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Group Learning In Marketing: An Exploratory Qualitative Study Of Its Usefulness

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Abstract

Group projects are often assigned in business schools to improve student comprehension of course content and build teamwork skills. Although the literature examining the usefulness of group projects is extensive, the link between cooperative learning, group performance and skills transfer in workplace contexts, remains unclear. In addition, group-learning research within the marketing discipline in Australian higher education institutions is limited. Focus groups were conducted with a sample of 107 postgraduate and undergraduate marketing students. Results confirm that group work facilitates the development of interpersonal skills and higher-level learning. In addition, there is the promise of transfer of learning to other situations. However, students appear to be negatively disposed to group work at the start of a teaching semester, signaling the need for instructors to prepare, coach and debrief students as to the expected benefits associated with participation in group exercises throughout teaching periods.

Keywords: group work, transfer of learning and skills, positive and negative dispositions

Background

The use of group work in tertiary education has mimicked the growth of cross-functional and cross-company work teams in private and public enterprise (Batra, Walvoord and Krishnan, 1997). Tertiary education group projects, which are graded tasks where students get a group mark for collaborative work, are preparatory to working effectively with others in the commercial world and are positively regarded by many practitioners and students (Gaidis and Andrews, 1990; Gardner and Korth, 1998). Indeed, many contemporary employers equate team skills with future career success (Chapman and Auken, 2001; Darian and Coopersmith, 2001; McCorkle et al., 1999).

Nevertheless, despite the positive attitude to group work in tertiary education by commercial practitioners, prior research is somewhat ambivalent. On the one hand, it shows that student group projects are effective in promoting active and deep learning, creating co-operative structures, building positive interdependence and individual accountability, and refining interpersonal skills (Bobbitt et al., 2000; Hernandez, 2002; Michaelsen and Black, 1994; Pfaff and Huddleston, 2003). Moreover, students learn more from group projects where they can increase their level of psychological ownership by providing their own ideas or material, choosing case studies, proposing their own internships, or creating their own experience (Wood, 2003). Furthermore, Chapman and Auken (2001) show that as the lecturer becomes a positive, proactive facilitator of group work, students believe in the benefits of group work, their attitudes toward it improve, and their work and grade equity concerns decrease. Reducing inequities is an important issue since it not only directly influences students' attitudes toward group work but also has a negative influence on perceived benefits. In sum, students believe that learning objectives are met very well through teamwork (Hernandez, 2002), but group dynamics need to be addressed by the lecturer at the beginning of teaching periods (Kates, 2002).

On the other hand, research conducted so far questions the value of group projects in promoting desirable student learning and performance outcomes (for example, Kunkel and Shafer, 1997; Ravenscroft and Buckless, 1997). In particular, group projects have been criticised as facilitating task accomplishment at the expense of student technical skills development and content learning (Bacon, 2005; Bacon, Stewart and Stewart-Belle, 1998; Bloom, 1976). Indeed, the successful transfer of skills from educational to professional settings may be reliant upon educators demonstrating the relevance of group projects, providing informative feedback and designing activities that simulate real work practices (Ettington and Camp, 2002). Additionally, students bring strong attitudinal dispositions to team work expressing fear that their individual grades will be compromised, that the work will not be distributed fairly (Huff, Cooper and Jones, 2002), that time and meetings will not be managed efficiently, and participation by group members will be unequal (McLaughlin and Fennick, 1987). These experiences can result in group disharmony, intra-group conflict and negative attitudes to participating in future group work (Chapman and Auken, 2001).

Thus there does not appear to be consensus within the business education literature and this disparity has fueled suggestions that future research should investigate the future transferability of skills acquired through group learning initiatives to the professional world (Ettington and Camp, 2002). Particularly within Australian tertiary marketing education, the focus of this study, group work has not been extensively examined.

Thus we attempt to extend the marketing education literature by investigating how marketing students approach group learning and how effective this mechanism is in promoting learning, skills development and future skills transfer. Specifically, we investigate the attitudes students bring to teamwork, what perceptions they have of the experience, and attitudinal changes resulting from involvement in this process. Accordingly, the first research issue is:

RI. 1 *What attitudes did students bring to group work?*

Furthermore, students who take a deeper approach to learning want their groups to be efficient and functional, and their colleagues to be equal participants in the learning process. In these cases, group conflict may not necessarily indicate a poorly functioning team, but rather, that a good team is one that can deal effectively with conflict (Darian and Coopersmith, 2001). Thus the second research issue is:

RI. 2. *Did students find that the structure and process of group work encouraged deep learning?*

Finally, within the context of learning outcomes, a cohesive team framework is associated with high levels of task performance (Deeter-Schmetz, Kennedy and Ramsey, 2002), and has the affective benefit of encouraging high levels of interest in a subject (Hernandez, 2002). Thus the third research issue is:

RI. 3. *Is the outcome of group work such that students will transfer what they have learnt to other situations and change their conception of the world?*

This paper is organised such that the data collection method of focus groups is discussed next, and then results, implications for educators, future research opportunities and limitations.

Methodology

Students in two postgraduate and one undergraduate marketing course engaged in mandatory group learning of case studies through either online or face-to-face contact. After discussing the case, the group provided two recommended actions for collective class discussion. These had strategic (ie big picture, longer-term) and functional (ie short term, operational) dimensions and were designed to improve the situation in the case. The objective of such group learning was to progress their ability to solve problems whilst developing interpersonal and teamwork skills. In addition, the importance of this process was reinforced by incorporating case studies in the end of semester examination. Each week we provided feedback and graded their contributions as part of formative assessment.

Following two months of group work, a series of short focus groups were conducted to provide tentative understanding of the research issues (Malhotra, 2002), capitalizing on group interaction to elicit rich experiential data (Asbury, 1995). The strength of this collective interaction approach is that it gives insight into participant attitudes and perceptions that are developed through interaction with others (Greenbaum, 1988; Morgan, 1988). In particular, people may need to listen to other participants before they solidify their own viewpoints (Crabtree et al., 1993; Krueger, 1988; Patton, 1990), and quality control on data collection is provided by group pressure on false or extreme views (Albrecht, Johnson and Walther, 1993), and researcher probing for clarification and observation of nonverbal responses (Byers and Wilcox, 1991; Greenbaum, 1988).

Generally, focus groups involve planned discussion groups of between 5 and 10 people, so we moderated 20 randomly constructed focus groups involving 107 students from one undergraduate and two postgraduate marketing courses. This random assignment of students to groups at the start of the semester facilitated group cohesion and cooperation through friendly and supportive participants (Fuller et al., 1993; Knodel, 1993; Krueger, 1993; Templeton, 1994).

Focus group moderators are nominal leaders (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990) who establish rapport, are comfortable with group dynamics, keep the group on track, maintain enthusiasm, and promote free discussion (Albrecht, Johnson and Walther, 1993; Bellenger, Bernhardt and Goldstucker, 1989). In this research, moderators were the course convenors that taught classes each week and thus they already had an established rapport with participants. They also possessed knowledge on teaching content and methods, and were experienced in focus group research. Moreover, due to time scheduling restrictions, we adopted a tightly structured moderating style, which is normal practice (Morgan, 1992), and to ensure that the research venue was close to a real life setting to encourage meaningful interaction (Karger, 1989), sessions were conducted in lecture times, and were recorded with participant consent.

For data analysis, we promoted interpretative accuracy through the integration of non-verbal observations with verbal responses (Krueger, 1988), and a dual moderation process. To capture the range of impressions on the topic (Flores and Alonso, 1995), the moderators content analysed the data, and supported preliminary conclusions through comparison with direct (typical) quotations provided by groups (Morgan, 1988).

Results

This research project was an exploratory study of attitudes, perceptions, and behaviour in group learning within the discipline of marketing. Our first research issue was, *What attitudes did students bring to group work?* The following quotations represent typical responses:

'I prefer to work on my own, but if I have to work in groups, I prefer to choose my own group members from high achievers who have common interests and goals'.

'I am positive about group work because I've always had good experiences and results. I am proactive and optimistic about group work'.

Our second research issue was, *Did students find that the structure and process of group work encouraged deep learning?* Typical responses include:

'Due to the different demographics in the class the ideas generated were on a global perspective, multicultural, and not just limited to the local Australian content, which I also found of interest'.

'Group work improved communication with other students, enabled me to make new friends. Because group work is interactive, it makes the experience of learning more enjoyable'.

'Group work has changed the value I put on it mainly because when group members co-operate to achieve a common goal, group work is successful'.

I have lost faith in this learning tool because of the lack of involvement of others.

Our third research issue was, *Is the outcome of group work such that students will transfer what they have learnt to other situations and change their conception of the world?* Typical responses included:

'By working in a group I have learnt that everyone is not perfect, everyone has different ideas to contribute and that I must respect them rather than criticise them. I realise that my ideas are not necessarily the correct ones either and that different people have different goals in life. Working with the group has also shown me that learning to interact with all types of people is imperative in today's multicultural world. In the future this will enhance my overall understanding of the world'.

'The world is full of ideas and difference. I have a greater appreciation for the contribution of people from different cultures and backgrounds. So my focus will be 'the world in me' and not 'me in the world'.

'I've come to enjoy working in groups and it has improved my ability to with people'.

Discussion

This research expands our understanding of group learning within the marketing discipline. Firstly, students had mixed attitudes to group work based largely upon prior experiences, many preferring to work singly while others were happy with group projects because of good experiences. These findings are consistent with extant educational research (Huff et al. 2002), where personalities, unequal workloads and grading issues produced negative attitudes to group work (Deeter-Schmetz, Kennedy and Ramsey, 2002). The implications for teaching are that, on balance, instructors can expect students to be negatively disposed to group work at the start of a teaching semester, signaling a need for marketing academics to communicate the positive learning benefits associated with group projects to students during plenary teaching sessions (Chapman and Van Auken, 2001).

Secondly, it seems that group work promoted deep learning. Most students suggested that a teamwork approach enabled them to view issues multiculturally and globally, and arrive at consensual viewpoints. Furthermore, group work facilitated improved communication and friendships with other students, making the experience of learning more enjoyable, in itself a feature of higher learning processes (McKeachie, 1990). Finally, results indicate that group work was a driver of better learning practices including time management, critical evaluation and involvement. In particular, while many participants suggested that they had an increased willingness to defend their stance on issues that were grounded in substantial preparation, most understood the value of co-operative learning through fostering a positive interdependent relationship with other team members (Johnson and Johnson, 1992). So, the implications for teaching are that group work encourages higher level learning and because this is one of the main objectives of a university education, group projects should form a significant component of a student's learning activities.

Thirdly, group work resulted in changed feelings and behaviour. Prior to attending our courses, many students were readily disposed to criticise other student's ideas and viewpoints, but now have a greater appreciation of the potential contribution of people from other cultures and backgrounds. Thus, group work appears to facilitate interpersonal interaction and intercultural understanding, which is an important component of relationship building within many marketing related activities. Similarly, group work brought about change in students' learning foci. Some students describe the change from 'selfish' to 'selfless' in terms of encouraging anxious students to participate in group activities, and learning to achieve a balance between individuals and the group and develop the art of standing out and fitting in at the same time.

In brief, the implications for teaching are that group work appears to facilitate a transfer of learning to other situations. For the future, students who enjoy group work and assert that they will adopt it as a learning tool, are promising a less ego-centric disposition and a more collaborative approach to their learning. This should result in greater motivation, and content-related learning outcomes (Kimber, 1996). The challenge for instructors is to determine the best method of relaying expected benefits of group work so as to ensure students' motivation to develop and refine skills that can be successfully transferred into new situations.

As our sample consisted of marketing students, generalisation to other contexts may be problematic. Also, in assessing the likely transferability of skills to other work situations, our measure of behavioural intention may not fully equate with actual behaviours. Future research into group work should address the relative importance of these issues.

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