

KEY COMPONENTS OF ONLINE GROUP PROJECTS Faculty Perceptions

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In order to better understand faculty perceptions of group work, a survey was deployed to online teaching instructors. Results suggest that most faculty find student socialization (e.g., being supportive, caring about each other), communication, reliability, and dependability important in the group process. However, very few faculty rated the development of deeper interpersonal relationships as very important. Finally, most faculty said it was important for group members to have a role, though most suggested group roles were decided upon by group members. Implications for group project implementation are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The ability to work effectively in a group was recently rated as one of the top two skills employers are currently looking for in job candidates (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2016). Further, according to the National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America's Promise (2007), one of the "essential learning outcomes" of a college

degree is intellectual and practical skills, which includes teamwork and problem solving (p. 7). Group projects have been touted as a unique opportunity to practice teamwork skills, create and refine interpersonal communication skills, and develop a deeper understanding of course content and concepts (Chapman, Meuter, Toy, & Wright, 2010; Chapman & Van Auken, 2001; Kendall, 1999; Myers et al., 2009). Further, group work

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opportunities in online classes provide an opportunity to create a community of learners, which has been associated with increased student satisfaction and level of learning (e.g., Dawson, 2006; Ouzts, 2006; Rovai, 2002; Rovai & Barnum, 2003; Sullivan, 2002). Researchers have often suggested that behaviors fostering connectedness, including developing interpersonal relationships with group members, enhance a sense of community within the group (e.g., Rovai, 2002).

Studies supporting the importance of the development of interpersonal relationships suggest that faculty should scaffold group projects through team-building exercises, synchronous group meetings, social icebreakers, and shared social support systems, so as to foster the development of interpersonal relationships (e.g., Bonk, Wisher, & Nigrelli, 2004; Wade, Cameron, Morgan, & Williams, 2011; Young & Henquinet, 2000). However, little is currently known about faculty perceptions of the importance of interpersonal relationship development between students within group work settings (Chapman et al., 2010). This is a critical gap in the literature, as it has large implications for how faculty facilitate student group processes.

To date, only a few studies have examined faculty perceptions of group work (e.g., August, Hurtado, Wimsatt & Dey, 2002; Chapman et al., 2010; Sinclair, 1997). Sinclair (1997) found that although job recruiters ranked the ability to work in team as the third most important skill of a potential employee, faculty only ranked it eighth. Chapman et al. (2010) found that students tended to feel more positive about their group's dynamics, cohesion, trust, and conflict resolution abilities, and also their ability to learn through group work, than did faculty. Finally, August and colleagues (2002) found that a majority of students and faculty both reported that collaborative/cooperative learning assisted the learning experience.

However, this very limited literature examining faculty perceptions of group work has not explored online group settings. This is a

critical gap, as distance education enrollments continue to increase, and the demand for innovation and best practice in these courses is real (Fish & Wickersham, 2009). For example, the U.S. Department of Education reported that the number of students taking distance education classes rose from 8 to 26% from 2000 to 2012 (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Further, according to Meyer (2010), "There are more global virtual teams today than ever before. And their numbers are increasing rapidly" (Meyer, 2010, para. 2). Thus, understanding how to best foster group work in an online educational setting is crucial so as to develop necessary teamwork skills in students. Examining faculty perceptions of group work occurring online is an important first step toward gaining this understanding.

METHOD

Survey Instrument

The current study utilized the survey instrument shown in the appendix. This survey is a modified version of Wade et al.'s (2011) survey of student perceptions of online group work, altered in order to assess faculty perceptions by rewording questions so that the topic remained the same but the wording was appropriate for the perspective of the faculty member instead of the participating student. The faculty survey contained 17 demographic questions and 33 questions regarding group work design, processes, experiences, and dynamics. Response options for questions regarding group work were answered on a 4-point Likert scale, with answer options ranging from "very important" to "unnecessary" or "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree."

Participants

The survey was deployed at a Western university across two semesters via e-mail invitation to all instructors of online classes; therefore, course content, length, and design

likely varied greatly among respondents. A total of 46 instructors responded. The average age of respondents was 49.6 years, 93% identified their race/ethnicity as Caucasian, and 54% were female. Only instructors who have/do include group work in their courses continued on to the group work questions. For those who have/do include group projects ($n = 30$), the average age was 52 years, 93% identified their race/ethnicity as Caucasian, and 63% were female. The majority of respondents identified themselves as adjuncts or assistant lecturers (60%), reported they had taught more than 4 online courses (69%), and the majority of group projects were four weeks or less in duration (75%).

RESULTS

Importance of Process, Experience, and Group Dynamics

The majority of faculty who indicated using group projects in their online courses (86.2% or higher) agreed or strongly agreed with the importance of the process and experience questions (Questions 18–27 and 29). Similarly, the majority of faculty (97% or higher) agreed or strongly agreed with the importance of all but one group dynamic questions (Questions 33–36). The one exception was the question regarding the importance of students developing deep relationships with online group members, to which only 40.7% of responding faculty agreed or strongly agreed. Faculty also tended to support the importance of etiquette in group projects (90% or higher agreed or strongly agreed; Questions 48 and 50).

Faculty were more divided, though, on questions regarded group experiences. Most faculty agreed or strongly agreed with the importance of developing supportive relationships with group members and developing a sense of trust with group members (96.3% and 100% respectively), and a slightly lower percentage but still majority agreed or strongly

agreed with the importance of students getting to know their group members on a personal level, developing specific roles in their groups, and identifying specific characteristics of their group members (63.0%, 78.6%, and 73.0% respectively). However, a minority of faculty agreed or strongly agreed that it is important for students to develop deep relationships with their group members (40.7%).

Group Roles

Of the 27 faculty who answered the question, most suggested group roles are typically decided upon by the group members (i.e., by group members either through purposeful or accidental assignment; 88%) instead of by the instructor (11%). Despite a lack of faculty involvement in the assigning of group roles, faculty did seem to endorse the importance of most group roles (leader, 79%; facilitator, 79%; editor, 79%; cheerleader/supporter, 67%; presenter, 75%; writer, 83%; and researcher, 96%). However a minority of faculty felt that the role of liaison to the instructor was important (46%).

Group Trust

Question 45 asked faculty to indicate what they think contributed to a lack of trust when noted in an online group. Of the 22 faculty who responded, the most common responses were that group members did not complete tasks on time (68%), group members did not work as promised (72%), and group members did not participate in planning sessions (64%). Only a minority indicated that not being able to meet face to face (4.5%) or group members not being clear about expectations (14%) contributed to the lack of trust.

Group Member Qualities

Faculty were asked to rank the top 5 characteristics they believed are important for students to identify in other online group

members. Faculty ranked their most important quality with a 1, their second most important quality a 2, and so forth up to a maximum of 5. Scores given to each characteristic were then reverse coded, in order to weight each score. In other words, a characteristic ranked a 1 was recoded into a score of 5 (thus having the most weight), a ranking of 2 was recoded into a 4, et cetera. These weighted scores were then summed across all respondents to form a weighted total for each characteristic. Two characteristics, reliability and dependability, rose to the top and received weighted total scores of 73 and 79 respectively (the next closest score was 54). The lowest weighted characteristic sum score was 25 for providing feedback.

Faculty also ranked their top five etiquette behaviors for online group interactions. Rankings were transformed into weighted sums in the same way as described above. Two etiquette behaviors, reliable and regular communication (both with weighted sums of 73), rose above the others (with the next weighted sum of 41). The lowest etiquette behaviors (with weighted sum scores of 12) were avoiding conflict and being a good listener.

DISCUSSION

Reports from company executives confirm that teamwork skills are critical in today's job applicants (Vance, 2007). Understanding how to work with others toward a common goal is a skill that needs to be developed in today's college students. Therefore, group projects in college settings that allow the development of these skills seem critical to developing students who are competitive in today's workplace market.

On the whole, this study found that faculty endorsed the importance of most of the process, experience, and group dynamics questions. That is, faculty seem to feel that when students work in online groups, they should get to know their group members, work together in a supportive manner, play nice (e.g., being

supportive, caring about each other), and communicate (including asking questions, dealing with conflict, and giving feedback). However, most faculty did not feel it was important for students to develop deep relationships with their group members. This is interesting, as previous research has often suggested that developing deeper relationships within a group is crucial to developing a sense of trust, which then affects the success of the group (e.g., Jarvenpaa, Knoll, & Leidner, 1998; Keyton, 2000; Preece, 2000; Smith, 2008). In fact, Keyton (2000) states that, "Group member relationship development and maintenance are the primary processes that enhance or detract from how group work is carried out" (p. 387). This area of research would be worth exploring further to allow for a better understanding of the importance of developing relationships in online group settings, as well as how faculty can best support these relationships (if they are determined to be important to the success of the group).

A further important point is that although interpersonal relationships may be necessary to develop trust and successfully complete the group project, it may indeed be the case that, in the typical short duration of group work, interpersonal relationships are not necessary (Jarvenpaa et al., 1998; Liu, Magjuka, Bonk, & Lee, 2007; Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). Because many faculty and students never participate in longer term projects, this particular aspect of group work might never become important in their experiences. Instead, it may only be in much longer projects (i.e., longer than 2 months; Jarvenpaa et al., 1998) that interpersonal relationships become critical to the success of the group. As the majority of faculty responding to this survey indicated their group projects lasted 4 weeks or less, this may explain why these faculty placed less importance on developing interpersonal relationships. Future research examining both the actual and perceived importance of interpersonal relationship development over varying lengths of time (i.e., weeks to months or lon-

ger) is needed in order to test the accuracy of this assumption.

With regard to group member roles, the majority of faculty indicated that group members determined role allocation within the group. Faculty also agreed that there are many roles that are important for an online group to take on, and that they are typically able to identify within a group who has taken on each of these roles. Finally, and as expected, faculty's perceptions of what tended to result in the breakdown of trust within a group (i.e., group members not completing tasks on time, group members not working as promised, and group members not participating in planning sessions) fit well with the characteristics they felt were important for students to identify within other group members (i.e., reliability and dependability) and the most important group etiquette behaviors (reliability and regular communication). Thus, not only do faculty feel it is important that group members need to develop a sense of trust in their group and trust group members to complete tasks, but they also feel that reliability, dependability, and communication are critical and that the breakdown of these aspects then lead to a breakdown in group trust.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

Although this study was completed by only a small number of self-selecting faculty who teach online classes that contain a group project, and therefore generalizations must be made cautiously, these findings have a few important implications for teaching. First, faculty opinions on the importance of socialization activities (e.g., getting to know their group members, being supportive, caring about each other, communicating, dealing with conflict, being reliable and dependable) may be an important issue for faculty to consider as they develop their group work assignments. Faculty often assume that students also see this as important and are capable of engaging in basic socialization tasks (Chapman & Van Auken,

2001). This could lead, however, to students sensing from their instructors that socialization tasks are not important (as there is never an explicit mention of them) and/or group members not knowing how to go about these tasks (as no scaffolding was provided). In fact, Chapman et al. (2010) found that faculty tended to underrate the personal interest students took in each other. Thus, faculty should consider explicitly discussing, encouraging, and supporting student socialization before and during online group work.

Faculty also tended to agree that there are many roles that are important for an online group to take on; however, these roles are typically assigned by group members. Allowing students to assign their roles in and of itself may not be problematic. However, as discussed above, if there are important roles to be assigned and these roles are not specifically identified, defined, and told to be assigned to group members, students may not know what roles are important, may not realize that explicitly assigning roles will help their group function more effectively, and/or may not think the instructor feels that group role assignment is important. Thus creating initial assignments that help students understand and assign group roles prior to the start of a group project may ensure group success.

Finally, since faculty members seem to have a consensus about what often leads to a breakdown of trust within a group (i.e., group members not completing tasks on time, group members not working as promised, and group members not participating in planning sessions), it is also important to have a mechanism through which specific group members are held accountable. Recommendations include:

- Encourage and/or require groups to make a list of all project tasks and a timeline of when those tasks will be completed.
- Make group member participation visible through the use of group planning threads or chat rooms so that individual student

participation and group functioning can be monitored.

- Provide a place (such as a document share) where group members post drafts, handouts, presentation materials, et cetera, to help make participation and timeliness visible to the instructor as well as other group members.
- Design the assignment so that individuals are held accountable to their group. For example, include a participation component to the final grade that is individually assigned to each student. These participation points can then be affected by mechanisms such as the ones above, and/or by allowing students to provide feedback about their fellow group members (see Williams, Cameron, & Morgan (2012) for a complete description).

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APPENDIX: GROUP PROJECTS SURVEY FOR FACULTY

Demographic Information

1. What is your age?
2. What is your race or ethnicity?
3. What is your sex?
4. What is your faculty status?
5. In what college do you teach?
6. Including this course, how many online classes have you taught?
7. Do you read journal articles regarding online teaching?
8. Have you attended any trainings, workshops, or conferences regarding online teaching?
9. Of the online classes you have taught previously, including your current class, how many have included a group project?

No Group Projects

10. If you do not utilize group projects in your online classes, why? Are there barriers, problems, and/or concerns that keep you from utilizing group projects?

Information about Group Projects

11. If you do utilize group projects in your online courses, why? What do you see as the benefits?
12. What has gone smoothly or worked well with your online group projects?
13. What has been problematic with your online group projects?
14. What level(s) of courses do you teach online that include a group project? Please check all that apply. (answer choices: freshman, sophomore, junior, senior, graduate)
15. What are the typical durations of your online group projects? Please check all that apply. (answer choices: Less than 1

- week, 1–2 weeks, 3–4 weeks, 1–2 months, longer than 2 months)
16. Have you seen differences in how online groups perform based on the duration of the project? If so, please explain.
 17. Would you be willing to participate in a focus group regarding online group projects? If so, please provide us with your e-mail address.

Process and Experience

(Answer choices to Questions 18-27, 29: strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree)

18. It is important that group members care about each other.
19. It is important for online group members to encourage each other to ask questions.
20. It is important for students to be able to rely on other online group members.
21. It is important for online group members to connect with one another.
22. It is important for group members to communicate frequently.
23. It is important for online group members to trust each other to complete assigned tasks.
24. It is important for online group members to be supportive of one another.
25. It is important for online groups to exhibit a sense of community.
26. It is important for differences of opinion within online groups to be successfully negotiated by the group members themselves.
27. It is important for online groups to be a cohesive unit.
28. When working with an online group project, I encourage my students to meet ... (Answer choices: face to face, through online threads, in an online chat room, using web casting, by voice [phone, Bluetooth, etc.], using Skype, using social networking tools [Facebook, wikis, blogs, etc.], not applicable)
29. It is important for online group members to provide constructive feedback to each other when communicating.

Group Dynamics

(Answer choices to Questions 33-37: strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree)

30. What do you see as your role in facilitating online group work?
31. Do you facilitate online group roles or creating a sense of community within the online groups? Why or why not?
32. Does your level of facilitation change based on the level of the course? If so, how?
33. It is important for groups to develop goals regarding the online group project.
34. It is important for students to make their expectations for the online group known.
35. It is important that students invest at an interpersonal level with online group members.
36. It is important for students to provide feedback about processes associated with the online group project.
37. It is important for students to develop deep relationships with the online group members.

Importance of Experience

(Answer choices to Questions 38, 39, 43, 44, 47: very important, important, not important, unnecessary)

38. How important is it that students get to know each other on a personal level in online group work?
39. How important is it for students to develop specific roles in online groups?
40. Are you typically able to identify the roles students have taken in their online groups? (answer choices: yes, no)
41. How are roles typically assigned in your online groups? (answer choices: by me, by a group member[s], created as individual group members volunteered, created by group agreement, seemed to “just happen,” other —please specify).
42. What role(s) do you feel are important for students to fill in online group work? Please check all that apply. (answer choices: leader, facilitator, editor, cheer-

- leader/supporter, presenter, writer, liaison with instructor, researcher, other—please specify)
43. How important is it for students to develop supportive relationships with their online group members?
 44. How important is it for students to develop a sense of trust with their online group members?
 45. If you have perceived a lack of trust in an online group, what do you think contributed to that lack of trust? Please check all that apply. (answer choices: group members were not able to meet face to face, group members did not answer questions when posed, group members did not complete tasks on time, group members did not do work as promised, group members did not participate in planning sessions, group members were not clear about expectations, other—please specify)
 46. What are the top five characteristics you believe it is important that students identify in other online group members? Below is a list of characteristics. While many may be important to you, please select ONLY your top five, and indicate which is the most important, with 1 being the most important to you, 2 being the second most important, et cetera. Again, please select only your top five. (answer choices: knowledge about the subject, reliability, dependability, honesty, respectful, provides feedback, follow through, work ethic, organized, positive attitude)
 47. How important is it for students to identify specific characteristics of their online group members?
- Group Etiquette**
(Answer choices to Questions 48, 50: very important, important, not important, unnecessary)
48. How important is it that ground rules be developed for online group interactions?
 49. Please select the 5 most important group etiquette behaviors in order of their importance to group performance. Below is a list of behaviors. While many may be important to you, please select ONLY your top five, and indicate which is the most important, with 1 being the most important to you, 2 being the second most important, et cetera. Again, please select only your top five. (answer choices: politeness, avoiding conflict, showing care and concern for others, reliability, follow through, trustworthiness, regular communication, good listener, positive attitude)
 50. How important is it that online group members contribute to etiquette within the group?