

An Ethnographic Study of Students' Views of Group Work

Paul Aljets, Leigh Anderson, Bettie Parsons Barger, Allyson Bowcutt, Chad Campbell, Kate Collins, Jessica Healy, Grant Joslin, Carolyn Kaplan, Soo Yun Lee, Katherine Mollohan, Mark Moritz, Laura Peterson, India Pierce, Meghan Rector, Jessica Romine, Allison Sigler

Conceptual framework

The overall goal of our project was to come to a better understanding of group work in higher education. This is critical because faculty and librarians in higher education believe that social learning is very important and they change the way they teach and design their libraries to support social learning. Research shows that there are many benefits that students gain from working in groups (Blumenfeld et al. 1996; Burkill 1997). However, we know very little about how students do group work outside the classroom.

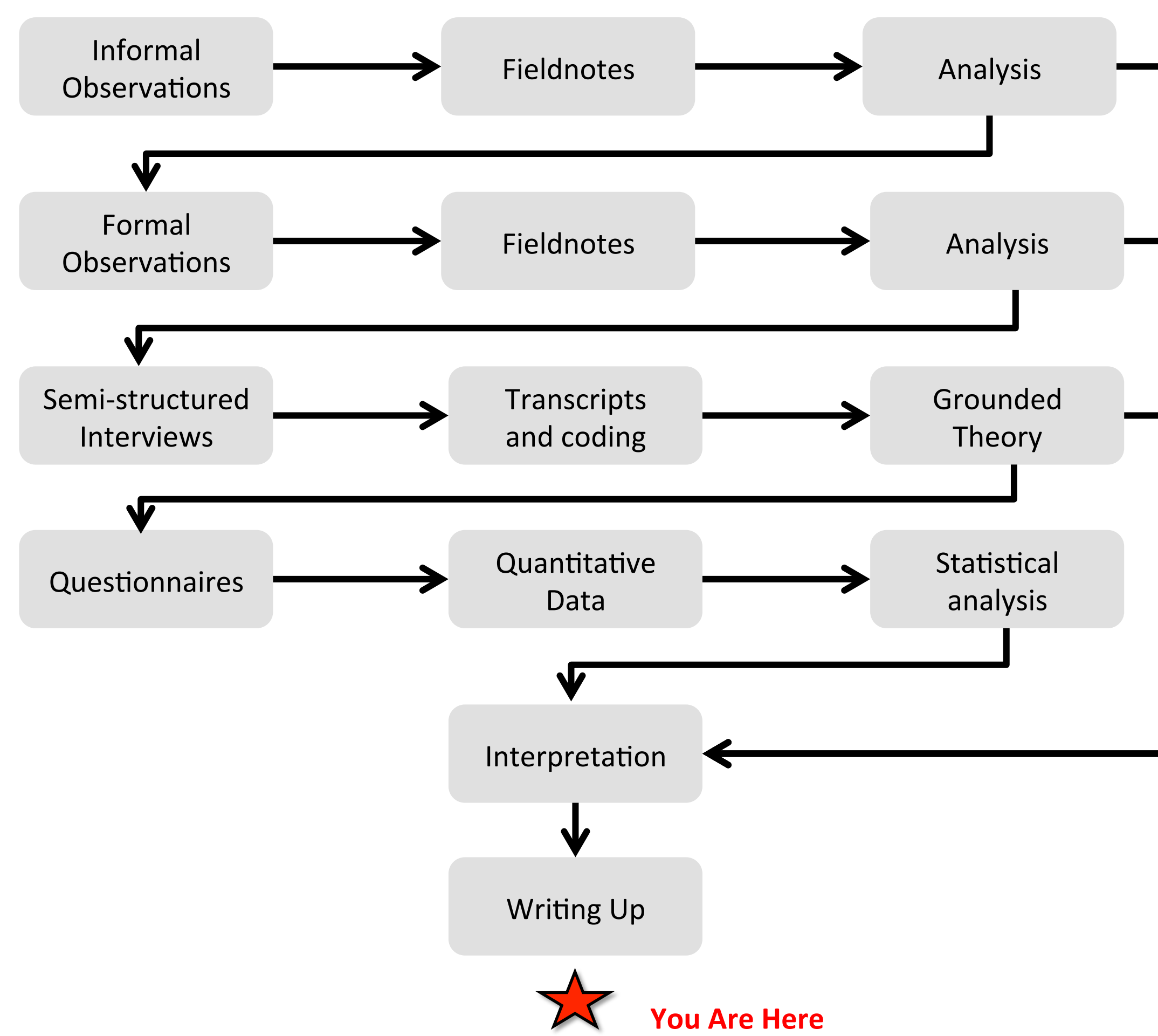
Our project seeks to understand what makes some groups successful, in particular what processes lead to success. We conducted an ethnographic study to answer this question, observing group work across campus and beyond and interviewing students about their experiences and views of group work.

Previous research has focused on group work in the class instead of projects that take students outside of the classroom. Furthermore, they focus on learning outcomes instead of group processes, comparing the outcomes of individual and group learning. Our research examines the process of doing group work in natural settings from the students' perspective.

Methodology

We conducted an ethnographic study using a combination of qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis methods. We observed group work outside the classroom and interviewed students about their points of view (POV1). Most research on group work is conducted from the perspectives of instructors, administrators, and researchers (POV2), but it is important to also get the views of those who actually engage in the work of social learning.

We used an iterative-inductive approach moving back and forth between data collection and analysis (Agar 2006). We began with broad questions and then narrowed down our focus using a funnel approach, constantly collecting and analyzing data changing our focus as we learned more about how our informants did and viewed group work.

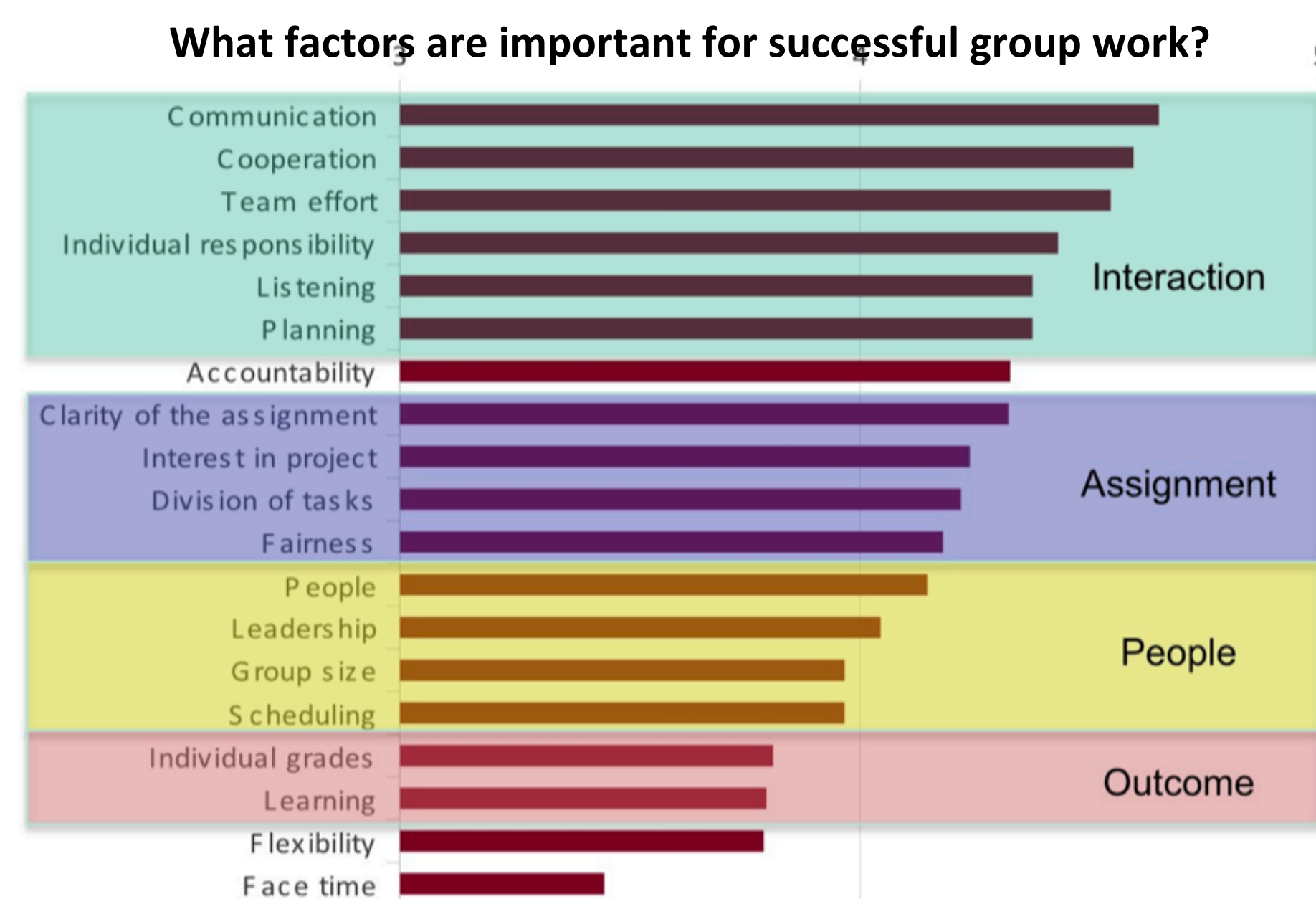


Sample

Over the course of the study we observed more than 150 students engaged in group work across campus and interviewed 250 students. Our non-random sample consists of students from a range of major from Accounting to Zoology. The respondents of our questionnaires were 59% female and 68% white, and represented both undergraduate (70%) and graduate (30%) students (N=206). The majority of the students were native English speakers (83%), with a median age of 22. The participants lived on campus (33%), near campus (41%), and commuted to campus (26%).

What makes groups successful?

Communication was found to be critical for successful group work. More than 92% of students cited communication as 'important' or 'very important' for successful group work. Being communicative was considered an 'important' or 'very important' trait of group members by 86% of students. Participants were also asked to rank the importance of specific factors in regards to their contribution to successful group work. Over 71% of students ranked communication as first (n=94) or second (n=53). In the words of one student: "Communication ... can make or break a group's success."



Interaction. When everyone "cooperates and communicates," "works hard," and "does their share" group work is worth the time and effort.

Assignment. The assignment needs to "relate to course material", "require group effort" to complete an "interesting and challenging task", and be "planned" with "clear learning goals."

People. A group is successful when, "all members are excited to do the assignment, want to learn, do their fair share of the work, and communicate well with the rest of the group."

Outcome. "Getting a good grade," "producing good work," "creating a novel product," and seeing the "final product come together" are important for measuring successful group work.

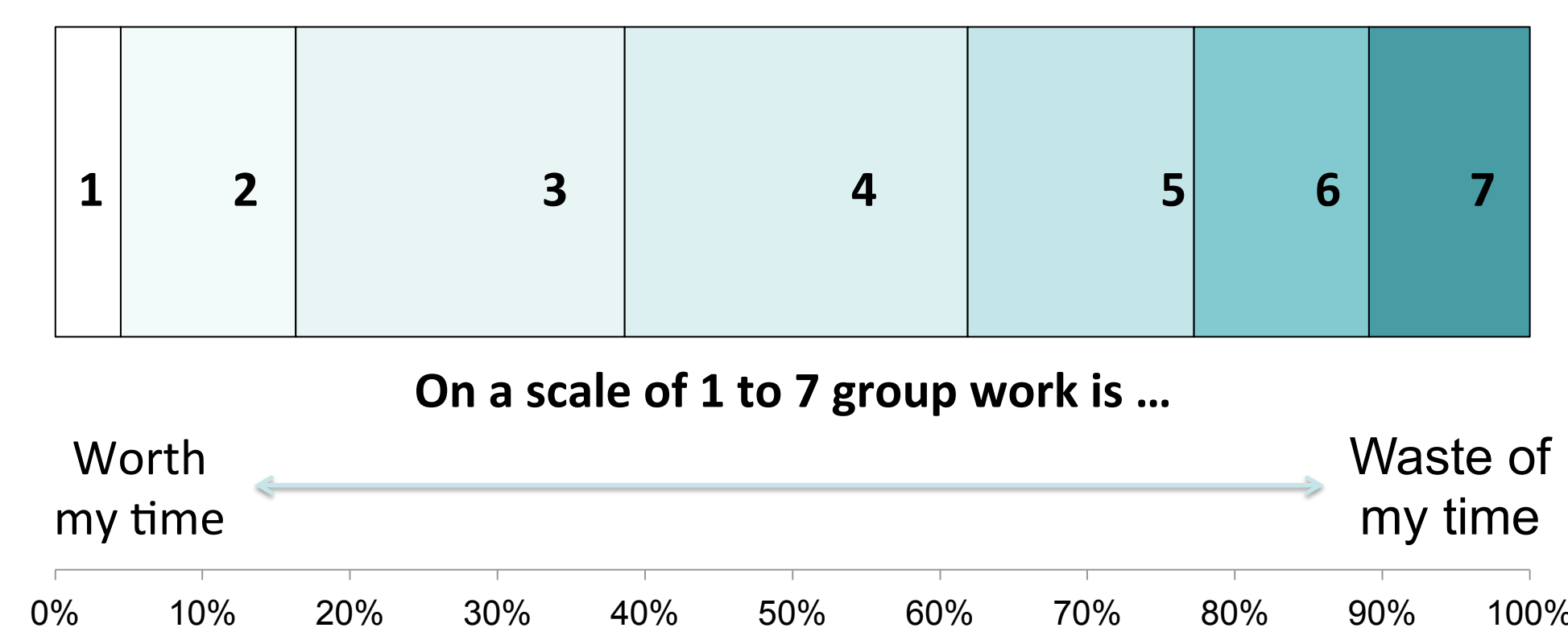
How do groups communicate?

Two methods of communication dominated: face-to-face (91.2%) and email (94.6%). Text messaging and telephones were also commonly used. Students did not report what each method of communication was used for, however. For example, electronic forms of communication such as email could be for sharing information or for scheduling a face-to-face meeting. Just over 10% of students reported using other means of communication, including Google Docs (6%) and Carmen (3%).

Where do students do group work?

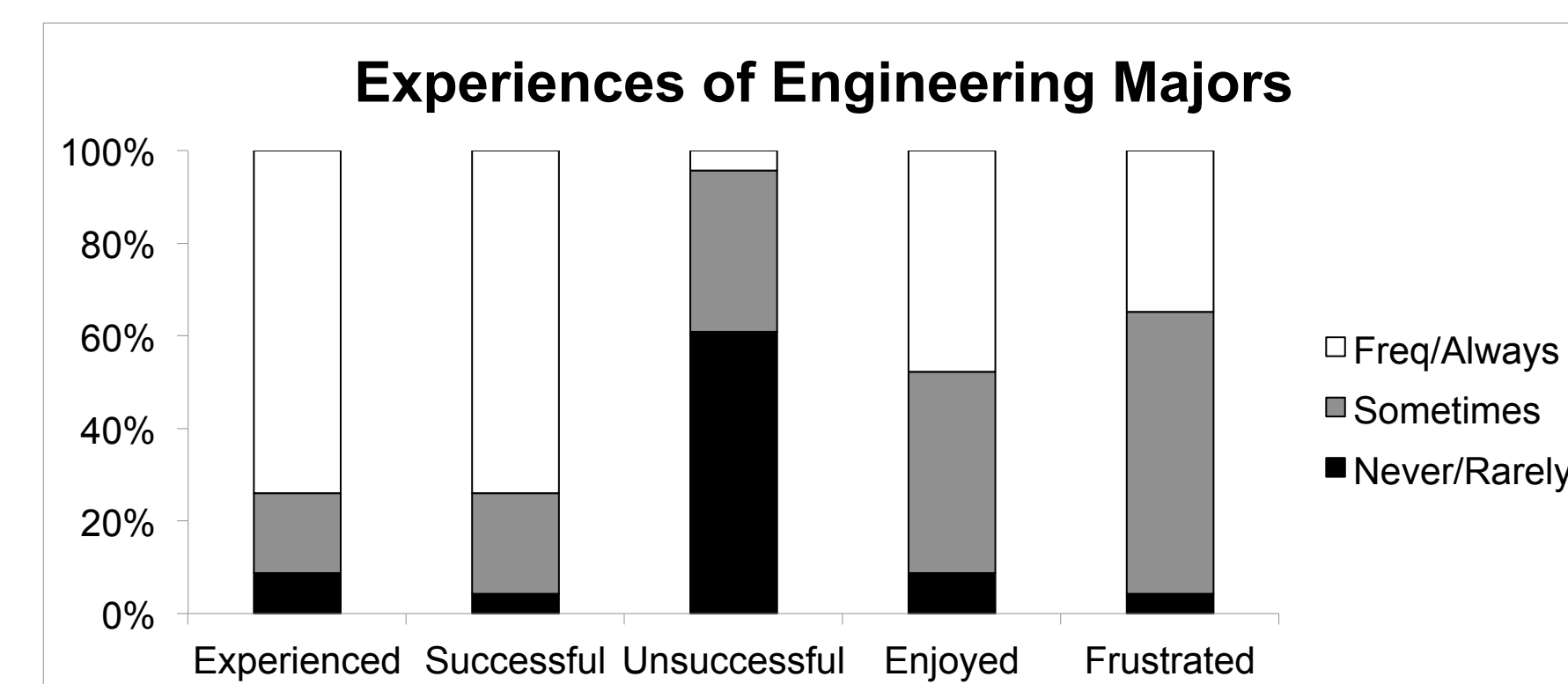
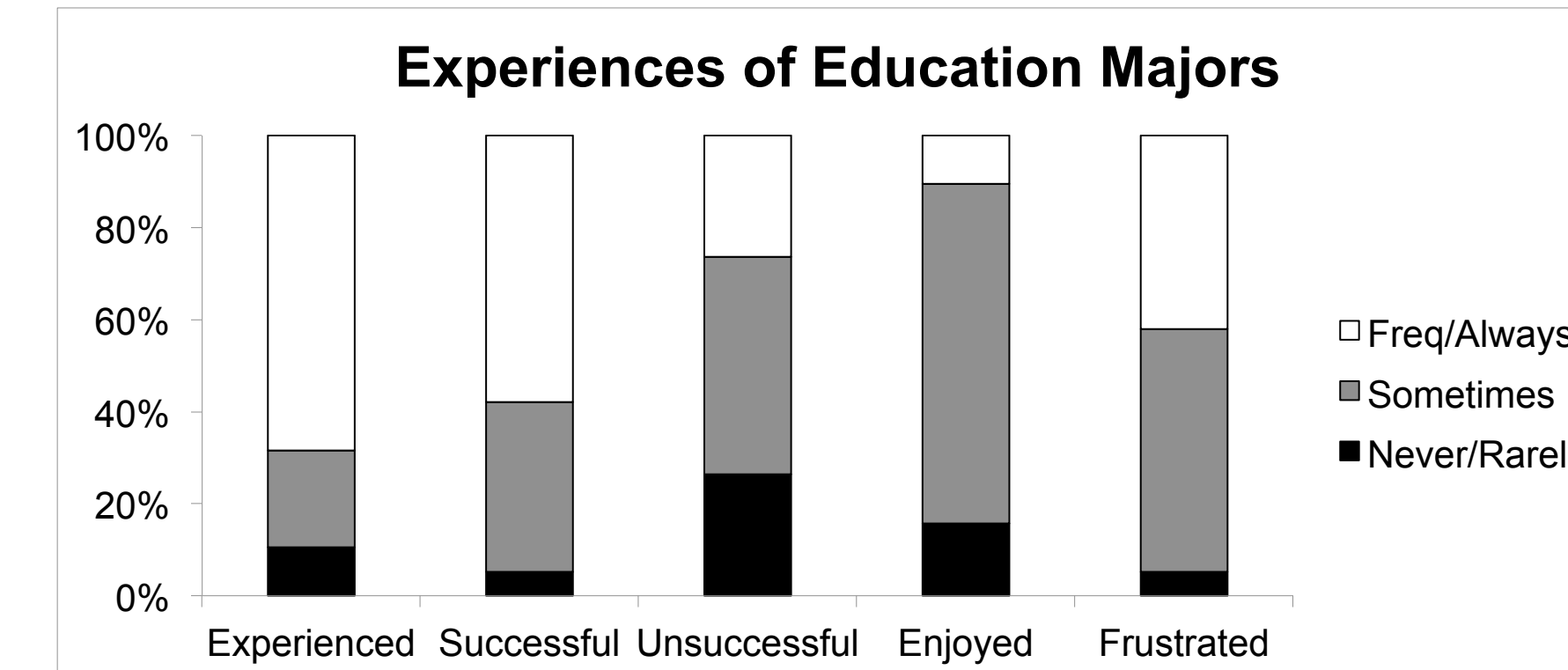
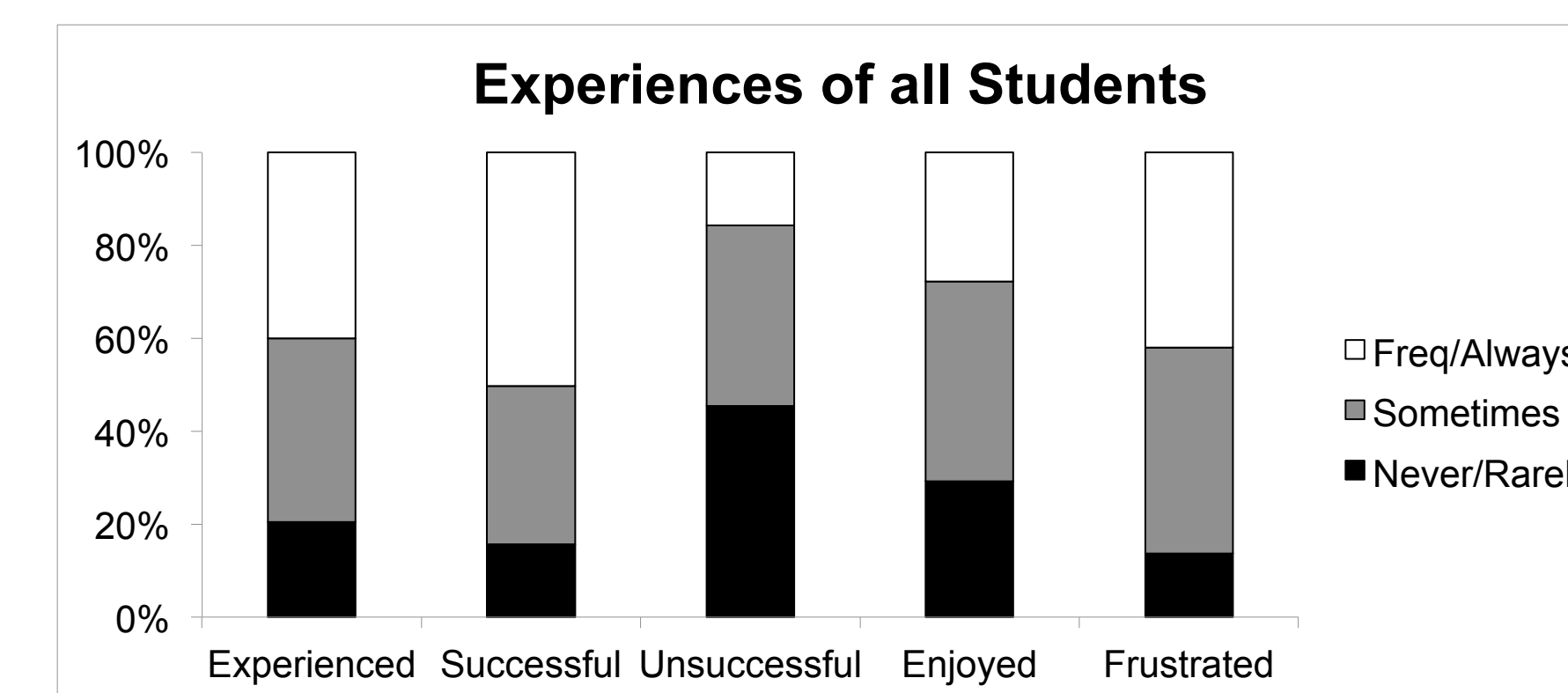
Locations used for group work	Percentage of students (N=206)
Library	90%
Coffee shops and restaurants	47%
Other locations on campus	44%
Dorms	39%
Off campus	13%

Do students think group work is useful?



How does experience impact group work?

Students in our sample were relatively experienced with group work: 79% of respondents did group work outside of class at least sometimes. Over 50% of student participants reported having frequently or always been involved in successful group work (n=103), while 34% report only experiencing successful group work some of the time. Corroborating this, 45% of students report having rarely or never experienced unsuccessful group work. The opposite group, those students seldom, rarely or never in successful groups, and frequently or always in unsuccessful groups, is much smaller. Interestingly, though, only 51% of respondents said they like group work. A significant portion (42%) of the sample considered group work frustrating frequently or always, while only 14% of respondents found themselves rarely or never frustrated. In summary, then, students who are experienced in group work, often consider group work successful as well as frustrating, and are divided about whether or not they like it overall.



Group work across majors: Engineering & Education

Examination of Engineering (n=23) and Education (n=19) student questionnaires showed some interesting trends in comparison to the entire sample. Other majors were not examined due to sample size. Education and Engineering were equally likely to report frequent experiences with successful group work (T-test, p=0.250), more so than the larger sample of students. Interestingly, Engineering students reported significantly fewer experiences of unsuccessful group work (T-test, p=0.008) and more enjoyable group work experiences (T-test, p=0.019) when compared to education students and the larger sample of students.

Do students learn from group work?

The majority of the students believes that group work has helped them learn course content (67%). Asked when group work is worth the time and effort, students reported when "all members learn and succeed," "you learn the course material," or "I enjoy what I'm learning." However, another student noted that, "A good grade doesn't mean you learned anything."

Theoretical implications

The findings of our ethnographic study validate findings of previous research on collaborative learning. Most importantly, our data indicate that students view communication and teamwork as important factors for successful group work (see also Otten & Chen 2011; Syh-Jong 2007).

Further, our research suggests that much of students' discussion/preparation for collaborative assignments is conducted via email and other digital media sources, an unsurprising discovery given Lee & Tsai's (2011) study, which found that students preferred collaborative learning that occurred in Internet-based, rather than traditional 'face to face' courses.

Previous research by Hillyard et al. (2010) found that faculty and student perceptions of group work differ. Our study indicates that students do not think that learning is essential for successful group work. Although we did not investigate faculty perceptions of group work here, we think they perceive learning as an important component of successful group work; future research could compare faculty and students' views on group learning.

Practical implications

For Students:

- Discuss communication, e.g., exchange contact information including email addresses and phone numbers and communication rules.
- Discuss the division of work and set clear timelines and individual responsibilities.
- Make sure you understand the assignment and ask for clarification from the instructor if necessary.

For Instructors:

- Emphasize the importance of communication for successful group work in terms of process and outcomes.
- Explain how group work helps students learn the material for the course.
- Provide clear instructions and give students multiple opportunities to ask questions about the project.
- Give suggestions for the division of labor on projects that ensures fairness and allows for different strengths and weaknesses of group members.
- Offer time and space in class for students to collaborate and commhttps://anthropology-81021-sp11.wdfiles.com/local--files/structured/IMG_0259.JPG?ukey=b7d04dfe51bd057be1fc17b89895f47b7bb82afaunicate throughout the quarter.



References

- Agar, M. 2006. An Ethnography By Any Other Name ... Forum: Qualitative Social Research (online journal), 7(4), Art 36.
- Blumenfeld, P. et al. 1996. Learning with Peers: From Small Group Cooperation to Collaborative Communities. Educational Researcher 25(8):37-40.
- Burkill, S. 1997. Student Empowerment through Group Work: A Case Study. Journal of Geography in Higher Education, 21(1):89-94.
- Hillyard, C. et al. 2010. University Students' attitudes about learning in Small Groups after Frequent Participation. Active Learning in Higher Education 11(1): 9-20.
- Lee, S. and C. Tsai. 2011. Students' perceptions of collaboration, self-regulated learning, and information seeking in the context of Internet-based learning and traditional learning. Computers in Human Behavior 27:905-914.
- Otten, R and T. Chen. 2011. Change, Chaos, Adaptation: The Effects of Leadership on a Work Group. Creative Nursing 17(1):30-35.
- Syh-Jong, J. 2007. A study of students' construction of science knowledge: Talk and writing in a collaborative group. Educational Research 49(1): 65-81.