

## THE LOVE/HATE RELATIONSHIP OF GROUP ASSIGNMENTS

*Putting people in a group does not make them a team – Adam Grant, 2020*

### **Abstract**

Although we know of the learning benefits students receive from completing a group assignment, it does not go without the challenges of managing group assignments – including free riding, lack of trust and poor communication between team members. Particularly, in the current covid-19 era, as university students are dispersed around the globe, team assignments can become harder to manage and assess. How can educators meet the changing learning environment of facilitating group assignments virtually? This roundtable discussion is to provide a platform for educators to understand the common problems in managing group assignments, and to provide a strategic plan going forward that we can apply to encourage true teamwork, as opposed to merely grouping students together to complete “group” assignments.

### **Keywords**

Teams, group work, diversity, covid-19

## **Introduction**

The purpose of this roundtable discussion is to provide a platform to address the common problems encountered in managing group assignments and focus on how we as educators can facilitate transforming *group* assignments into collaborative *team* projects. The intended outcome of the session is to understand the shared problems coming from both the students' perspective as well as educators, and what needs to happen differently in our approach during the current covid-19 era. Suggested discussion topics include how we can make students understand the value of contributing towards a team and the applicability of teamwork skills in their careers.

The target audience of this roundtable discussion is anyone involved in the management of group assignments – including curriculum coordinators, lecturers and tutors. Those who are new to teaching and or veteran teachers are highly encouraged to join in the discussion to discuss this widespread issue and contribute to share potential innovative solutions to the problem.

## **Theoretical Foundation**

A work group is defined as a set of people who influence and interact with each other to accomplish similar objectives for work tasks that are interdependent among group members and that respond to environmental stimuli (Gowen, 1985). Group work tasks provides a diverse perspective on the course material, while developing social skills and practical values that may be instrumental for management careers (McKinney & Graham-Buxton, 1993) of students. Through group work, students achieve personal growth, along with a lesson in interpersonal communication, interdependence, individual accountability, and respect for diversity (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 2007).

However, there are many challenges faced in group work include free-riding, insufficient English language skills and poor communication amongst students (Popov et al., 2012). The current “social distancing”, covid-19 era additionally brings about new challenges for students working within virtual group assignments. Students working remotely need to invest time and resources to adapt to using new technologies such as Zoom or Microsoft teams, as well as the demands of a faster internet speed. Above all, students experience greater hurdles in building trust, cohesion, team identity and overcoming isolation in virtual teams (Kirkman et al., 2002). Thus, the development of mutual trust and personal knowledge about team members is much more critical to good collaboration than resolving technical issues (Morrison-Smith & Ruiz, 2020).

As educators, there are various solutions that may meet the current challenges of managing group assignments. Firstly, monitoring collaborators’ work progress remotely amongst team members can be difficult given the physical distance and the inability to physically look over the shoulder of team members (Morrison-Smith & Ruiz, 2020). In recent years, the use of peer evaluation and its effectiveness in reducing free-riding to determine and/or adjust individual student grades within a team context is inconsistent; casting doubt on the practice of peer evaluation in improving team performance (Tavoletti, Stephens & Dong, 2019). Alternatively, educators may seek alternate mechanisms to monitor work transparency. This may include the use of certain software or third-party involvement that tracks the updates made by which student and when.

Secondly, in light of forming a team identity to complete the group assignment effectively, educators can look into facilitating a sense of belonging towards the team and achievement of goals. Based on goal-setting theory, goals have a pervasive influence on employee behaviour and performance in organisations and management practice (Locke & Latham, 2002). Forming compulsory individual and group goals in a group assignment may

foster a sense of belonging that enhances team members to work towards a common objective within their groups.

Furthermore, from the “community of fate” perspective of reward structures, the higher the shared rewards amongst team members, the more satisfied and higher performance the group will become (Shaw, Duffy & Stark, 2000). This suggests that the implementation of a higher weighting on a group assignment towards the final overall grade of the student may also enhance the compatibility of individual and group goals that can lead to increases in group performance relative to no goals (Gowen, 1985).

To facilitate a sense of belonging and cohesion, communication between team members should also occur on a regular basis. Lee, Smith and Sergueeva (2016) suggests instructors should focus more on the earlier stages of group development by offering a better introduction to groups and assigning more group-related time or meetings during class. The more time students spend working in projects both in and out of class, the more cohesive the group becomes - making the group work project a more positive experience (Feichtner & Davis, 1984).

Thirdly, to encourage students to embrace the diverse effects of team member diversity, instructors can highlight the particularly positive effects of contextual diversity, as opposed to the negative effects of personal diversity (Taras et al., 2019). Based on information-processing theory (Simon, 1978) whereby a large pool of information and variety of perspectives aid problem solving and facilitate creativity and innovation (Simon, 1978), diverse team members that come from diverse contexts have better access to diverse knowledge. This generates alternative and unique viewpoints that provides diverse groups with a larger number of possibilities and solutions to enhance performance (Williams and O'Reilly, 1998; Taras et al., 2019).

Finally, educators need to further develop the compelling message on “what’s in it for you”. Students are self-interested, and as educators, we can learn to demonstrate how working in group assignments trains you to work in the corporate world. Students need to be able to see how they benefit from the process of working within the team. This reflects on the importance of a student’s motivation.

Motivation describes the reasons that drive actions (Grant, 2008). Unlike intrinsic motivation that refers to the desire to expend effort based on interest in and enjoyment of work (Ryan & Deci, 2000), prosocial motivation is the desire to expend effort to benefit other people (Batson, 1987). When prosocially motivated, individuals are outcome focused whereby they see the work as a means to the end goal of benefitting others (Grant, 2007). It is a state of identified regulation whereby individuals are driven not by internal interest in the work itself, but rather by introjected goals of avoiding guilt and protecting self-esteem, or by identified goals of fulfilling core values and identities (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Grant, 2008).

By understanding that both intrinsic and prosocial motivation can work in tandem to enhance higher levels of persistent, performance and productivity (Grant, 2008), educators may want to further consider developing tasks that are significant enough to provide students the opportunity to boost their intrinsic motivation, as well as tasks that have enough impact to foster their prosocial motivation. In focusing on tasks that substantially relates towards student’s future careers, this can significantly appeal towards the students’ motivation to perform in their teams.

### **Session Description**

The roundtable discussion will consist of both breakout rooms and main room discussion. Within the breakout rooms, participants will be encouraged to share some of the problems they have encountered in group assignments. After collating the shared problems in the main

room, the facilitator will highlight some of the key potential solutions – including how we can develop a team identity and shared goal, designing tasks that enhance student’s intrinsic and prosocial motivation, as well as monitoring the collaboration amongst virtual team members in the covid-19 era.

The compelling take away for participants would be identifying the common problems they share between one another as a community of educators, and to also work together to develop a strategic plan going forward that embraces the benefits of assigning team projects towards the students learning and applicability to the “real” working world.

### **Timeline**

5 minutes [Main room] – Introduction and session agenda by facilitator

15 minutes [Breakout rooms] – Share within groups the problems encountered in managing group assignments

10 minutes [Main room] – Share some of the problems discussed. Facilitator to group together the “key” problems

5 minutes [Main room] – Facilitator to identify some of the solutions towards the “key” problems

20 minutes [Breakout rooms] – Each group is assigned with a set of “key” problems and the exercise is to come up with a strategic plan towards its solution

5 minutes [Main room] – Conclusions from facilitator. Groups will be asked to email their strategic plans to facilitator, and facilitator will collate these and email to attendees.

Total – 60 minutes

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