

The Discussion Facilitator—How One Member Alters Group Dynamics

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Abstract

Past research has shown that it only takes one person with negative influence, one 'bad apple', to spoil a group's dynamic. In this study we aim to see whether the opposite effect is also true. More specifically we ask: **Can the presence of a "Discussion Facilitator," a positive influence, improve the number of times a student participates in a Workshop?**

Experimental observations were made in two instances—the control without a discussion facilitator and the experiment with a facilitator. For the experiment, a member of the workshop was secretly chosen to act in as a "discussion facilitator.". The number of times each student participated during workshop was noted in both cases.

As a result of the research, it was found that the presence of a "Discussion Facilitator" on average positively correlated with the number of times each student participated during the workshop.

Theory and Hypothesis

The article "How, When, and Why Bad Apples Spoil the Barrel: Negative Group Members and Dysfunctional Groups," difficult team member behavior is described as: "withholding of effort, being affectively negative, and violating important interpersonal norms. From this definition we can derive then that good team member behavior is: "putting in maximal effort, having a positive attitude, and being respectful of peers." This good team member encourages discussion in the workshop and will be called the "Discussion Facilitator."

The article explained that if there was a bad apple in the group that was pessimistic about the work, then usually the whole group would start becoming pessimistic. Similarly if there is a bad apple in the group that doesn't put any effort into the work, the whole group will reflect this attitude.

This research project seeks to verify the opposite. It is hypothesized that someone who actively participates in workshop discussions will influence other members of the workshop to participate as well.

Experimental Procedure

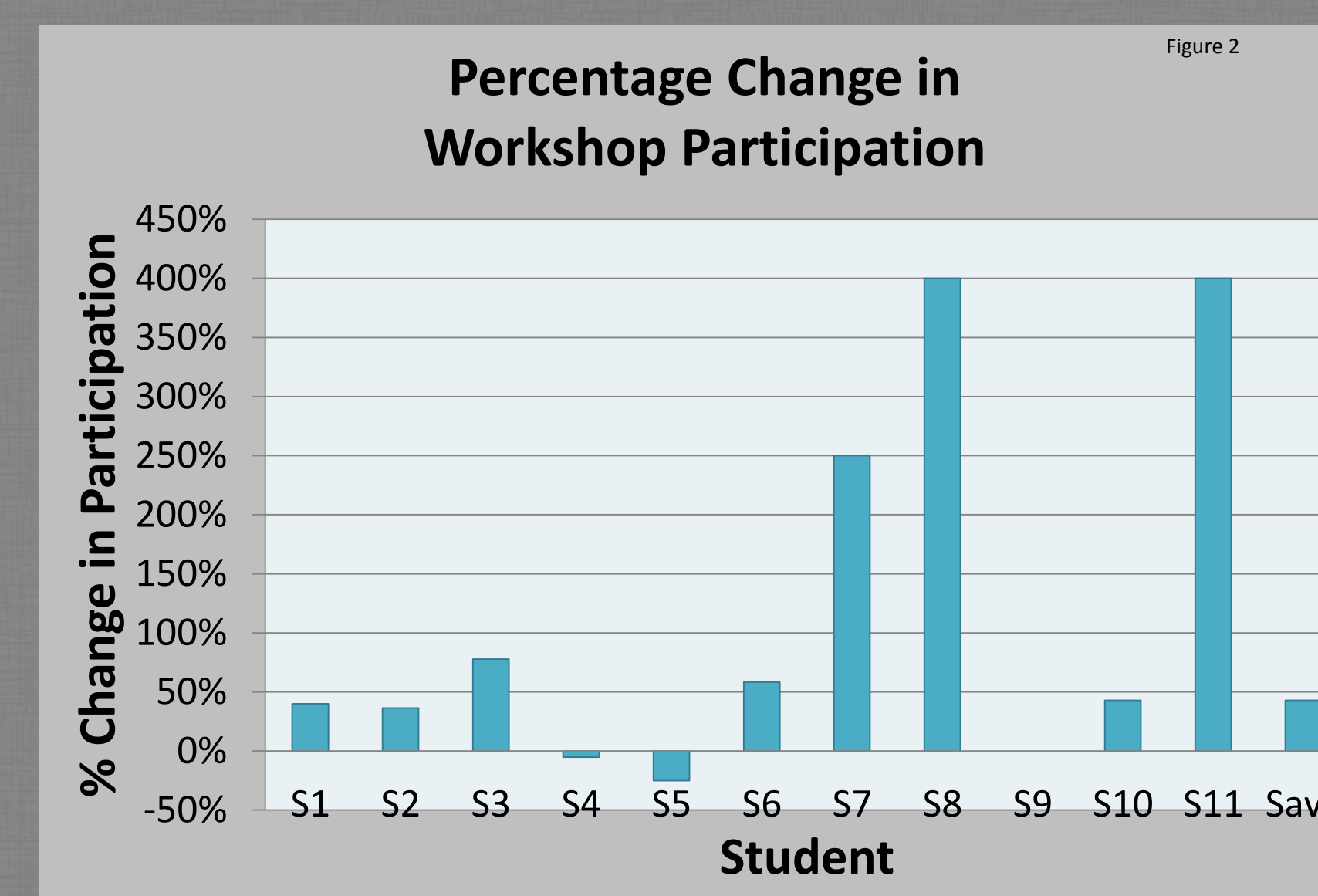
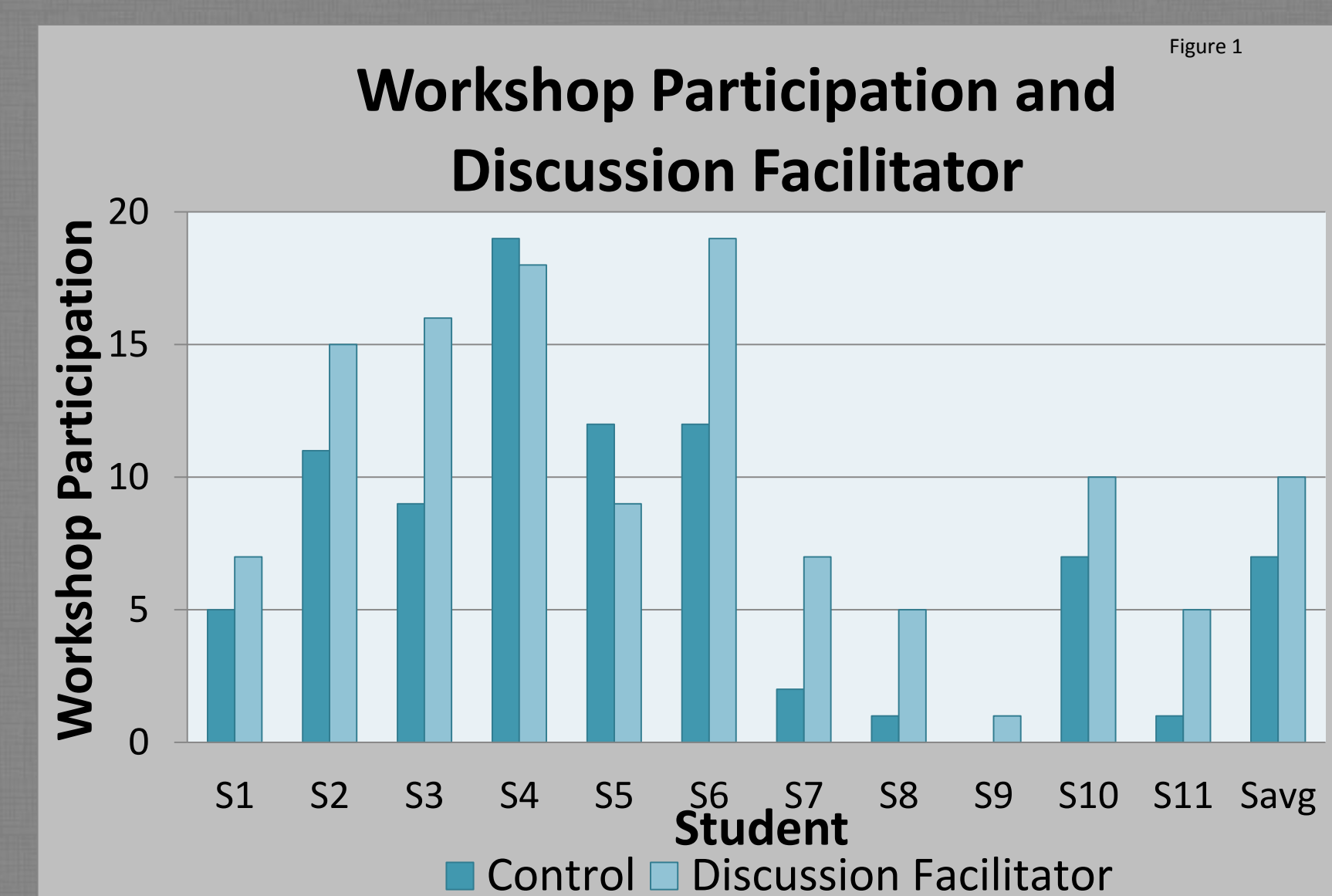
The goal of this research project was to find out whether having a discussion facilitator in the group can increase overall student participation. In order to get this comparison, the control experiment measured the total number of times each student participated without the facilitator. The experiment measured the same thing except in the presence of the facilitator. Data was only used from students that were present during the week of the experiment, therefore in total 11 students were used.

For the Discussion facilitator, the actor was asked to ask questions and make comments such as:

- Student A, how did you get that answer?
- Could you please explain your steps in the last part Student B?
- Did you have any ideas about how to solve this Student C?
- Thanks for your help Student D!
- I didn't completely follow that thought process...

Results

The following chart in Figure 1 displays the number of times each student participated without the discussion facilitator and with. Figure 2 portrays the percentage change in participation for each student. (Savg is the average student)



Quantitatively it can be seen that in most cases, there was an increase in participation in the presence of a discussion facilitator. On average the average student experienced greater participation when one of the members of the workshop was actively participating.

Qualitatively some results of the discussion facilitator were that students started repeating certain patterns of the discussion facilitator. For example One of the phrases that the facilitator used was "Do you think this is right?" directed towards the entire group.. Shortly after two other students started asking the group the same question. Students that usually liked working independently became more open to discussing questions with each other.

Conclusions

At the end of this research process it was found that there was an average increase in workshop participation in the presence of a 'discussion facilitator.

The groups experienced a greater amount of discussion back and forth among the students when the discussion facilitator was present. There was especially a rise in the participation of the quieter students.

It should be qualitatively noted that while the average number of participants increased, some students became more closed off and participated less because of this addition, while others benefitted more. Other factors such as unprofessional acting and workshop material may have affected the results.

Implication and Proposals

If the presence of a Discussion Facilitator in a workshop group helps improve participation amongst students, a suggested improvement to the workshop model might be to choose at least one good discussion facilitating student in each group. This aid to the workshop leader would secretly act as a role model of a good group member for the rest of the group. This support could be greater towards the beginning of the semester and though a scaffolding type system, the support could be decreased as the students learn how to be good group members.

The discussion facilitator could disband any bad apple influences that the group might otherwise experience.

Some further research might be necessary before such an approach is applied is checking to see whether a discussion facilitator can overcome the negative influences of some students. Papers such as "Bad Is Stronger than Good" suggest that negative influences are often stronger than positive ones. Thus a research question might arise: by what amount does a discussion facilitator improve group discussion in the presence of a bad apple—and is it worth it?

References

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Acknowledgements

Dr. Robin Frye
Professor Pawlicki
Professor Mottley

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