Getting off on the right foot: Helping groups of non-traditional students form, storm, and norm

ABSTRACT

Non-traditional students typically have several responsibilities outside of the classroom. For these students, group work can be particularly challenging as they have little discretionary time to meet with group members. Students typically meet each other, decide to work together, exchange contact information, and then communicate through email or text to complete the group project having never stormed or normed with the resultant adverse effects. This exercise takes participants through the process of forming, storming, and norming. By using this activity, students experience forming, storming, and norming in the initial class setting, which allows students to then focus on work.

Keywords

Groups

Non-traditional Students

Group development

**Introduction**

Non-traditional students (*e.g.,* older, commuter, first generation, married) often face challenges when working in groups, either with other non-traditional students or with traditional students. They have minimal discretionary time, and often cannot meet outside of the class environment. In any class where group assignments require classmates to work together to produce a final paper and/or presentation, it is important for students to experience the stages of group development, and this exercise will provide them with three critical steps in the group development process: Forming, Storming, and Norming. These critical steps can be accomplished in the classroom on the day the groups originally form, which lays the foundation for expectations and alleviates any need for additional group development activities outside the class**.**

**Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications**.

The exercise is based on Tuckman’s (1965; Tuckman and Jensen, 1977) stages of group development, and the purpose is to provide student groups with the necessary stages of group development rather than allow for the group to progress independently through the stages (or fail to progress). There are several reasons for assisting in this process. First, stages are not always followed by groups of students. Students lament free-riders, yet do not do anything to change the situation, and this is likely due to two influences: the short time frame of a typical term (especially the quarter system in the US – 10 weeks) and failing to set norms or expectations for the members of the group. Second, non-traditional students experience different demands on their time than traditional students. Marriage, full-time work, parenting, and finances can create pressures not typically experienced by traditional-aged students (Hagedorn, 2005). Non-traditional students relish flexibility in their education (Li & Irby, 2008; Varela, Cater, & Michel, 2012), yet without proper guidance, group members can become rather inflexible, and unmet expectations often derail proper group functioning. Assisting students in two ways, in group development and in group member choice, this exercise is key to effective group functioning for non-traditional students, a mix of traditional and non-traditional students, and for other diverse student groups.

**Learning Objectives**.

The learning objective for this exercise is an understanding of the challenges faced by students in choosing groups and in functioning effectively in groups. This exercise will take participants through exactly what I do in class to help students choose the right members for their groups and to do a “crash course” in forming, storming, and norming so they can focus on performing. Participants can expect to leave with instructions on how to run this activity in their own classes. This activity can be done in any class in which students will work in long-term groups.

**Exercise Overview**

This exercise is done close to the beginning of the term when groups are first formed. The exercise typically takes 90-120 minutes to complete with a class of approximately 50 students.

The first step in this exercise is to conduct a realistic job preview of working with particular group members. I lead the discussion by asking each person in the class to **introduce themselves**, tell their major and year in school and anything interesting about themselves. They are also asked to tell two important pieces of information: 1. When they get work done (*e.g.,* two days ahead of the deadline, 30 seconds before the deadline), and 2. How they prefer to do the work (*e.g.,* alone or with the group). These two pieces of information set the expectations for how the group will function. (20 minutes)

In the second step, I give some **background information** on group work. I like to ask how many of them have been taught how to work in groups. I ask how their previous groups have functioned, if they like group work, and what has gone wrong in the past. After a few students share their perceptions and experiences, I ask if they have worked in groups that performed well. Next, I ask them to think about what makes a group successful or what they think would have made their previous groups successful. (5 minutes)

I then ask the students to give me one word or phrase that tells me **what makes a good group**. I say, “Like punctuality, or positive attitude, or answers emails frequently.” I start at one end of the class, and I ask every person for their answer, and I do not allow students to refrain from answering. Sometimes, if a student cannot think of an answer, other students will chime in and help. The atmosphere is fun and while students start off somewhat nervous, they quickly settle in and participate. I write each answer on the board, and when I am finished, I ask for any additional ideas that aren’t there but that we want to be included. (15 minutes)

Once we are happy with the list, I take a 5-minute break during which the students are instructed to find people they want to work with in a group. When we return from the break, students move to sit in their new groups. (5 minutes)

I then give a **quick lecture** on the stages of group development, and I explain that we will be doing the first three in class: forming (which they just did), storming, and norming. I explain the importance of storming, and I give examples of witnessing students skipping the storming phase. I say, “You see one member of the group say, ‘I think we should do it this way,’ and the others nod and say, ‘Okay,’ without really considering what they are agreeing to do. Soon, those people who were all too agreeable in the beginning start to change their minds about what they want to do or they start to feel like what they agreed to isn’t what they expected. Once this happens, the group has to go through the storming phase, but it may be too late, or people decide it’s only a few more weeks and to stick it out. Those groups do not do well in the final presentation or paper. When a group skips one of these stages, they will eventually begin the process of de-norming, de-storming, and possibly even de-forming meaning they break up right before the end of the term.” I explain that storming is not interpersonal, but rather task-oriented and what that means. (5 minutes)

I then set them to picking **five norms** from the board that will apply to their groups. These five norms will be used for group member evaluations at mid-term and again after the end of the term. As they begin to consider their five norms, I add that they must provide an operational definition of each norm. They must say, for example, what on time looks like. “On time for one person may be 15 minutes early, but for another, it may mean 5 minutes late.” (20 minutes)

The last instruction I give them is to decide on a group goal and a group name. I do not give this first, as it impedes the norm discussion. I have found it more useful to have them begin discussing norms and then think about what they want to accomplish. Students email me their group names, group goal, and norms. At mid-term and again at the end of the term, I send them their norms with a Likert-type scale with 1 = never exhibits this norm to 5 = always exhibits this norm.

**Session Description**

In the session, I will take participants through the exercise described above (the terms in bold font) as though they were the students in the class--except they will not choose group names or group goals. It will take approximately 60 minutes to complete, and I require nothing more than a white board with markers.

1. Introductions (15 minutes)
2. Background information (5 minutes)
3. What makes a good group? (15 minutes)
4. Quick lecture (5 minutes)
5. Five norms (15 minutes)
6. Discussion (5 minutes)

References

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