

FACULTY PERCEPTIONS OF ONLINE GROUP WORK

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Focus group interviews with university instructors (tenured, tenure-track, and adjunct) were conducted to explore perceptions of online group work. Results indicated that instructors believe that group work is an essential tool for students' future lives and, therefore, a key component of the online classroom. They believe that professional development should be offered to distance instructors to encourage the use of best practice teaching (including group work) in online courses. Specific strategies for the successful implementation of online group projects were shared. Implications for practice related to faculty development, supporting outstanding teachers, and successful implementation of online group projects are presented.

INTRODUCTION

The ability to work collaboratively in groups has long been recognized as an important skill in the workplace. Group work is a key pedagogical tool in the online classroom, allowing for student interaction to play an active role in the learning process (O'Neill, Scott, & Conboy, 2011; Roberts & McInnerney, 2007). Group work has also been identified as a best practice in undergraduate online education (Bailey & Card, 2009), yet we know very little about why faculty choose to use (or not use) group projects in their online courses. The little we do know focuses on the "I don't use group projects" side of the equation; faculty

may be concerned about shifting from a teacher- to a learner-centered environment, or they may lack the skills needed to facilitate group projects in an online setting (Roberts & McInnerney, 2007). We know much less about the faculty to who choose to use group projects. Our study was designed to contribute to this body of research by exploring the perceptions of faculty members who choose to use group projects in their online courses.

Faculty concerns regarding distance education may be one of the greatest barriers to the advancement of distance education (Crawford-Ferre & Wiest, 2012; Major, 2010). Therefore, if distance education is to maintain its relevance in today's higher education landscape, it

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is critical that we have a better understanding of faculty perceptions of distance education, including why they choose to use, or not use, specific best practice teaching strategies, such as group projects.

METHOD

This study employed focus group methodology to investigate faculty member perceptions and strategies for use of online group work. Guidelines for conducting focus groups recommended by Krueger and Casey (2009) and Daly (2007) were followed. Data analysis was conducted by the primary investigators in two phases using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and guided by the processes recommended for focus group analysis (Krueger & Casey, 2009).

Focus group participants were recruited from an earlier study that was conducted by our research team. Four faculty members were available to participate in the focus groups on campus; four participated through teleconference. Seven of the participants were female. Two participants were tenured faculty members, five were tenured or tenure-track lecturers, and one was an adjunct faculty member. Participants taught both undergraduate and graduate level courses and represented a range of disciplines: biological science, social science, business, nursing, humanities, and education. There were no incentives for participating in the focus groups; lunch and snacks were provided. Both studies were approved by the university's institutional review board.

RESULTS

Participants expressed strong opinions regarding the value of group work as a critical life skill for student success in future professional settings. As one participant noted, "people are going to be working in teams almost anywhere they go and to have a degree that doesn't emphasize that type of interactive online group

experience is to really keep our students out of the main line of employment opportunities." Specific examples related to work in professional settings were noted, such as auditing teams in business or the need for nurse managers to collaborate with nurses from other facilities.

Participants valued the authentic learning experiences provided by group work, including opportunities to develop and practice time and conflict management skills that will be needed in the professional workforce. The following quote represents this value:

Even though it [group projects] can be painful for students and painful for faculty, I'm absolutely sold on the benefit of it. I think it fosters time management skills.... They may find themselves having to collaborate with peers in another facility in town. They may be in another state to present something locally [or] nationally. I just think those skills are absolutely essential in today's technology, we don't just communicate via phone or face to face.

Participants shared a number of specific techniques or strategies they have found to be effective in managing online group projects. Participants shared techniques they used to encourage students to get to know each other, how they formed groups and used online tools to maximize interaction, as well as specific steps they took to ensure groups had the tools they needed to be successful. For example, one participant shared that, "I try to have the groups ... understand ... the functions of team formations: storming, norming, forming, and performing and what are the challenges on each level." Another described a contract students are asked to sign that includes rules regarding collaboration as well as personal issues such as work style, preferences, time available to work, and pet peeves. The importance of being "clear and specific in what you expect ... [online]; a project has got to be totally, completely delineated so that students feel comfortable about it" was also noted.

Discussion also included techniques used to scaffold effective work such as setting ground rules, rotating leadership on projects, providing timely and specific feedback, monitoring threaded discussions, explaining grading policies, or setting up a “help me thread.” Participants also shared their struggles regarding when and how to intervene with individuals or groups. The faculty in our group relied upon the use of e-mails to provide specific direction, correction, or feedback to individual students.

Participants shared a desire for mentoring, continuing education related to distance pedagogy, and additional support and compensation for time spent preparing an online course for the first time. Lack of professional development was noted as a barrier to effective implementation of online group work or other best practices. One participant explained,

I think that we don't do enough to develop our faculty members. We just fling them in there. We give them no guidance in course development. We give them no guidance on online teaching ... I think to expect a faculty member to jump in and teach an online course, facilitate group work without any professional development is asking a lot and I think these conversations like we're having just now should happen on a regular basis. There should be support; there should be meetings.

Another shared, “the first time I did this online teaching I sort of felt thrown into the lions in terms of the whole outreach school system and what to use and how to set it up.” This individual also shared that a lack of knowledge about the basics of the course management system may prevent faculty from trying teaching methods that are perceived to be more challenging, such as online group work.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The faculty members who participated in our focus groups represent a select group of individuals who are dedicated and passionate

about online teaching, and committed to the use of effective pedagogies such as online group projects. They believe that group work is an essential tool for students' future lives, and they developed very specific strategies for implementation of group projects. Yet, significant concerns were expressed regarding lack of support for the use of such practices in the online classroom. In light of these results we offer the following recommendations.

Recommendations for Successful Implementation of Online Group Projects

Participants in our focus groups shared a number of strategies that they use to ensure group success. These strategies included how groups are assigned (or not), how faculty members facilitate and monitor the group process (including how and when they become involved in the group process), specific techniques they use to support the group process (for example, posting a video to discuss the project and what is expected or e-mailing individual members with concerns or positive comments), and how they evaluate work and assign grades. The strategies used by these faculty members mirror recommendations that we have made in previous publications (Williams, Cameron, & Morgan, 2012). Specifically, we offer the following suggestions regarding successful implementation of online group projects:

- Structure the task so it allows a climate of collaboration and true engagement by the students (Illera, 2001).
- Create a preliminary assignment to help students understand group roles and styles well before they begin a group task.
- Decide whether or not to assign roles. Both strategies have merit, and the faculty member may want to alternate between the two or only use one.
- Make participation by group members visible. For example, require that groups use course shell threaded discussions or other

similar formats. Having effective documentation of individual group member participation can help with potential challenges related to “who did what” in the group, which is a common concern of faculty (and students).

- Use an online document sharing area or wiki outside of the course shell so faculty members and students can share handouts, presentation materials, and drafts of their projects.
- Provide a mechanism to individualize grades, which will allow for points to be adjusted when participation in a group is noticeably uneven or complaints regarding participation surface (and can be confirmed).
- Post a guide for successful group processes:
 - Define the goal of the project clearly.
 - Define the essential tasks.
 - Identify each participant’s role.
 - Set a realistic timeline that allows the project to be done by the due date (and with time to fix, redo, or create drafts that the group reviews).
 - Create a written record after every group meeting.
 - Agree that if a problem develops, it will be solved in a respectful manner and have a clear procedure in place so that all members are aware of the mechanism and follow its steps.
- Encourage group presentations. Most platforms have the capability for real-time presentations using voice, whiteboard, and other tools.

Recommendations for Faculty Development

A lack of preparation and support for the unique pedagogical aspects of online teaching was a particular concern of our participants. Participants in our focus groups reported that they felt “thrown to the lions” and did not have adequate training prior to starting to teach

online. This finding supports a number of previous studies that report faculty dissatisfaction with professional development. In particular, faculty feel that professional development too often focuses on the navigation of a particular course management system (Bailey & Card, 2009; Major, 2010; Steinert et al., 2009; Stewart, Goodson, & Miertschin, 2010) versus the pedagogy of effective online teaching.

When designing professional development, it is important that such opportunities include training on content and pedagogical knowledge (Glowa, 2009) and skill building focused on addressing and managing the unique social context of the online classroom environment (Kanuka, Heller, & Jugdev, 2008) in addition to the technical aspects of online teaching (Glowa, 2009). Professional development should utilize “multiple strategies including real-time as well as ‘anytime’ online training and traditional workshops, [to ensure] that each online teacher has a rich, multilayered understanding of online teaching” (Glowa, 2009, p. 2). Institutions should also be attentive to the faculty development needs of all faculty members who are teaching in online settings (tenure-track faculty members, tenure-track academic professionals, adjunct faculty etc.), including the unique needs, interests, and motivations of adjunct faculty (Bedford & Miller, 2013).

A final note: faculty in this study did not specifically mention awards or recognitions. However, it goes without saying that a simple “thank you” (Grant & Gino, 2010) from an administrator, or a teaching award (Brawer, Steinert, St-Cyr, Watters, & Wood-Dauphinee, 2006) can go a long way to encourage and recognize the efforts of distance faculty.

CONCLUSION

As online learning in higher education continues to grow, it is essential that attention be paid to quality instruction and how to support faculty in implementation of best practice strategies (Crawford-Ferre & Wiest, 2012). The

faculty members in our study believe strongly in the importance of online group work, but they would like more support as they work to implement such strategies into their classes. Committed, dedicated, and enthusiastic faculty are key to the success of online course development (Fish & Wickersham, 2009); by failing to support faculty in their efforts to implement best practice, we run the risk that faculty will discontinue their efforts. Further understanding of faculty perceptions of best practice pedagogies, including online group work, can assist faculty and administrators in supporting and developing high quality distance education.

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