

Campus



Group work: improving communication, participation and dynamics

Jonathan Sim offers three methods for facilitating effective group work by improving participation and communication between student peers

Teaching and learning Course design and delivery Pedagogy Asia Feature article



Jonathan Sim
National University of Singapore

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When I ask students how they feel about group projects, the response is often negative. This is usually a result of bad experiences with problematic group members, such as free riders who do not contribute or members who bulldoze their ideas through while disregarding their peers.

After many semesters mediating disputes within such groups, I have found that issues often stem from concerns about “saving face”. This leads to a lack of much-needed communication.

Concerns about saving face, or preserving pride and reputation, are common in Singapore, and few places are immune from this. In many cultures, ordinary actions such as seeking help from others can be seen as embarrassing. With close friends, this is not an issue. But with student peers, who may be unfamiliar, one might feel more concerned about not appearing as a liability to the group.

There is also concern about causing others to lose face. It is just as bad to embarrass or offend someone else by highlighting their mistakes or to say something contrary to what they had expressed. This is especially so in the presence of peers with whom one lacks familiarity. Such outspoken behaviour can appear confrontational, showing up the other person in front of others.

It is because students are afraid of embarrassing themselves or their group members that there is a lack of communication. Students would rather stay silent than admit their struggles or voice legitimate concerns. It's not that they prefer silence, but they lack knowledge about how to effectively communicate or manage problems without causing anyone upset or offence.

Conversely, students who report that they are happy working in groups are usually very friendly with one another. They regard each other as friends rather than unfamiliar co-workers, are less inhibited or concerned about embarrassment, and can communicate more openly.

Students will have a more productive and enjoyable group work experience if they can achieve similar levels of relaxed friendliness within their groups. I have found these three methods very effective to help facilitate group dynamics:

Grading based on collaboration

Change the tutorial participation grading rubric. In my module, students belonging to the same project group are also required to discuss and solve challenges together for tutorials. This gives them more opportunities to interact and grow friendlier with each other.

However, this alone was not sufficient because students still retained the same level of cold unfamiliarity with group mates. So instead of awarding marks based on contribution – ie, the more you talk, the more marks you get – we began grading class participation based on how much students help others in their group, and how much students seek help within their groups.

This incentivises students to help one another and collaborate in their learning. By making it a mandatory policy for students to help and seek help, we remove the embarrassment associated with asking for help or advice. It creates a friendlier working environment – one where students within a group learn to grow comfortable with helping each other out.

Breaking 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 or bond over a topic of their choice. They are not allowed to start on the actual tutorial activity until that sacred time is up.

Devising the right discussion topic is the critical point. Students will likely be able to bond over hobbies, shared experiences such as taking the same module together, or even common annoyances. I encourage my students to bond over complaining about how challenging my assignments are – and it works in building solidarity among them.

After introducing the mandatory warm-up activity in the second semester of 2020-21, 76 per cent of that student cohort reported that it had helped them to bond with their group.

Resolving differences

The third strategy is to provide students with resources guiding and teaching them to communicate better with each other. As mentioned earlier, many students are afraid of causing themselves or a group mate embarrassment because they do not know how best to manage difficult situations.

I provide materials to teach students how to respectfully handle disagreements and make it mandatory for them to discuss and document their differences in values and working styles. Students have to come to a common agreement with each other, if there are differences. The mandatory discussions give students an avenue to speak up without fear of appearing confrontational because they are not the ones initiating it, and it teaches them the importance of ironing out differences in a respectful manner.

With these three methods in place, group communication, and therefore group work, has improved. Many students in this module now claim that these are the best groups they have ever worked with.

Jonathan Y. H. Sim is an instructor in the department of philosophy, [National University of Singapore](#).

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