“Please Don’t Make Me Work With Him...”: The Effect of Group Placement on Individual Student Performance

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Introduction

Exhaustive research has been done on the effectiveness of collaborative learning (students working in groups). Collaborative learning, or group work, refers to “an instructional method which students at various performance levels work together in small groups toward a common goal.” (Gokhale, 1995) Advocates affirm that group work makes students responsible for their own and each others learning. These educators claim that group work increases motivation and improves critical thinking skills. This study will not refute these claims. In fact, as a history teacher I have found group work to be an excellent vehicle for navigating the passages of time. Through simulations and role-playing, students are able to view history as a participant, rather than as a removed (and often bored) observer.

Having established group work as a successful instructional tool, the next issue becomes how to place students in groups. The objectives of group placement are to create a working environment whereby both low and high academic achievers can learn from and be motivated by one another. Furthermore, groups must be constructed so that every student has the opportunity to succeed and each group completes the assigned task to the best of their ability. The question is, “How do I achieve all these objectives?” Unfortunately, I have not found this an easy question to answer. Despite careful experimentation with various grouping techniques, there always seems to be one or two groups who are never able to get off the ground. These groups languish without leadership or motivation. Their final product is usually significantly below the quality of the other groups’ final products. They seem unable to communicate with each other or organize themselves.

In high school, students are constantly asked to work in groups. In fact, group work offers an opportunity for students to learn more than just academic skills and content. Group work teaches social skills. I always tell my students, “Learning how to work with others may be the single most important thing you can learn in high school.” That is a skill they will need throughout life, regardless of what they end up doing. As with most skills, some students come with a natural inclination to excel while others find working with peers difficult. Interestingly, the students who perform higher academically are not necessarily the ones who work well in groups. Oftentimes these high achievers find depending on others to be difficult and fail to see what some of their peers can offer them.
Groups also face problems with excessive absences, students failing to carry their share of the workload, personality conflicts, communication problems, and particular students dominating the decision making process. As a teacher, I feel the burden of all these potential problems when placing students in groups.

According to Gokhale (1995), groups can be formed using self-selection, random assignment, or criterion-based selection. In my quest for the best group placement method, I have tried variations of all three techniques. In terms of criterion, Stahl (1994) suggests groups should be heterogeneous according to academic abilities, ethnic backgrounds, race, and gender. I have added to this criterion language ability, attendance, and perceived social skills.

This year I was interested in seeing if an individual's performance in a group changed depending on their group placement. I wanted to see if a student's performance improved depending on who they were grouped with. By studying the effect of placement on performance, I was hoping to develop an optimal criterion for group formation. My research question was, "Is there a relationship between group placement and a student's ability to work well with others?" Based on my belief that all students possess the capacity to learn, I postulated that students merely needed to be placed in the appropriate group in order to achieve at a high standard. Thus I hypothesized that the results would show a significant relationship between group placement and a student's ability to work well with others.

Methodology

The site of this study was Bell Multicultural High School, located in the Columbia Heights neighborhood of Washington, DC. The study was conducted in a US history class composed of one sophomore, eighteen juniors, and eight seniors. This class is a required semester-long course for graduation. The class included five African-Americans, sixteen Latino-Americans, two Ethiopians, three Vietnamese, and one Haitian. Of the twenty-seven students, nine were female and eighteen were male. With the exception of four students, the entire class was bilingual. The ages varied significantly. English language ability also varied from advanced ESL to fluent.

Data collection was done in two ways. First, I maintained an observation journal which I would write in both during in-class group work and when reflecting after class. This journal was informal. I did not follow any format in my writing. I simply observed how individuals were working in groups and how groups were working as a unit. I looked for groups who were not actively engaged, who were involved in off-task behavior, and who were failing to communicate as a group. Within each group I tried to identify the individuals who were not participating, who were failing to contribute ideas, and who were antagonistic to one or more members of the group.

The second form of data collection involved formal assessment of each group project in a rubric. Each project had a different rubric. The rubrics were developed by me and were presented to the class at the inception of each project. Each rubric had an individual performance component and a group performance component. Furthermore, each rubric evaluated an oral
presentation and a written piece (see appendix for rubrics and full assignment descriptions).

Using the two aforementioned methods of data collection, I identified two students who were functioning particularly poor in groups, regardless of group placement. I then used these two students as the main subjects for the rest of my study, however the rest of the students continued to play a supporting role. The rest of the class continued to be relevant in that they could potentially affect the performance of the two identified students. Furthermore, there remained the possibility of other students also being identified as “poorly functioning in groups” later in the semester.

My role during these projects was twofold. First, as a researcher, I made observations, assessed performance, identified issues, and made alterations in future group placements based on data collected. Second, as a teacher, I introduced the assignment, provided support and assistance during work-time, and gave each student a grade based on the provided rubric.

Numerous design and data collection limitations existed. As previously mentioned, journal observations were informal. Thus identification of student subjects was not done scientifically and was not based on a clearly delineated criterion. By acting as both researcher and teacher, some reliability may have been lost. My responsibility as a teacher required that I help groups achieve to the best of their abilities. Having identified poorly achieving students (as a researcher), it is possible I gave these students more attention or assistance (as a teacher), thus affecting results. Finally, in searching for a relationship between group placement and ability to work well in a group, I was not able to isolate these two variables. Inevitably poor performance is due to a myriad of different issues. In other words, a student's continued poor functioning in a group could be attributed to any number of things.

Findings and Interpretations

The first group project, Catching Up On History, took place within the first two weeks of the semester (see Appendix A). Since I barely knew the class, group selection was done randomly. Groups consisted of 4 to 5 students. Groups were responsible for researching an assigned event or time period, answering questions about their topic, developing a skit, and presenting their findings and skit to the class. My journal observations identified one poorly functioning group. The other groups cooperated, interacted, and participated well, however the previously mentioned group did none of these things. Group members did not speak to each other. There was no leadership in the group. Each member appeared to be doing individual work without having coordinated with the group. Three members of the group asked to be switched to a new group. They complained that the group was "not doing anything." Ultimately I had to facilitate some organization and cooperation in the group, however they were still the only group to score in the C range (all other groups received an A or B).

Having identified the members of this group as potential subjects of the study, I resolved to split up this group for the following project and place each member with a student who had showed leadership, strong academic ability, and
good social skills. The following project, Perspectives Poetry, involved pairs rather than large groups (see Appendix B). The partners were responsible for writing a poem with two voices. The two voices showed different perspectives of a single event or time. The students from the previous group had varied results on this second project. One student (henceforth to be called George for purposes of identification) and his partner never even finished the project and both received an F. This surprised me because the other student was a motivated individual, who had done well in his first group. Another student from the previous group (henceforth to be called Lenin for the purposes of identification) performed extremely well with his partner. This pair received an A for their poem, based on both their written work and their final reading of the piece. This also surprised me since Lenin's partner had strong language skills but a weak academic record. Although the other students from the previous group produced good final products, I observed that their partners did much of the work in their groups. Thus the group placement had not improved their performance per se, but rather allowed them to benefit from their partners' performance. Based on my observations from this second project, I had concluded that group placement did appear to have an effect on student's ability to work well with others. At least one of the students from the first group, Lenin, had improved his performance in his new group. George's performance had not improved, and had arguably gotten worse (since he did not even finish the second project). Since George and Lenin had diverged so drastically on the second project, I resolved to use them as the primary subjects for the rest of my study.

I chose these two students because they did not appear to have other issues which would hinder their ability to work well in groups. Neither student had excessive absences, nor did they have any learning disabilities. Both students were fluent in English. George speaks only English and Lenin is bilingual. Both students had friends in the class, thus were not severely lacking in social skills. Finally, both students had strong cognitive abilities (more so than their grades reflected). I later learned George suffered from depression and was seeing the school social worker on a regular basis.

The third group project of the semester was called Labor Skits (see Appendix C). This assignment required that students work in groups of three to six students. Students had to create a skit that would illustrate the relationship between labor unions and management during the period of Industrialization. For this project I placed George and Lenin with students they had yet to work with in the class. George's group was comprised of six students, including two girls and three other boys. The group had varied language levels, attendance records, academic records, and perceived motivational levels. Lenin was placed in a group with two other males. One of his group members was very motivated and had strong attendance and academic records. The other student was very weak in all of the above. These group placements improved neither George nor Lenin's performance. George's group suffered major inner-group conflicts, predominantly involving George and one other student. As a group they could not agree on the roles for the skit, the skit's dialogue, or even the sequence of events to occur during the skit. The final performance of the skit was satisfactory, but only after I
allowed the group an entire extra class period to plan and rehearse their presentation. Furthermore, I spoke with several members of the group privately regarding resolutions to the conflicts within the group.

Lenin’s group did equally poorly. With one student often absent, I hoped Lenin would work as well with his other group member as he had on the previous project. Unfortunately, none of the group members worked well together. Instead of working together, they did not communicate with each other and ended up doing most of the work individually. This resulted in a great deal of overlap and inconsistencies in their final product. One group member tried very hard to engage Lenin in a cooperative learning environment, however Lenin insisted on working alone. The final product was uncreative, disorganized and under-practiced. Lenin’s group received a D+ for the project.

After the poor performances of both George and Lenin on the third group project, I decided group placement was not an isolated factor in determining one’s ability to work well with others. After discussing the issue with my LMTIP advisor, I decided to address the issue of "what makes good group work" with my class. Until that point I had never discussed with my students the skills required to work well in groups. I had focused on the content and presentation skills being learned during the projects, to the detriment of group skills. I had hoped students would instinctively develop group skills without those skills actually being addressed. George and Lenin’s performance forced me to reflect on my teaching and realize the entire class could benefit from a discussion of good group work.

The final project was a court simulation called the Hawaii Trial. For this project, I divided the class into two parts: the prosecution and the defense. The object was to prove the guilt or innocence of two defendants, Hawaiian President Sanford Dole and US President William McKinley, who were accused of violating the sovereignty of the Hawaiian people. Within each team there were subgroups consisting of an attorney, and the witnesses they were supposed to question. Each attorney was responsible for questioning two or three witnesses from their own team. Thus these subgroups had to meet to form strategy and develop questions and responses to be used during the court proceedings. I told the class that during this project I wanted to focus more on what good group-work means. The students brainstormed a list of attributes of good group-work. The list consisted of the following:

**What makes good group work?**

- If everyone does their part
- Everyone works together
- Respect and listen to each other’s ideas and opinions
- Attendance
- Be responsible to get in touch when absent
- Leadership
- Use time wisely
- Treat everyone equal
- Do research together outside of class
- There is no "I" in team
- Be punctual
- Don't wait to the last minute
- Communication
- Don't keep it to yourself
- Give each member a chance to talk

During the attorney/witness strategy sessions, I had the students do a "fishbowl" exercise. Two students (one attorney and one witness) "in the fishbowl" were to conduct a discussion where they developed potential questions and responses for the actual court proceedings. They also developed strategies for the attorney to use during the trial. The other witnesses stood "outside the fishbowl" as observers. They wrote down observations based on the list above and the following questions:

**Group Feedback**
1. What did you see/hear that was positive?
2. What did you see/hear that could be done better?
3. What is some information that could be valuable to your group?

The students "outside the fishbowl" then shared their observations with those "inside the fishbowl." Then the roles were switched. Before the beginning of this activity we discussed positive versus negative feedback and the purpose of doing the exercise. The objective of the exercise was to get students to reflect on their own and each other's contributions to the group. The result of this activity was positive. Students gave each other good feedback and the mere existence of observers facilitated better discussion between attorneys and witnesses. Unfortunately I was only able to conduct such a session once. In order to significantly improve group-work, I believe this activity should have been done on a regular basis and developed further with more self and peer reflection.

Both George and Lenin did poorly on the Hawaii Trial. Although they both participated in the fishbowl activity, it was not enough to dramatically change their ability to work well in groups. Both students presented relatively well, however this was due more to their language ability than any preparation or coordination with the rest of their group. Ultimately George did not turn in the written component and thus failed the project. Lenin turned in his written work on the final day of class and received a D.

**Conclusions**

Based on my two subjects and their performance on all four group projects, I found the results of my research to be inconclusive. With the exception of Lenin’s successful second project, both students did poorly regardless of group placement. However I do not necessarily feel this indicates a lack of relationship between group placement and a student’s ability to work well with others. Perhaps more significant than George and Lenin’s poor results is the fact that I only isolated two students who performed consistently poor. The only other students to perform consistently poor in groups despite their placement were those with excessively low attendance. This reflects the fact that most students
were eventually placed in a group where they worked well. Another variable was
the different topics and formats of each project. It is possible students connected
with certain topics or project structures, but not others. The study could have
benefited from more student feedback regarding these issues.

Although not a part of the original research question, the activities
regarding "What makes good group-work?" proved insightful. Students
responded well to the discussion and fishbowl activity. Unfortunately one such
session was not enough to foster a significant improvement in group-skills. This
is something that should be done throughout the semester. In the future I would
like to develop this aspect of the class further. I intend to do more student self-
reflection, peer evaluations, and fishbowl activities. If nothing else, my research
project highlighted the fact that group skills should not be assumed. Like all skills,
students need to be taught how to work well in groups.

The problem then becomes finding time to address content, presentation
skills, and group skills. Inevitably time previously used for the former two, would
be sacrificed to focus on the latter, however such a sacrifice would be worth it.
The pay-off would come when presentation skills and acquisition of knowledge
improved due to the student's ability to work better in groups. Ultimately the final
product would be superior.

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