

Fostering Autonomy and Creativity in the Classroom: A Group Exercise

ABSTRACT

I use this activity as a final graded group assignment in my undergraduate Human Resource Selection class, but a revised version of this activity can be used in other Management courses as well. Student teams are given a pre-curated list of recent HR or Selection related articles or reports. Topics are chosen “first come, first served.” The teams have to create an engaging, interactive activity or presentation without using traditional PowerPoint/Prezi methods. This assignment is particularly well-suited for students with different learning styles, and it fosters experiential, group-based learning. Student feedback indicates that this activity is extremely popular and impactful.

Keywords: experiential learning, autonomy, creativity

Time requested: 60 minutes

Activity/Exercise

Unique Contribution: This work has not been presented or published before

Introduction:

While group-work and student presentations are widely used in higher education, particularly in business disciplines, these assignments are typically conducted under very strict parameters (e.g., certain structural elements, number of slides). The skills students learn during these types of assignments are undoubtedly useful, but there is also a value in allowing students more autonomy in their topic selection and method of delivery.

This submission describes a graded, creative final project that student groups need to perform in the classroom. The activity's main focus is to foster students' autonomy by allowing them to select their topic from a predetermined list and giving them the flexibility in using ANY kind of delivery method (with the exception of a traditional PowerPoint or Prezi).

In addition, students are pushed out of their comfort zone to work within very few guidelines, and they are encouraged to come up with an original and interactive way to cover their chosen topic. Students often struggle when they first read the assignment, but they get more comfortable and creative as they start working on the project with their teammates. The final products are often innovative and funny, and the presentations generate a lot of engagement from the class.

Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications

This exercise is closely linked to educational games and role-playing which fall under experiential learning. In these types of activities, students are actively involved in the learning process. Active learning enhances motivation and interest (Svinicki & McKeachie, 2014). Peer, cooperative learning where students interact with each other, has been shown to produce favorable results and developed students' cognitive and interpersonal skills.

Providing a choice both for the assignment topic and the delivery method increases students' perception of autonomy, which is regarded as an essential need by Deci and Ryan (2000). As students work through this creative assignment as a group, they can leverage the different learning styles identified by Kolb (2015). For instance, students with *experiencing* learning styles can help the teamwork process to move along. Students with *imagining* learning styles can offer various ideas for delivery. And students with *acting* learning styles can keep the team accountable and on time.

Learning Objectives

This activity is conducted in my HR Selection (a 4000 level, Management elective) course as a final group project. Most of the other assignments in this course are case study based, where the students need to apply their theoretical knowledge to different case scenarios. With this in mind, I wanted to do something a bit different (and fun) for their final project.

This exercise provides an opportunity to students to come up with original, creative ideas on how to introduce their topics to the other students and how to ensure engagement and participation from the audience. This prepares them for workplace situations where they might be tasked to conduct a non-traditional presentation or training session. Further, students sometimes have to “think on their feet” when something does not go as planned during this activity. At times, they may not receive the level of engagement as their hoped. Being able to “read the room” and “go off script” as needed are also valuable take-aways for many situations that will occur at work.

Exercise Overview

This project is the final group assignment in this class. For a face-to-face class, the assignment description is as follows:

“You and your teammates are to conduct a presentation/activity “inspired by” the following articles. The topics are “first come first served.” Please tell me or email me your selection. Obviously, you should look for OTHER sources/information about your topic as you prepare.

You have flexibility in coming up with something creative/fun/original. The only stipulation is that you CANNOT use a traditional PowerPoint or Prezi format. You will have 6-8 minutes for this assignment. (Please let me know if you think you will need more time.) All your teammates need to participate in some capacity. You may also involve the other students in the classroom. Interactivity is encouraged!”

Topic examples from prior semesters include: Hiring from Marginalized Communities, Exit Interviews, Disappearing Jobs, Cultural Fit/Retention, Salary Negotiations (for Women), Boomerang Employees, Toxic Culture, and Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI). Each topic title is accompanied by a link to a recent article or news report to offer an introduction to the subject.

I am focusing this session for in-class delivery, but I also developed a version of this activity for my online class during Covid (Fall 2020 and Spring 2021). For an online class, the assignment description is as follows:

“You and your teammates are to produce a creative project “inspired by” a selection-related article/topic. You will have two choices: 1) create an audio/video recording (e.g., Kaltura

in iCollege, Zoom) OR 2) design an infographic (e.g., Canva, Piktochart). Before you get started, make sure that you will be able to SHARE the link or upload your file into an iCollege discussion post. The topics are “first come first served.” Please email me your selection. Obviously, you should look for OTHER sources/information about your topic as you prepare.”

For in-class delivery, students can use the standard classroom equipment (computer and projector) or bring in any material that they need. Most commonly students would do a role-play (e.g., act out an exit interview) or use an interactive platform, such as Kahoot or Jeopardy.

Depending on class size (and number of groups), the timeframe can be adjusted to suit the particular course. In my experience, students tend to go longer than the allocated timeframe, especially if they are using something like Kahoot.

To further enhance engagement, all students need to rank order the presentations at the end of the class. I share the top two choices with the class before we conclude the class session.

Session Description

In this session, I will describe the reasoning behind this activity, share the assignment description, show some examples of the topics that I use for this activity, and share my experiences and the student feedback from this assignment. I will also offer some particularly unique approaches that student groups have come up with in the past (e.g., “How to make a Happy Employee Salad”).

In the Q&A section, I will ask participants to share their thoughts on how to use this assignment in their own classes or if they have any suggestions on how to improve this activity.

Timeline: 60 minutes with breakdown is as follows:

- **Introductions** (presenter and participants): 5-10 min
- **Activity description, design, grading rubric, “lessons learned”** (presenter): 25 min
- **Student Feedback** (presenter): 5 min
- **Q&A and open discussion about the topic/activity** (presenter and participants): 20-25 min

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