Some students were satisfied because they liked the individual accountability, but then others were unsatisfied because they thought there should have been group accountability; in other words, they thought the grading went against the very nature of the course:

No matter how well a group works together, it is always nice to only have to ultimately rely on yourself for a grade rather than stressing about everybody else's performance to get a good grade.

When it came to the class structure of no group grades, I thought it was a faulty idea. How are you supposed to have a small group communication class without group grades?

Several students suggested a balanced approach, whereby the projects included both individual and group grades. For example, one student suggested that I should "give both individual and group grades for both presentations, and then average the two, to make grading more fair."

The idea of students being held accountable for their own work was the reason mentioned most by students who were satisfied with the grading system. Students made reference to groups in past courses where they felt their grade was hurt because their own individual work was not recognized. However, even some students who were satisfied and liked being held individually accountable still mentioned that there should have been some kind of group grade, simply because they were enrolled in the "small group communication" course.

Theme 3: Satisfaction based on how grades were determined. The third theme reflected how students thought grades should be determined overall: based on learning or based on effort. Students were either satisfied because the individually-focused grading system encouraged a deeper level of learning, or dissatisfied because they were not rewarded for their collective effort:

The combination of the writing and the presentations forced the application and the understanding. There was no skating by in this class.

I would have to say the only thing I didn't like about the class was that we didn't get a grade for the first project. Our group worked really hard on that presentation, and I think we deserved points for the assignment.

Some students specifically suggested that the papers and journals should be graded individually in order to measure learning, but the presentations should be a group grade because of the amount of work done as a group.

The idea of students wanting to be rewarded for their efforts in their groups was mentioned most by students who were dissatisfied with the grading system. This feeling was particularly prevalent for the first group assignment, and was discussed extensively during the debriefing interviews, because all the groups felt they did very well in planning and facilitating the team-building activity in class. Because students did receive an individual presentation grade for the second group project, the need for a reward was perhaps not so apparent.

Theme 4: Satisfaction based on levels of cooperation. The final theme was the least mentioned of the four. For some students, the individual focused grading structure was satisfying because it encouraged a more cooperative atmosphere; for others, the set-up was unsatisfying because they felt disconnected from their group members. In this case, students explained that they did not really feel like a group:

What I did like about the grading system that I did not realize at first is it makes you work harder as a team. Everyone at first seems to be working hard just for themselves to get a good grade, but the harder you work the more you come together and the more a team starts to realize how they need each other in order to succeed.

I think that if the grading scale involved the whole group and not individual, everyone would have been more united...having individual grades made some people in the group feel not as smart as other group members and they were pushed aside at points.

This theme, although mentioned by relatively few students, offered an interesting contrast. For some students, being graded individually actually encouraged them to want to cooperate with their group, and might have actually brought the team closer together. For others, the feeling was just the opposite; one student even commented that “we’re just individuals who work together to get a separate grade.” For these students, the individual only grades discouraged any real interaction within their group; the grading structure, then, may have worked against the “communication” related goals of the small group communication course.

Conclusion

Satisfaction with the individual only grading system increased from mid-semester to the end of semester. The main reason for satisfaction with the grading structure of the course was the notion of individual accountability. By the end of the semester many of the students liked that their grade would not be tied to the efforts of others in their group. However, many still were unsatisfied because they felt since their group worked so well together, there should be some kind of a reward for that effort. Very few students were clearly either for or against group grades; rather, most of the students were open to the idea of some kind of a combination. Students want to be recognized for their individual learning but they also feel they deserve credit for simply working cooperatively in a group.

Results: Student Cooperation and Motivation

The second research question asked “how can we design group assignments that encourage cooperation and motivation without assigning a group grade?” The group assignments in these courses did encourage students to cooperate; students were motivated to work cooperatively in their groups for many reasons. Of course, in any class, students are conditioned to do what is asked of them, so if they are instructed to work in a group, they will do so simply because it is a requirement of the course. Specific elements of cooperation and motivation were noted with these groups, however, over the course of the semester.

Cooperation

Despite the fact that the students were graded individually, they did work cooperatively in their groups. This was evident not only from reading the journals and observing the groups in class but specifically by observing the videotaped meetings. As I watched the videos, I was looking for overall general levels of cooperation as well as specific elements of parallel versus cooperative play as defined by Nowacek.

Overall, student groups did display cooperative behaviors in the videos; they met with a purpose, discussed the facilitation project or film analysis project, took on various roles, and made decisions and had a plan of action by the end of their meeting. This general cooperative atmosphere also exemplified elements of parallel play; although there was more discussion than monologues, questions were simple and there were plenty of back-channel comments. Groups got along quite well, complimented each other often and seemed to enjoy each others' company. The groups accomplished a significant amount of work by the end of their meetings.

There was only one group that seemed to engage in the cooperative play behaviors of making significant connections and engaging in extended disagreement as described by Nowacek. This particular group had been having some issues since the very beginning of the semester. There were five members in the group, with a clear alliance of three against an alliance of two. There seemed to be a constant struggle for power and never-ending disagreement with this group. Their conflicts were readily observable both in class and via communications with me outside of class.

Their videotaped meeting contained much conflict and disagreement, and there was extended discussion regarding several decisions that needed to be made. The disagreement was not necessarily to the detriment of the group, however. This group met to discuss and plan their facilitation activity, and throughout the discussion, they continually asked specific and critical questions and challenged each others' ideas. Several of the group members even outwardly expressed frustration at the difficulty of this meeting. The in-depth and critical reflection actually worked well for the group, however, as they subsequently presented a very thoughtfully-planned and well-executed

class facilitation. Although the group climate was not always a constructive one, this group managed to get past their differences, remain intact as a group and successfully complete both projects.

The overall lack of cooperative play was not surprising; students are conditioned to work together very positively so that they can get through the class and get a decent grade. In my experience, the conflict I witness in classroom groups is more related to personalities than content. Parallel play is more common, and in fact does lead to positive group outcomes. Students conform and go along with the majority so as to not “rock the boat”; therefore, constructive criticism and extended debate and disagreement are not the norm. Although I encouraged cooperative play, I did not require it. Not all student groups may need to engage in cooperative play behaviors; it is evident with the groups I studied that all were successful without the “cooperative play.” Extended disagreement and discussion are important group skills to learn, however. Students may need to be taught to engage with each other in this manner in order to truly experience cooperative play as defined by Nowacek.

As mentioned before, students were generally cooperative; however some did note in their final journal entry how the lack of group grades may have impacted the willingness and necessity to work together. It may have even discouraged them from trying out “cooperative play” behaviors as described above. One student commented that “groups without a group grade will ultimately result in a lack of cohesion and lack of interdependence.” Another student agreed:

I think it would have made us work harder if there were group grades, because I knew I did not care at all about my group members because they did not affect me. I just knew what I had to do and that was it. As long as I got a good grade, I did not care about how my group did.

Although the above student did not care about her group members, many other students did, which became a strong motivational factor overall, as is discussed below.

Motivation

There were four categories of motivation reported by the stu-

dents. The two primary reasons given were “motivated by liking of group members” and “motivated by grades.” Other motivational factors include competition and identification with the group:

Students overwhelmingly liked their group members. Liking their group members made the group tasks more enjoyable and motivated the students to cooperate and work with their group, regardless of the fact that they were being graded individually. Even though students were assigned to their groups, they developed real affection and loyalty to the group of students they had to work with for the entire semester. One student reported:

We all liked each other and didn't want to let anyone down. I've found that it always helps me stay motivated in group work when the people in my group are people that I like.

Students not only liked the people they were working with; in some groups, they cared about their group members and their group members' grades:

I know that I personally was more motivated towards my own gains in the beginning of the semester. When I viewed our team as a “group” I know that all I was focused on was my grade, and because there was no group grade, I knew that I could manage to get myself a good grade if I did what was required of me. However once our group became a team I was completely different. I started to care not only about my grade, but the grades of everyone else. I would suggest ways they could improve their journals, presentations, and overall performance. Once I realized that our success as a whole was not solely determined by everyone just putting their pieces to the puzzle together in the end, I was much better off. The fact that synergy actually could occur, and did in our group, made such a difference in my outlook.

The above student quote illustrates how students were also motivated because they identified with their group members and wanted the group to do well overall.

Grades were also a motivator for students. For example, one

student reported that “I was extremely motivated, because I knew my grade as well as the grades of my group members was very important to each and every one of us.” Many students are motivated by grades, no matter the class, so this was not a surprising finding. In addition to grades, however, students were motivated by the competitive aspect of the group assignments - the class evaluated the group presentations and the group with the highest class evaluation earned an extra ten points for each group member. The evaluations had both a quantitative (used to determine the winner of the ten points) and qualitative aspect. This was not a frequently cited motivator, but for some students (for example those who lost group members) it did matter. One student noted that “at the end, winning the extra points became important because it would show that despite the fact that some of our members dropped out we could still win.”

Conclusion

Overall, students did cooperate to complete their group tasks and were motivated to do so. The primary reason for this is probably that most students in the college classroom will do what is asked of them in order to finish and pass the class. However, even with the individual-only grading system, only a few students reported that they did not care about nor need to work with their group members. The first assignment (facilitating a team-building activity) was more successful at creating a cooperative atmosphere than the second assignment (film analysis), perhaps because the second assignment had separate individual paper and presentation grades built into it. Students could have very well worked separately to complete the film analysis project where as the teambuilding assignment necessitated more creative input from all group members.

Also, the lack of lengthy discussion or extended disagreement (“cooperative play”) was noteworthy, but not surprising. Students at times strategically ask themselves “what is the minimum amount of work I need to do to get this project done?” While they may be motivated to work for the group, they may not be motivated to go above and beyond for the group. Extended dialogue and disagreement can be uncomfortable for students, especially when they like their group members and they know they will be working with the same peers all semester. The individual-only grading system may have prevented

students from engaging in cooperative play behaviors, but it might also be that cooperative play is difficult for students. Thus, they need to be pushed outside their comfort zone and given opportunities to engage with each other in this manner, group grades or not.

Results: Student Learning

The third research question asked “how can we measure the learning of group processes without assigning a group grade?” In general, the design of the assignments and the focus on individual versus group grades did make learning small group communication concepts visible. The journal entries were an opportunity for students to apply their learning to their current in-class group and see the connections immediately. Some students made these connections, however, while others did not.

Journals

While I was looking for evidence of both reflection and application, there were several journal entries that displayed reflection only. These journals also contained a lot of description. For example, students might simply describe a particular group meeting and comment that the meeting went well. Or, they might describe how they felt about each group member’s contribution at the meeting. These journals, while interesting to read, did not in any significant way demonstrate learning of course terms and concepts.

These “reflection only” journals were generally much shorter than the journals that demonstrated in-depth and thoughtful reflection and application. Journals were supposed to be at least one page long each, and many journals, especially the early ones, consisted of half a page or less. Calling these writing assignments “journals” was probably a mistake; students equate journal writing with free writing about thoughts and feelings, not writing that includes links to course terms and concepts.

Journals containing both reflection and application were generally one page or longer, and those that were done well made specific connections to course concepts and provided examples. For example, after completing an in-class group competition, one student aptly linked the activity to the idea of constructive versus destructive group

competition, an idea we had previously discussed in class. Seeing this connection and applying it to the class activity was a clear demonstration of learning for this student

To really see and measure learning, students also needed to complete all of the eight required journals, something that only 26 of the 52 students did. While all the journal entries were required and counted toward the final course grade, students may not have completed all the journals because each journal was worth only 10 points (besides journals #1 and #8, which were each worth 20 points), and missing one or two would not significantly hurt one's grade. In addition, students were awarded extra credit points for participating in the focus group interviews, so some may have seen that as an excuse to miss a journal entry. Finally, as mentioned before, a "journal" may be seen as a very informal assignment and thus not taken very seriously by the students.

Videotaped Group Meetings

Learning was also visible in the videotaped group meetings. By watching their group's taped meeting and then writing a journal entry analyzing that meeting, students could actually see small group concepts in action, not only exemplified by their group members but by themselves as well. For example, the one group that displayed elements of cooperative play during their videotaped meeting also showed several other small group concepts such as social loafing, leadership styles, conformity, alliances, and decision-making. All the submitted video taped meetings were interesting to watch and were wonderful examples of several different small group communication concepts.

It was disappointing, however, that only six of the twelve groups actually taped a meeting. In addition, not everyone who participated in a taped meeting with their group actually watched the video and wrote an accompanying journal entry. Therefore, the learning potential associated with this assignment was never fully reached. Groups may not have seen this as a serious assignment. Students did not receive any points for taping a meeting; the grade attached to this assignment was visible via the accompanying journal entry. As mentioned above, since journal entries were only worth 10 points, it could have seemed like a lot of work (schedule a meeting, get a tape recorder, etc.) for such little reward.

Conclusion

Overall, the course structure and assignments were designed to make learning visible; however, the learning was more visible to me than to the students. For example, not all students included application of course concepts in their journals. Additionally, not all groups taped a meeting nor did all students who did tape a meeting actually watch it. In order to measure the learning of small group communication processes, I do believe that reflection and application journals are appropriate, especially if they are focused around the students' current classroom groups. However, it may be better to call them "essays" or "exams" rather than "journals," as students may take them more seriously and complete them more consistently. The videotaped group meeting, a clear and effective way to make learning group communication "visible," needs to be emphasized as a critical component to the course, with a significant grade attached. Specific suggestions for making the learning more visible will be discussed next.

Final Reflections

Now that these classes have concluded and the data collected and analyzed, I feel closer to solving the problem of assessing group learning in the small group communication class, but by no means have I figured it out entirely. As I reflect on the data, I can say I have learned much and am already implementing different ways of structuring and grading in this course.

For example, instead of simply encouraging students to engage in cooperative play, I am spending significantly more time discussing the notion of parallel versus cooperative play, assigning individual tasks to students and then setting aside class time for groups to work together to try out both parallel and cooperative play behaviors. I am also awarding points for these in-class "cooperative learning" experiences because students are motivated by grades and will do more of what you ask if there is a specific grade attached. I might even extend this learning opportunity by having students specifically role play cooperative play behaviors in class and then have them write about what they learned. Overall, I have realized that even though cooperative play is a nice goal, it is not a necessity for the students to understand

group communication concepts nor is it needed for students to feel successful in their groups.

Additionally, through this research I have found that it is important to measure both the final group outcome as well as the group communication processes. I can never satisfy all students in a given course but I can make a rational argument for paying attention to both process and product. In the future, I will share the research on cooperative learning with my students in order to provide a solid argument behind the grading structure of the assignments. Also, I have come to understand that grading the group outcome can be an effective way to grade the group process. A good or excellent group project or presentation could be a good indicator that the group members were using cooperation and teamwork skills; the uncertainty, of course, is that without any kind of individual assessment, you will never really know.

While my major concern in the beginning was awarding grades that were not equitable, the system used in these courses could have been perceived as unfair by the students. Several students pointed out in their final journal entries that basing their grade on the journal entries and major papers associated with the projects was unfair because these assignments favored good writers. While it's true that much of the assessment in the course was based on written work, in a college classroom writing should hardly be unexpected. However, the point was well taken that if I am measuring group learning, perhaps I should find ways to look more at the group work itself instead of focusing all the group assessment on the individual writings of each student.

In the future, I hope to make group communication processes more visible to students in a number of ways. I will continue to explain concepts related to cooperative versus parallel learning and include both individual and group grades. I will introduce information on successful teamwork, especially practical information on organizational teams (see, for example, Huszycz, 1996). Students may then connect their learning to the "real world" instead of just to their classroom groups. I will ask students to re-read past journal entries or read and comment on journal entries of other students in the course. I will also attach a more significant weighting to the videotaped group meeting assignment and possibly have students show and discuss their group's tape in class.

Finally, I will continue to ask students to reflect on their learning and engage in conversation with me and with others about how best to learn small group communication theories and concepts. It is my hope that truly visible collaborative learning occurs for students, that which contains “positive interdependence between students, an outcome to which everyone contributes, and a sense of commitment and responsibility to the group’s preparation, process and product” (MacGregor, 1992, 38). While it may be difficult to reach this level of group work in the college classroom, we can continue our efforts in that direction for the benefit of both teachers and students.

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