Chapter 10

Learning to Lead Collaborative Student Groups to Success

Micah Gideon Modell
SUNY Korea, South Korea

ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the barriers to achieving the myriad benefits often attributed to collaborative group projects. It begins with an explanation of what collaboration is and the value the method offers to both learners and instructors. It then presents a variety of ways in which these projects can fail to achieve their goals and even have a negative effect on student performance, attitudes towards collaboration and self-efficacy. It also explores some of the ethical concerns that accrue when these problems are not addressed. It then explains how instructors can mitigate these problems today.

INTRODUCTION

The week before final projects are to be submitted and presented, a student asks to speak with the instructor after class. Experienced with long-term collaborative group projects, the instructor can anticipate the topic of the discussion will be the team’s dysfunction—even if the specific details are as yet unknown. Perhaps the student will explain that a member of the group seldom attended out-of-class group meetings or rarely completed the tasks assigned. Alternatively, the student might explain that one member dominated the rest of the group and would not hear of any alternative perspectives, or some other group dynamic in which one student exerted disproportional influence on the group’s work product. The student might express frustration with the anticipated grading, with the group’s results, or with the overall collaborative experience.

The instructor may or may not have reason to distrust the account offered by the student. Perhaps the instructor has observed some corroborating activity, or maybe another team member already expressed contradictory complaints. Maybe the student is part of a very large class and the instructor has only passing familiarity with the particular group. In any event, the instructor could not have been monitoring the group’s every activity throughout the semester and would therefore be faced with a number of questions:

• Can instructors know what’s really going on in a group?
• How can instructors know if student groups are having problems?

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- Is there any reason for instructors to try to resolve such problems? How can these problems affect the course objectives?
- What should instructors do when a group faces dysfunction?

The rest of this chapter explores these questions and provides some guidance to the reader intending to address those problems which arise. This chapter focuses on collaborative group work involving students beyond high school in a face-to-face environment.

WHAT IS COLLABORATIVE GROUP WORK AND WHY SHOULD I USE IT?

Definitions

Collaborative group work is a situation where individuals work together to achieve one or more shared goals, negotiating with one another to determine a shared path (Bruffee, 1995; Dillenbourg, 1999; Matthews, Cooper, Davidson, & Hawkes, 1995; Panitz, 1999). This is in contrast with cooperative learning, in which group members work together following a proscribed set of processes—learners are essentially assigned individual roles that contribute to the group’s product. Simply put, collaboration is the subset of cooperative activity in which participants are expected to contribute as relative equals in terms of both skills and responsibilities (extending to equal partnership in negotiating those responsibilities). Because division of labor is explicit and clear, cooperative learning methods lend themselves more readily to student accountability and individual performance assessment than collaborative learning situations.

Similarly, this chapter uses the term group, rather than team, because teams are expected to exhibit complementary skills and mutual accountability (Katzenbach & Smith, 2005). Classrooms, on the other hand, often expect entering students to bring a similar set of skills and knowledge (prerequisites) and to exit having developed a similar set of skills. Furthermore, in these formal learning contexts, students are explicitly accountable to the instructor, who determines their grade. Mutual accountability is a desirable goal but in reality, students may or may not feel accountable to the other members of their group.

While collaborative groups may be of any size, Wheelan (2009) found that groups with three to six members were most likely to reach the highest stages of group development and levels of satisfaction. Therefore, this is the recommended range for collaborative group projects.

There exists a paucity of research on group dysfunction (Modell, 2015; Salomon & Globerson, 1987) and therefore, while it focuses on adults, some research on children has been included where it demonstrates concepts that apply to adults as well. These instances are clearly identified. Instructors working with children do assign group projects, but these are often scaffolded using cooperative structures in which individual roles and expected contributions are clearly defined. Adults, on the other hand, are commonly expected to express greater autonomy and therefore are more capable of collaboration as relative equals, co-negotiating roles (Bruffee, 1995).

Furthermore, while most of the material in this chapter reflects a face-to-face environment, this too is due to the general lack of availability of material on collaborative group dysfunction. Collaborative group projects are certainly used in distance learning environments and, as discussed in the chapter, this can interfere with communications and hinder the development of trust—both of which are key ingredients for successful collaboration. Material from distance learning contexts is included where available.