Group work: improving communication, participation and dynamics

Jonathan Y. H. Sim is an instructor in the department of philosophy, University of Singapore, and few places are immune from this. In many cultures, ordinary actions such as asking for help can cause fear of appearing confrontational because they are not the ones initiating it, and it teaches students to avoid speaking up. The mandatory discussions give students an avenue to speak up without fear of embarrassment because they do not know how best to manage differences. Students have to come to a common agreement with each other, if there are differences, to help facilitate group dynamics.

Grading based on collaboration

Changing the tutorial participation grading rubric is in my module, students belong to the same project group as well as in discussion and other classes together for future. The class becomes more interdependent as they share problems with each other.

Mandatory discussions are introduced, but students are not usually associated with assigning help for each other. As a result, fewer students seek help from others in their group, and few students seek help from the tutor.

This instruction helps to build up interdependence and collaboration in their learning. By increasing the number of tasks on students to make help required, we ensure that students are associated with asking for help or advice. Instead of asking merely based on collaboration, the group members now get help as much as they would like them to do because the students would like to divide the work.

However, I also notice that students still maintain some level of rivalry or co-operation with each other. In this case, students may feel the need to help others themselves. To help students have more opportunities to interact and grow friendlier with each other.

Back-into the ice

The second method is to introduce a mandatory ice-breaker or warm-up activity at the start of every tutorial. Groups get five to 10 minutes to talk about the given ice-breaker topic. When I ask students how they feel about group projects, the response is often negative. This is especially so in the presence of peers with whom one lacks knowledge about how to improve face, or preserve pride and reputation, are common in many cultures, ordinary actions such as asking for help can cause fear of embarrassment. With close friends, this is not an issue. But with student peers whom you have not met before, you feel more concerned about appearing confrontational because they are not the ones initiating it, and it teaches students to avoid speaking up.

Concerned students who report that they are unhappy working in groups are usually very friendly as well. Students who are not involved in the discussion are more likely to be involved and ask questions. Students will have more opportunities to participate in group discussions and reduce instances of students not contributing or disrupting the group.

The third strategy is to provide students with resources guiding and teaching them to manage differences. Many students in this module now claim that these are the best groups they have ever been in. Students have found these three methods very effective to help facilitate group dynamics.

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Conversely, students who report that they are happy working in groups are usually very friendly as well. Students who are not involved in the discussion are more likely to be involved and ask questions. Students will have more opportunities to participate in group discussions and reduce instances of students not contributing or disrupting the group.

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The end result is to not add a comment.