

Classroom Group Works Under Scrutiny: A Case Study at International Burch University

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ABSTRACT In the last couple of decades in contemporary societies, educators and educational institutions have required their students to participate actively and devotedly in their educational process in order to prepare them for the future employment which almost always includes team work and cooperation. Besides, methods that include students' cooperation and collaboration within group learning have been used increasingly in all levels of teaching and in all subjects. The present study attempts to provide an insight into students' perspectives on these issues in the international and multicultural environment of International Burch University. Students were given the opportunity to express their own opinions through the interviews evaluated by taking into consideration key elements of cooperative learning situations. The researchers have aimed to indicate possible shortcomings in the implementation of group work methods applied in practice and to attract students' attention to their importance by offering possible solutions for their overcoming.

INTRODUCTION

Collaborative learning refers to instructional method that involves active students' participation in classroom in which they acquire knowledge through the dialogues and reciprocal feedback from their peers in the group. It views a successful learner as an individual who took over the responsibility for his/her own learning, and who besides possession of basic knowledge about certain discipline has to develop different abilities and skills to gain competence in a particular field.

Involving students in class participation generates a deeper, and more desired, level of quality learning that is of great importance for students especially because, as stated by Astin (1997) and Tinto (1998). "Positive group experiences have been shown to contribute to student learning, retention and overall college success." Thus, the researchers found that the purpose of including a group work component in course is to prepare students for future occupation, which in majority of cases require work in a group-based environment. Additionally, the researchers presupposed that social settings in classroom are similar to the ones of a workplace, where mutual goals are accomplished through the academic and social learning experience.

Having in mind that particular requirements and cooperative efforts need to be met to expect

positive and productive outcome out of the group work, this study is oriented around five key elements of cooperative learning according to Johnson and Johnson (1991), positive interdependence, individual and group accountability, promotive interaction, appropriate use of social skills, and group processing. Through the students insights the researchers tried to indicate possible shortcomings of these five elements: positive interdependence, individual accountability, promotive interaction, social skills and group processing (Johnson and Johnson 1991) in practice, students' views and perceptions of problems that appear when working in a group, to respond, in the best manner, to the challenges of collaborative work which requires adjusting to them to benefit knowledge and skills, raise the awareness on the importance of this approach among students, and finally to recommend some solutions for further improvement.

RESEARCH METHOD

Participants

The participants of presented study were 25 undergraduate students of freshmen, sophomores, juniors and seniors at English Language and Literature Department of International Burch University which is located in Sarajevo, capital

city of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The study included both male and female participants with age varying from 19-27 years. To gain diverse perspectives and avoid uniformed answers, groups of students participants in the interviews reflected diverse demographic characteristic of this university with students coming from Turkey, USA, Canada, Libya, etc., as well as from Bosnia and Herzegovina. All of them were contacted via e-mail and voluntarily participated in the research.

Procedure

As the main aim of the study was to examine overall perception of students of International Burch University (IBU) on the group works and collaboration within group, the researchers conducted a series of interviews with 25 of the participants. Students were interviewed in groups consisting of 3-5 interviewees. Interviews were led and facilitated by one or two researchers who asked additional questions when needed to maintain the discussion. All the participants were encouraged to make remarks and to participate interactively in discussion. Discussions were recorded and transcribed by hand to preserve the trustworthiness of gained results.

Instruments

Interviews were semi-structured with main questions reflecting the five key elements of cooperative learning by Johnson and Johnson (1991), (positive interdependence, individual and group accountability, promotive interaction, appropriate use of social skills, and group processing), and were focused around aims of the research. The participants were directed to reflect on their previous experiences regarding the group works they were involved in as well as their own views on it with respect to the five key elements of cooperative learning mentioned above. After each interview, recorded discussions were transcribed by hand and discussed to be analyzed according to the research objectives.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Positive Interdependence

Positive interdependence occurs when there is a positive interaction among students in a

group and when each of them respectively perceives that, when working in a group, they are linked in a way that they cannot succeed unless every member in the group does, and that they have to make mutual efforts to successfully complete a task.

Most of the participants skipped talking about positive experiences in group learning and started to count negativities they have experienced. Members in the groups mostly lacked positive interdependence; positive influence and encouragement of each other. They weren't able to grasp the level of mutual acceptance at which they would be able to share resources, exchange ideas and opinions, provide support to each other which would result in knowledge and skills increase.

Participant 7, Female, Bosnian, Age 29:
"Thing that is most common in group works are the people who expect others to carry out their work load. Also, there are people who wait the last moment for everything, and often do not follow the group schedule. My personal experience was rarely positive when it comes to group work, and I prefer to work on my own."

Participant 19, Female, Mexican, Age 25:
"I do not like it when one member wants to do all the work, and won't take others suggestions even though they pretend that they're interesting."

Even though they are respectively equal members of the group, some individuals perceive that they can accomplish their goals only if other members fail to achieve their goals. As one may see in the last statement above, negative interdependence may have opposite effect resulting individuals discouraging and even impeding the efforts of other group members in achieving their goals which in many cases is the number one reason of frustration, stress, inability to agree upon the assignment, etc.

Issue that aroused during the interviews was the case of no interdependence; no correlation between group members what so ever. It happens when group members cannot agree upon even to meet each other for the sake of working together as they perceive that their goals and goals of other members are not related.

Based on the information gathered from the participants in the interviews, important issues related to influences on positive interdependence aroused. Besides, we may construe that factor such as grouping deeply affects the attitudes and motivation of students toward mutual work.

Grouping is crucial and basic element in cooperative learning as groups include individuals with unique personalities and learning styles and differing levels of skills. Personalities of individuals may clash, some group members may be more dominant than others, and there may be conflict within the group which can cause its dysfunction. In theory, described are many methods in which students can be allocated in groups, however, in practice it seems that whichever method professor chooses, and there might be students who will not agree upon it, which in great measure influence the group work process and its outcome.

Participant 1, Female, Libyan, Age 24: *"I'm a newcomer, a transfer student and to find people to work with is little difficult because everybody immediately just goes to the people that they have known for years."*

Participant 17, Female, Turkish, Age 24: *"One can destroy all group work. So you have to choose the right person to that work."*

What one may infer from most of the students responses is that working with unknown people comes as difficult in sense of agreeing upon what they are supposed to do or finding common ground about any issue related to their group. Many of the participants expressed frustration when it comes to choosing the members of their groups and that they prefer to work with people with whom they are familiar.

While discussing the issue of grouping students mentioned many other factors that affect their work in groups. Besides, one understands that group allocation has an impact on the distribution of structural variables within the group (numbers of males or females, age, nationality), group cohesion and cooperative structures (the extent to which group members pull together), group size, etc.

Although, it may seem that these factors wouldn't have had any effects on the final outcome of group work they should be taken into consideration when allocating students into groups in order to have learning as a positive experience, desirable outcomes of learning, knowledge retention and progression.

Bearing in mind different practices in educational systems around the world as well as cultural diversity of the IBU, where interviews were conducted, the researchers were interested in examining how the integration of students coming from different countries works in terms of cooperative learning.

Participant 23, Female, Palestinian, Age 23: *"It's ok unless the language is the problem. In addition, it can be a tricky thing, because we do not share same beliefs. What is okay for one person may be insulting for another. For instance, working in groups where we have mixed male and female members, is alright for one culture, but for some our friends' culture is not desirable."*

Participant 16, Female, Chinese, Age 22: *"Generally, people with different cultural background have different habits and customs in communicating with others and different personalities. So it depends on the people who are whether conservative and even prejudiced to foreign culture or open and respectful toward different cultures."*

Participant 1, Female, Libyan, Age 24: *"I did find certain cultures to be easier to sort of breach in you know be part of and they are more willing and more open."*

Participant 11, Female, Pakistani, Age 23: *"Most of the people work like that and choose their own people they feel more comfortable with. Rarely can you break those groups. Only if they have extra members some of them search for other groups...Secular and religious people tend to closer in groups."*

Diversities, which different nationalities in groups offer, give the opportunity to students to familiarize, receive, but also to share different values, beliefs and ideas, with which they wouldn't have the opportunity to work. Interviewees differ in their experiences in working with students from different cultural backgrounds. Some found it as negative aspect of group works, while the majority stated that in spite of all the differences other people bring it improves interpersonal-relationships and self-development. Experiences that students found mostly negative are related with different working styles, attitudes towards group work and education in general, and, above all, language barriers which impede information sharing.

Further, many of the participants mentioned the tendency of students of similar or same ethnicity to congregate in same groups, which does not go in favor of sharing diverse knowledge, skills, beliefs, or ideas. This phenomenon "in which students spontaneously congregate in ethnically-similar groups is known as 'clustering'" (Davies 2007). This way may not be in favor of learning improvement since students

from ethnically similar groups may divert conversation in different direction, or, if students are required to speak target language in language classrooms, they may fail to do so.

The participants also expressed the problem of group cohesion. In such cases, as stated by Harasim et al. (1998), students have reservations about their ability to work as a part of a group, don't share feelings of commitment with other members, or they may be unwilling to participate due to the previous negative experiences. These negative experiences mostly occur if students have unproductive group members and feel the obligation to take the burden of the whole group and do all of the work by themselves. To add on this, apprehension towards group work will increase even more if students get mark they feel did not reflect the level of their contribution and efforts. To achieve group cohesion, cooperation among students and overall positive outcome of group work students has to share their experiences with each other.

Participant 2, Male, Bosnian, Age 22: *"It's not so much group work as it is single work with the group... Then it's just really hard to reach to people and talk to them and meet in different places especially if they are unknown or unfamiliar that requires quite a lot effort... there is a large gap in the proficiency of students in whatever area it is of study in the group."*

Participant 13, Female, German, Age 23: *"People want to do it quickly... Its quality is not as it should be."*

Participant 3, Female, Bosnian, Age 20: *"... problem is lack of willingness of all group members to work on the assignment leaving other group members (especially the leader) to either finish the work by themselves or do the most part of the assignment."*

In establishing at least basic levels of positive interdependence group size plays important role as well.

Participant 25, Female, Bosnian, Age 27: *"If the group is too big, not all the members get the opportunity to express themselves."*

Group size may greatly affect opportunities for equal participation. Large groups enable greater amount of distinctiveness to certain students, and, thus, support their passivity. Besides, smaller groups make participation possible for every student within it, and decrease a level of passivity, and provide fewer opportunities for hindrance of participation.

Individual Accountability

As it stands that group is effective only as much as every individual within it is effective, the objective of the cooperative learning is to make every group member a stronger individual. Therefore, to achieve that every member is strengthened, students need to be individually accountable, that is, to be able help and support each other throughout the process of working together on the basis of principle all 'for one - one for all'.

The participants in the interview mainly pointed out that students lack confidence to express themselves and, therefore, to contribute to the group. This is especially case if they are unfamiliar with what they are supposed to do and come unprepared.

Participant 13, Female, German, Age 23: *"Some people are very irresponsible, I did and arranged everything."*

Participant 16, Female, Bosnian, Age 25: *"They would come to our meeting totally unprepared as they don't understand what we are doing or something."*

Participant 14, Female, Croat, Age 20: *"Many of the students lack in confidence. They come and literally beg to present instead of them. They don't want to be leaders, don't want to work, don't want to present... anything."*

As for many researchers (Howard and Henney 1998; Howard et al. 2002), preparation is a reason for nonparticipation among students. The lack of preparation may cause a fear of peer disapproval and thus decrease students' participation, due to the fear of criticism. Alternatively, being well prepared increases students' confidence in their understanding of the assignment and, thus, enhances participation.

Similarly to preparation, lack of confidence may lead to low participation and even complete passivity. Many of the researches (Fritschner 2000; Howard and Henney 1998) claim that students feeling incompetent or frightened in front of the class or teacher are likely to choose not to participate.

Also, one of common drawbacks for a group in a cooperative learning expressed by interviewees and described in literature as well is "free-rider effect".

According to Maiden and Perry (2011), this issue is often discussed in manner of the burden to the active members of the group who feel pres-

sured to do the tasks of non-active students in order to complete their group work assignments.

Promotive Interaction

Promotive interaction refers to students promoting each other success by sharing resources: helping, supporting, encouraging each other's efforts. Most of the participants expressed a difficulty of sharing knowledge with those who they don't know or not close with, which is by itself a paradox, because it is not possible to know someone or get close with without cooperation.

Participant 1, Female, Libyan, Age 24: *"You have certain students that basically do not care less who they are working with or about you."*

Many of the participants expressed lack of trust to be the main issue that prevents promotive interaction. However, as many researchers claim that trust is created over time (Huxham and Vangen 2004) it may be developed through interactive processes of group works. When to establish the trust among group members, participants mainly wary and prefer to stay reserved and have back up plan if some group members fail to perform their task. Based on their responses, it seems that they work more on promoting their own work than on establishing trustful connection with group mates.

Participant 15, Male, American, Age 21: *"I don't think there is enough time to establish a well connection between the members, but rather a constant reminder that you should always take care of your own, meaning that you need to check on other members and their progress from time to time, depending on the timeframe and deadline."*

Livingstone and Lynch (2000) explored that group work is as a mechanism for the transfer of student skills. The absence of trust and negative relationships only increase frustration and anxiety of group members which leads to isolation of group members and decrease of willingness to share ideas and work harder for mutual achievement.

Participant 13, Female, German, Age 23: *"We were supposed to negotiate, exchange our opinions, make an improvement... but none of it happened."*

Many of the interviewed students had no or little experience when it comes to sharing skills or knowledge. Most common reason they mentioned was lack of time and focus on one's own part of the assignment.

Participant 3, Female, Bosnian, Age 20: *"When I work in the group I just try to get my part done and move on with my life."*

In this way, dividing the assignment and doing their work independently, the feasibility of knowledge sharing is very low.

Social Skills

Cooperation and collaboration require communication, and social skills are considered as the most important element of group work and its high achievement. It is necessary for group members to communicate in order to achieve the goal of cooperation and of their task. Further, communication enables resolving any possible conflicts or problems within the group. However, it appears that students are not eager to work on these skills as they don't consider it as essential as many researchers in this field usually do.

Participant 23, Female, Arab, Age 23: *"I do not know a person willing to participate in a group work just for improving interpersonal skills, or focusing on that while working."*

These issues are mostly accompanied with personality and power clashes, inability to find common ground, and overall lack of communication between group members, which altogether affect the final outcome of assignment. Many students claim that positioning a group leader is desirable for solving most of these problems, but most of them also stated that they wouldn't want to be leaders since it carries a large responsibility, many problems with the lack of authority and lack power to manage the group.

Participant 11, Female, Pakistani, Age 23: *"I don't like to be responsible one, they are not precise, not working properly and you have to do it for them."*

Group Processing

What comes at the end of every group work is assessment of how effectively students were working together. The purpose of group processing is to identify the contributions and effectiveness of group members and overall outcome of group work. Assessing is one of the greatest concerns when it comes to this type of learning in terms of whether it reflects individual contributions.

Participant 12, Female, Turkish, Age 24: *"The problem of being in a group is that people*

who don't work think they will get the same mark if they study or not."

Participant 25, Male, Bosnian, Age 27: "In my opinion, assessment of the group work can never be fair, unless teacher was 24 hours with the members, following their every step."

What students fear, in the first place, is to work with low achieving students with low knowledge and skills because their overall outcome might be poorly graded. This implies that if only overall outcome is assessed and not process – inequity in grading, which is not at all encouraging for students to be involved in the group work at all.

CONCLUSION

Collaboration among students within group work to achieve common goal is recognized by many researchers in this field as a good method for active learning; development of critical thinking and decision making skills, improvement of communication and team work skills, increasing of knowledge, and above all sharing knowledge and skill. Based on the experience in teaching and being aware of general situation in education, many teaching professionals are trying to employ these methods in practice, but at the same time many students as having experienced negative effects of group works still show frustration, anxiety, dependency, and passivity whenever group works and collaboration are put into practice.

Using five elements that make cooperative learning successful and observing them from students' point of view we may notice that there still exist resistance and hostility towards this method of learning. It can be seen that simply placing students in groups and telling them to work together does not produce a cooperative effect by itself.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Students do not have innate knowledge of how to cooperate effectively with others nor are they born with instant motivation to work with other people. All of this must be learned and acquired only through practiced application and participation. Thus, firstly teachers must understand the nature of the group work and its es-

sential elements. They should clearly define academic and social goals and outcomes of group works, and communicate with the students what is expected from them to do and how they will benefit from it as much as possible.

Furthermore, students' perceptions on group works should be changed in the way that they are not focused only on final outcomes but on the process of cooperation on which final outcome depends.

Indicating the significance of cooperation and collaboration, and evaluating its application we may note that both students and professors, lecturers and instructors need to work on a variety of strategies and skills in order to overcome shortcomings and misunderstandings in the practical application of group works.

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