

Group Work

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INTRODUCTION

Many active learning strategies, including a number of the ones you will find in this handbook, involve group work/teamwork. Learning in groups is subject to a range of complex elements including individual

characteristics, group dynamics and interaction theory. To assist practitioners who are relatively unfamiliar with group learning, this chapter has been included to provide some straightforward guidance.

RESOURCES

An important feature of most face-to-face teaching is that it takes place with a group/cohort of students. However, formal lecture settings often remove the group learning dimension, with an emphasis on the teacher as the fountain of knowledge. Group learning is an important teaching/learning technique that can be used to enhance active participation and facilitate peer-to-peer learning.

In a group setting, learners are provided with an opportunity to interact with each other to acquire, practise and test new information in an often more meaningful way than they do individually in traditional passive learning environments

The following sections consider the stages of group development and how learners behave in groups. They also explore techniques for managing group learning activities with a variety of learner types to ensure that a focus is maintained on learning objectives.

THE STAGES OF GROUP DEVELOPMENT

Group learning is not always familiar to students and it can take time for individuals to become comfortable enough to interact meaningfully with their peers in a formal learning setting. The length of time this takes depends on factors such as group size, frequency of interaction, and structural features. Seminal works on the development of learning in groups reveal a wide range of models concerning developmental processes.

Probably the most widely recognised model of the developmental process of groups is that of Bruce Tushman (1965), which he based on an analysis of group models which had previously been developed.

Tushman contends that group development follows a number of incrementally progressive stages. Though originally developed as a four stage model (i.e. forming, storming, norming, performing), this was further refined to include an adjourning stage (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: Five Stages of Group Development

STAGE 1: FORMING

In this stage, there is a sense of exploration as group members get to know one another. Individuals tend to focus on similarities and differences with their peers and first impressions are key as they try to figure each other out. Group members are also inclined to identify a group leader who can provide guidance and direction. Orientation is an important task in the forming stage. Members attempt to become orientated to the tasks as well as to one another.

It is also helpful to set ground rules for the group at the forming stage, which are expectations about how the group will interact. For example: task division, how decisions will be made, and how people will treat each other.

The main characteristics of the Forming Stage are:

- Exploration
- Focus on similarities and differences
- First impressions are key
- Confusion/anxiety
- Lower productivity
- Issues of inclusion, leadership, developing trust
- Open communication is a must

To progress to the next stage, group members must be assured enough that they are in a non-threatening environment and are prepared to accept the possible risk of disagreement. One way of initiating and supporting the forming stage is through

ice-breakers. An ice-breaker is a short activity designed to encourage participants to talk to one another and to share some limited information about themselves. Ice-breakers can be as simple as asking students to turn to one another and introduce themselves to the people sitting next to them, or they

can be complex lengthy activities where students can find a lot out about each other. Ideally there ought to be a fun aspect to the activities in order to provide participants with some shared history that they can discuss later and, where possible, a relevance to the upcoming learning activity.

STAGE 2: STORMING

At this stage, as group members get to know each other better, conflicts can emerge in the group relationships arising from issues relating to tasks and responsibilities.

As the group organisation begins to take form, individuals may have to move out of their comfort zones and be challenged to adjust their beliefs, feelings and attitudes. If they resist this adjustment then conflict can often follow.

Relationships may become strained and differences uncomfortable. It is important that the facilitator observes closely to identify and resolve any issues arising as early as possible. If left unaddressed, they may lead

to anger and hostility, causing the group to become unproductive.

In order to progress beyond this stage, group members need to move from a 'testing and proving' mentality to a problem-solving mentality. The most important factor in enabling groups to move forward is addressing problems such as conflict within the group, poor communication styles, and learning to appreciate the differences in personalities within the group.

Defining characteristics of the Storming Stage are:

- Competition between members
- Strained relationships
- Leadership challenge
- Tension and disunity
- Ensuing differences become uncomfortable

STAGE 3: NORMING

In the norming stage, the group begins to become effective. Group members become aware of their role within the group and become comfortable in working on and maintaining the group dynamics.

At this stage group members develop trust in their peers, becoming more open-minded and forming the basis for true collaboration. The facilitators focus should now be on how to strengthen relationships, maintaining open communication and providing positive and constructive feedback.

The group now focuses more on cooperation and team goals. However, group members may lapse back into behaviour from the Storming Stage and still need to be observed closely and corrected when necessary.

Characteristics of the Norming Stage are:

- Increased cohesion and collaboration
- Emerging trust in each other and comfort in providing constructive feedback
- Appreciation of intrinsic differences that may prevail
- Individuals develop an improved commitment to team objectives

STAGE 4: PERFORMING

Groups that reach the Performing Stage are typically filled with enthusiasm and focused on creative problem solving in an interdependent way.

Characteristics of a group at the performing stage include harmony, productivity, and effective problem solving and full development of the potential to leverage the individual strengths within the group.

In this stage, learners can work independently, in subgroups, or as a combined unit. Their roles adjust to the changing needs of the group and individuals. Individual members have become self-assuring, and the need for

group approval is less significant. Leadership is shared and participative, and the group leadership role is mainly delegation. The overall goal at this stage is productivity through problem solving and work.

Defining characteristics of the Performing Stage are:

- Harmony
- Productivity
- Problem solving
- Shared and participative leadership
- Full development of potential

STAGE 5: ADJOURNING

Adjourning is the final stage and only occurs when a group has fulfilled its goals and objectives. This stage may come relatively quickly for a temporary group engaged in a classroom based task, though a more permanent form of group might function for a long period of time without reaching the adjourning stage.

This stage is also referred to as the Mourning Stage as group members may feel a sense

of loss and their motivation may decline when the group's work comes to an end.

At the Adjourning Stage it is important to achieve closure for the group on a positive note, usually by providing recognition for their participation and accomplishments and celebrating the group's overall success. This can enhance a positive perception of working in groups and encourage future participation in similar activities.

TOP TIPS

The following guidance may help you as a facilitator to successfully navigate a group through each stage of group development (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977):



GROUP PERFORMANCE

A useful tool to support the work of facilitating groups is the team performance model developed by Drexler et al. (2009). In this model, seven stages are identified that describe a team's evolution from formation through to task completion and renewal (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Seven Stages of Team Performance (adopted from Drexler et al., 2009)

1. ORIENTATION

Group members need to be aware of the value of working in groups, the leveraging of diverse strengths and how they themselves can contribute to achieving team goals. This will help with an understanding that a team can collectively accomplish something worthwhile that is significantly more difficult for an individual working alone.

Learners are likely to ask questions such as:

What will these group sessions be like?
Will I be able to succeed in this environment?
Do I know enough to be successful here?
How will this approach help me?

At this stage a learner may need answers to these questions as there is a risk they may disengage from the group activities. A facilitator should make every effort to explain how the activity links with positive outcomes for the learner. This link is fundamental in providing motivation for an individual to take the risk of engaging with group work if they are reticent or apprehensive.



2. TRUST BUILDING

Group members need to believe that they can trust others and feel trusted themselves. When team members trust each other, the feedback is more open and honest. Members can come to recognise that their own risk-taking builds this trust.

Learners are inclined to ask questions like:

How am I like other people here?
Am I different from them?
Will they like me? What will happen if they don't accept me?
Will I look stupid? Will I embarrass myself?

If a learner fails to reconcile these questions, they are less likely to be trustful of their peers. They may not relax within the group and often feel isolated. Consequently, they may at this stage decide to disengage. If they receive satisfactory answers, they are more likely to feel comfortable and ready to engage with this type of learning. A key function of a facilitator is to develop trust within a group.



3. GOAL AND ROLE CLARIFICATION

Group members need to be clear on the specific goals and objectives of the group learning activity. It is important that they understand what is within their area of control and what is not, along with their own role and responsibilities with respect to the group goals. Agreement on the purpose of the group and roles of the members needs to be agreed before meaningful work can be undertaken by the group.

If learners are not clear on their responsibilities, they are likely to either fight for their role or become quiet and disillusioned. The facilitator should endeavour to diffuse any concerns by communicating clear answers to the above questions. This will assist each member of the group to be clear on their role and the expectations of their contribution to the overall objectives.

Learners are likely to question:

How will this group be different
from my daily interactions
with others?
What risks will I have to take?
If I'm asked to do things, will others
see how nervous I am?
What will happen if I'm asked to do
something and I don't succeed?
How important will I be in the group?

4. COMMITMENT

Group members need to be clear on how they will work together. It is important that they have a shared understanding of how decisions will be made, how resources will be allocated and how dependent they are within the group on each other's application to the goals of the group (interdependency).

Learners commonly question the following:

How are we going to achieve our
goals?
Who decides how we arrive at
decisions?
What is my role and the role of
others in the context of the
overall goals?

If a learner does not feel valued or adequately supported at this stage, they may begin to question their position within the group. For the group to be successful at this stage, everyone in the group needs to have a shared vision of the direction and be understanding and accepting of the role each person will play in achieving the goals of the group. Resources should be distributed to help them achieve their aims.

5. IMPLEMENTATION

Members of the group should have a clear vision of the overall process for the group to successfully achieve its goal. It is important that they understand how individual and combined contributions impact on the success of the process.

At the implementation stage, the group puts plans into practice. Members get the opportunity to carry out the roles that they envisaged for themselves in the previous stages. Everyone should have a clear sense of who should be doing what, where and when.

Some issues that may arise at this point if the team is not well evolved include:

The group project plan is likely to be highly confused.

Group members may work to a schedule that suits them, rather than the group task.

Group members question their commitment to the group.

The members may start to renegotiate on their role in the group, and wonder about their possible contribution.

A well-developed process will result in a group that is highly motivated. This should enable all members to contribute to the achievement of group goals during the implementation stage and result in a strong sense of satisfaction for all.

6. HIGH PERFORMANCE

Only teams which become highly interdependent, highly interdisciplinary and creative in problem solving achieve this high performance level. At this stage, all team members are working in unison towards group goals. An important benefit is that successful, high performing groups are often highly motivated to take on other projects of a similar nature in order to exercise their expertise. If this stage is not well managed by the facilitator, the group can begin to suffer from the fatigue of working at this high performance level.

Overload can sometimes lead to lower performance levels and missed deadlines. The group may regress to the previous stage, and may need to reorganise its implementation process. However, if the group has a well thought out implementation plan, the bond between the members of the group can become even more cohesive. The group can develop a strong sense of each other's abilities and weaknesses, enhancing their ability to adjust roles and responsibilities to leverage the strengths of the individuals.

7. RENEWAL

From time to time, individual group members may need to recommit themselves to the work of the group or decide to leave the group. At this stage, members can decide that they have achieved the purpose of the group, celebrate the completion of the project and disband. If they feel that the group still has value, it allows for a refocus on future projects for the group.



SUMMARY OF DREXLER'S SEVEN-STAGE MODEL

Drexler's seven-stage model (Drexler et al., 2009) focuses mainly on the energy level of the group. Even assuming positive intent on the part of the participants, the journey from a group to a team can face many obstacles

A skilled facilitator will need to guide the group through the seven development stages so that they may become a group in the truest meaning of the word, as opposed to a collection of individuals.

It is important to remember that as the group moves towards its goal of 'high performance' it may regress by a stage before moving forward again.

GROUP DYNAMICS

Group dynamics have a major influence on the success of learner groups, through all stages of development. Not only do the different type of participants have an impact, the nature of hierarchies in groups are also a major factor and this element may be influenced by the facilitator.

There are three types of hierarchy in group learning decision making:

1. **Autocratic:** The facilitator decides everything, without any consultation.
2. **Consultative:** The facilitator consults with the learners about their needs and what ideas they have. However, the final decision remains with the facilitator.
3. **Cooperation:** Here, the focus is on partnership between the facilitator and the learners.

The adoption of one of the decision making approach within the classroom warrants

consideration in light of potential impact on behaviour of the three typical types of learners as described below:

1. **The dominant learner:** Dominant behaviour can often disrupt the dynamics of a group and the synergy of a group learning environment. Individuals may dominate activities or discussions to such an extent that others may be left feeling excluded
2. **The passive learner:** The passive or non-participating individual needs the intervention of a facilitator in order to encourage them to participate. Individuals may be passive for a variety of reasons such as boredom, anxiety or shyness.
3. **The resistant learner:** A learner may display resistance to group learning for a number of reasons. These include past experience, personal problems, literacy problems, feeling overwhelmed or resentment because they have to attend training.

HANDLING OF DIFFICULT PARTICIPANTS

Although the preceding section describes three generic types of learners, it is worthwhile to further explore the characteristics of disruptive learners. Pike and Arch (1997) describe a number of different types of participants and how they can disrupt the group dynamic (Figure 03).












-  • **The late-comer.** One-time offender or chronically late. Beginning of session or after break.
-  • **Pre-occupied.** Play games on computer, read or write letters or read the newspaper during sessions.
-  • **Mobile phones.** Obvious.
-  • **The Prisoner.** Those who 'have' to be there. Passive (and apathetic) or aggressive (angry and hostile).
-  • **Introvert.** Very little energy — may be shy or may be intimidated by others in the group.
-  • **The eager.** Struggles with self-confidence 'with all this new stuff'.
-  • **Know-it-all.** Expert on everything that is discussed. Distinguish those who really are experts and those who spoof.
-  • **Socialiser.** Does not stick to task and easily moves to gossip, etc.
-  • **Apple-polisher.** Those who praise you and want to be on your good side.
-  • **The Bored.** They don't want to be here, or they have done it before. Their eyes glaze over.
-  • **The confused.** People who do not follow what is going on, and are wondering what the whole exercise is about.
-  • **The Unqualified.** Those who do not quite know what is going on, or are very dependant on directions and want answers. Their interventions annoy others.
-  • **The sleeper.** Someone falls asleep during the session, or is struggling not to nod off, and distracts you.

Figure 03: Types of group participants (adopted from Pike and Arch (1997))

It is important to consider the motivations for people behaving in particular ways. The following are a number of common reasons:

1. **Attention craving** They need to be recognised and hope that someone in the group, especially the facilitator, will give them a little extra attention
2. **Fear of failure** Some learners are afraid that they may be asked to do things that they are unable to do, or will make them look foolish. They may attempt to cope with this by engaging in distracting behaviour.
3. **Gaining status** This is basically a power issue. The learner may need to be confronted about this behaviour.
4. **They have very difficult personality traits**, which may need professional help. Sometimes learners have behavioural problems that are not feasible for a facilitator to cater for in a group learning environment.

APPROACHES FOR HANDLING DIFFICULT PARTICIPANTS

In order to deal with the diversity of personalities within groups, Pike and Arch (1997) described a set of general approaches to handling issues arising, and particularly difficult participants!!!

FACILITATOR LED ACTIVITIES

These are actions taken by the facilitator to deal with the participant. This may include approaches such as varying the pace, raising your voice, using humour. Standing close to or making frequent eye contact with a difficult participant can often help.

Breaking up a learning session with focus groups or brainstorming can help to keep learners engaged. Sometimes, an individual will need to be dealt with privately, so as to avoid embarrassing them in the group setting.

'it wasn't the presence or absence of structure and authority which was the issue....
....it was its appropriateness to the task and the group'
Atherton J S (2013)

Adequate preparation by the facilitator can help to limit disruptive behaviour. In theory, this planning needs to take into account the individual needs of the learners, but can be difficult to cater for in short learning sessions such as single day events. Again in these situations, the facilitator can employ humour, frequent opportunities for learner engagement, group exercises and feedback sessions to overcome pushback.

GROUP WORK

While the learners are engaged in group work, the facilitator can organise the session to limit the impact of disruptive individuals by:

Rotating membership of small groups.
Building in incentives for success, which often helps concentration.
Rotating roles in groups – leader, recorder, time keeper, etc. (the rationale for this is explained in more detail in the following section).

An important outcome of group work for students is learning to be adaptable and how to deal with change. Therefore, it is a disadvantage for individuals to become fixed in their role within a group.

If provided the opportunity, individuals may attempt to take up the same role in every group session. Some steps the facilitator can take to avoid this include:

Asking quiet members of a group for a specific contribution, e.g. ensuring that all members contribute in questions and answers.
Deliberately selecting quiet or shy learners to lead groups.
Being careful to correct inappropriate behaviour by anyone including the 'good' learners.



Figure 04: Students engaged in group work

HANDLING EXTREME CASES OF DISRUPTION

A facilitator may have to deal with extremely disruptive behaviour from time to time. Several techniques can be employed. However, a facilitator should only intervene when there is a danger of a participant getting the group completely off track. The following are a number of suggested approaches:

Ask the individual to stop their behaviour and take up the issue with them after the session.
Engage the individual and ask them to explain their behaviour.
In serious cases, it may be necessary to instigate formal disciplinary procedures.

SUMMARY

In a group setting, learners are provided with an opportunity to interact with each other to acquire, practise and test new information in an often more meaningful way than they do individually in traditional passive learning environments.

Bruce Tushman proposes that group development evolves over five distinct stages – forming, storming, norming, performing and adjourning. A solid understanding of this model can help a facilitator to improve the potential of group learning in a classroom.

A skilled facilitator may guide a group through Drexler's seven stages of group performance:

1. Orientation
2. Trust building
3. Goal clarification
4. Commitment
5. Implementation
6. High performance
7. Renewal

This model is useful for building strong group cultures where individuals recognise the benefits of cooperation to leverage the collective strengths.

Approaches such as varying the pace, raising your voice and using humour can be effective when dealing with disruptive participants.

Breaking up a learning session with focus groups or brainstorming can help to keep learners engaged. Sometimes, an individual will need to be dealt with privately, so as to avoid embarrassing them in the group setting.

An important outcome of group work for students is learning to be adaptable and how to deal with change. Therefore, it is a disadvantage for individuals to become fixed in their role within a group. A facilitator should be cognisant of this and be strategic in rotating roles and responsibilities.