CORE
Metadata, citation and similar papers at core.ac.uk
Provided by University of Richmond

University of Richmond
UR Scholarship Repository

Rhetoric and Communication Studies Faculty Publications

Rhetoric and Communication Studies

1992

Groupthink and the Classroom: Changing Familiar Patterns to Encourage Critical Thought

Scott D. Johnson
Universtiy of Richmond, sjohnson@richmond.edu

Richard L. Weaver II

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarship.richmond.edu/rhetoric-faculty-publications

Part of the Curriculum and Instruction Commons, and the Educational Methods Commons

Recommended Citation
Johnson, Scott D., and Richard L. Weaver, II. "Groupthink and the Classroom: Changing Familiar Patterns to Encourage Critical Thought." *Journal of Instructional Psychology* 19, no. 2 (1992): 99-106.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Rhetoric and Communication Studies at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Rhetoric and Communication Studies Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu.

Authors:
Johnson, Scott D.
Weaver II, Richard L.

GROUPTHINK AND THE CLASSROOM: CHANGING FAMILIAR PATTERNS TO ENCOURAGE CRITICAL THOUGHT

Groupthink is an unhealthy decision-making pattern characterized by a high degree of cohesiveness and a striving for consensus among the members of a decision-making group. This article considers the classroom as a potential contributor to the groupthink phenomenon, comparing the antecedent conditions for group think with typical classroom conditions and expectations. With a plausible, though unproven, link between the classroom and group think decision making, four suggestions are offered teachers for encouraging independent thought and action in students. The four suggestions include adding critical-thinking skills, decision-making skills, small group communication skills, and conflict management skills to the curriculum. These additions are possible and valuable at every educational level.

Since Irving Janis coined the term "group think" in his book, Victims of Group think (1972), it seems that our national decision-makers have been determined to prove the concept true in times of crisis. Recent media allegations regarding the Bush administration's handling of the war with Iraq have once again brought group think to the forefront. Whetheror not group think was part of the Bush administration's decision making is yet to be determined. It is worrisome, however, that the concept is again associated with decisions of worldwide significance.

The frequency with which decisions have been made that appear to fit the group think designation gives cause to wonder the source of such behavior. Why do decision makers seem to fall victim to this type of thinking when so much is at stake? How often does this kind of decision making occur at the corporate level or within religious organizations? Most importantly, where does such behavior originate? While not attempting to answer questions of such magnitude, this article suggests that we consider our educational system a potential contributing factor to a tendency toward group think behavior. The authors will do so by briefly presenting the group think theory, then comparing the antecedent conditions related to the theory to classroom processes. The conclusion offers four practical suggestions for educators to implement in the classroom with hopes of decreasing the tendency toward group think in the practices of future decision makers.

What Is Groupthink?

Janis (1972) defines group think as follows:

I use the term "group think" as a quick and easy way to refer to a mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group, when the members strivings for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action...Groupthink refers to a deterioration of mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgment that results from in-group pressures (p. 9).

The key concepts in Janis' definition are cohesiveness, in-group, unanimity, deterioration, and pressures (PosnerWeber, 1987). Examine the definition carefully. Deep involvement, strivings for cohesion that override realistic thought, and pressures that result in the deterioration of moral judgment are not elements that can be quickly waived away. Janis is suggesting that membership in a group think-type group overrides even individual values; that people act in a manner they might not typically act or agree with things they might normally find disagreeable. While some research has been conducted that supports Janis' theory (see Callaway & Esser, 1984; Courtwright,1978; Flowers, 1977; Moorhead, 1982) and anecdotal evidence from a number of national crises would also indicate its occurrence, it is not known why some groups generate this behavior and others do not.

Groupthink is a mode of operation that produces a diminished decision making capacity. Groups affected by group think make decisions without considering alternatives to initial suggestions. They may ignore information that says initial ideas are poor ones, examining only information that extolls the value of the group's chosen plan. The group strives to gain and maintain a high level of cohesion mostly through a momentum toward consensus. Group think can produce good decisions if the initial suggestions of the leader or group happen to be effective ones. The likelihood is greater, however, that the lack of exploring suitable alternatives, combined with a selective bias in reaction to factual information, will produce lesser, or even dangerous, decisions.

Janis and Mann (1977) have outlined eight symptoms of the occurrence of group think:

1. an illusion of invulnerability;
2. collective efforts to rationalize;
3. an unquestioned belief in the group's inherent morality;
4. stereotyped views of rivals and enemies;
5. direct pressure on a member who expresses arguments against any of the group's stereotypes, illusions, or commitments;
6. self-censorship of deviations from apparent group consensus;
7. a shared illusion of unanimity;
8. the emergence of self-appointed "mindguards" (p.131).

A group exhibiting these symptoms is likely to be functioning in a group think mode as it makes decisions. While these symptoms are helpful as we examine groups for group think, they typically gain their greatest use in analyzing groups after decisions have been made and fiascos have occurred. In most cases it isn't possible to observe groups making decisions during crisis to see if these symptoms are apparent. Thus, a frustration with studying group think is a lack of research on groups in true crisis as they make decisions.

In addition to the symptoms presented above, certain antecedent conditions have been identified that relate closely to the formation of a group think group. These conditions are are not said to cause group think-only to allow its occurrence. Callaway and Esser (1984) concisely paraphrase Janis and Mann's (1977) five antecedent conditions: "(1) a high level of group cohesiveness; (2) insulation of the group members from opinions or information from outside of the group; (3) an inefficient procedure for gathering and interpreting information;

(4) leadership that is both directive and influential; and (5) a high degree of stress and a tendency to avoid challenging the first acceptable alternative suggested by (the leader or) an influential member" (p. 157). These conditions are thought to provide an environment that fosters group think decision making.

Group think and the Classroom

As post-secondary teachers, it is in no way the authors' intent to belittle the work of educators or the significance of our nation's system of education. Rather, what follows are some suggestions that support the current push for teaching critical-thinking skills along with several other ideas that educators might find useful in encouraging the independent development of young thinkers. To attack an entire system is extremism; to believe that our system is above improvement is similarly extreme. When a condition as significant as group think consistently recurs in adult decision making, it seems of value to question the roots of that behavior. If it is possible that some of our educational endeavors encourage or teach group think, and those endeavors are easily adjusted, we would be remiss in not considering those adjustments. The comparison of the classroom and group think is made with that mind set.

The idea for this article came while one author was teaching an undergraduate course in Small Group Communication. In the midst of leading a lecture and discussion on the topic of group think, the following exchange occurred:

Teacher: "...that results from in group pressures."'

Student: "Excuse me. Could you repeat that definition? You spoke too quickly and I didn't get it all down."

In repeating the definition, it was difficult not to feel somehow uncomfortable. It is similar to a short Doonesbury comic strip by Garry Trudeau that depicts a teacher instructing his students to be certain that their papers on independent thought are turned in on time and the students responding "Baa.- "Baa, sir." Trudeau's sense of irony holds true as one lectures on the topic of group think and students write down every word with little analysis or thought.

The antecedent conditions for group think that Janis and Mann list are commonplace conditions in the classroom. Most are seen as desirable, helpful elements of a successful class. A brief discussion of each condition as it relates to the classroom follows.

First, a high level of cohesiveness is not present in every classroom, but it is certainly a goal of many teachers. As semesters and years progress, students and teachers grow together through shared experience and the development of unique norms, language, and expectations. The sense of sadness that is often felt as classes end (tempered, of

course, by a sense of elation!) is indicative of a cohesive group. Certainly, cohesion is both a valuable and worthwhile pursuit for educators. It is also something that students and teachers find pleasant and stimulating. The most enjoyable courses are often those in which a sense of comfort and acceptance have been shared by teacher and students.

Second, while the insulation of class members is not as complete as it is with groups making national-defense decisions, the classroom bears some similarity. It seems there is a general un willingness on the part of most students to question what has been presented in class. Additionally, students rarely enter into lengthy conversations regarding course material with other students or teachers outside the classroom context. When such conversations do take Dlace, it seems more common to hear a recitation of things heard in class rather than a disparaging or challenging of class statements or positions. Though empirical support is lacking for claiming that students do not discuss course material in significant measure, anecdotal evidence provides enough support to encourage thought. Do students often state to one teacher their lack of comfort with material taught by another? Do students go to the library or other resources to verify the accuracy and veracity of course material?

In mass lecture situations, it is our experience that students only want to capture as much as possible in their notes. These notes are seldom seen again until it is time to study for examinations. When the studying is complete and the examination is over, the material is promptly forgotten and often disposed of. Telling students to write a note to themselves (e.g., "Bring a number two pencil to lecture next time.") is a wasted activity unless the note is placed somewhere where it is likely to be seen in the interim. Lecture notes are not that place. From our experience, lectures tend to be autocratic, one-way communication situations where the authority of the lecturer is seldom questioned.

The third antecedent condition for group think, an inefficient procedure for gathering and interpreting information, relates to a common classroom problem. With just a few weeks available to cover vast topics, teachers are forced to pick and choose the material that students will see. There is rarely time for teachers to present contradictory or opposing material (if that was desired), or to challenge students to approach ideas from a variety of perspectives. Methods of evaluation (typically papers and examinations) generally measure how well a student can retain and re-present the given material. The rare student who makes an attempt to challenge conventions is rewarded by some teachers and punished by others. Techniques for conveying information to students often involve lengthy lectures with no time for discussion or evaluation. Again, students simply write things down in their notes, often paying little attention to what they are writing.

Fourth, and most obviously, there is a leader that is both directive and influential. From their earliest days in school, children are taught to believe and obey their teachers. Teachers are often the second or third most powerful people in childrens' lives. To young children, teachers are seemingly omniscient and omnipotent. Six or more hours per day, all rewards and sanctions are controlled by teachers. Teachers know things that even parents don't know, and remain in full control of what children are to do and ream. They command all five of French and Raven's (1959) teases of power;they control rewards and sanctions, they serve in the societal role of teacher, they often become referents after whom children model behavior, and they function as experts regarding the material they present.

By the time students reach college, they are well trained to believe that their professors are final authorities on the subjects presented. Tenure systems make them somehow untouchable, and the title "doctor" is intimidating. In the classrooms, the teachers decide whether their students' work is satisfactory or unsatisfactory, their answers right or wrong, and their contributions valuable or worthless. They alone decide to pass or fail students based on requirements that they have established as reasonable. In some cases the very future of students rests in the hands of the teachers of required courses. Students learn to appease their teachers and to tell them what they want to hear in class and on examinations. Few students are willing to risk challenging them to any significant degree.

Finally, classrooms and group think groups both operate under a high degree of stress and with a tendency to avoid challenging the first acceptable alternative suggested. As just discussed, few students are willing to challenge the material presented by their teachers. Students may have memories of challenging teachers when they were young and being shown to be wrong in front of their classmates. There is strong pressure to achieve in classes levied by peers, parents, and teachers. Students who do not succeed and leave school are said to be wasting their lives. Tests, assignments, and the need for approval create high levels of stress.

Students are trained to accept as natural and typical the antecedent conditions of group think. They are found daily from age six through the college years. Those conditions that empower cohesion, a sense of being in an in group, unanimity of practice and belief, deterioration of individuality and creativity, and that apply pressure to achieve according to set standards are commonplace for students. While many teachers and schools have attempted to implement programs in critical thinking, or to allow students to explore alternatives to "correct ideas," most of us, as educators, must admit to times of giving information and evaluation in much the same fashion as it was given to us.

If it is true that the antecedent conditions for group think are accepted by students as commonplace, is it not likely that, as those are the conditions to which they are accustomed and with which they feel most comfortable, they will return to them under times of great pressure? The group think mode of decision making may follow quite naturally for adults who have grown up with years of comfort experiencing those conditions that allow, even foster, such behavior.

Changing the Conditions

With the obvious similarities between the tenets of group think and classroom teaching, it seems plausible that some styles of education may contribute to group think decision making simply by conditioning. Without significant research, there is no way of knowing if there is a true link between group think and the classroom. With even tentative conclusions years away, it seems worthwhile to consider making appropriate adjustments based on the similarities between an unhealthy form of decision making and the style we use to teach. There is truly an element of paradox in attempting to stimulate reaming by presenting ideas and concepts as unchallengable, by establishing the teacher as an ultimate authority, and by rewarding conformity while punishing creativity and variation. The effects of such a paradox can be diminished with the application of some communication strategies and course work.

There are a number of things that teachers can do to facilitate student learning while avoiding a group think teaching style. Four suggestions are presented here, but the reader is encouraged to seek out others (see Eisner, 1983; Weaver & Cotrell, 1985; Weaver 8 Cotrell, 1986; and Wolkomir, 1986). By expanding teaching methods and philosophies, teachers stay fresh. They find connections to new things and fields, and they are less tempted to slip into patterns that are easy and that allow more time for research and writing and less for teaching.

First, critical-thinking skills should become part of the curriculum at every level. The recent push for teaching critical thinking is a sound one (see Herrick, 1991; Young, 1980). Helping a student learn to think critically is similar to the cliche "Give me a fish and I eat for a day. Teach me to fish and I eat for a lifetime." If we simply present students material without giving them the skills with which to analyze it, we do them a disservice. They need to learn to make connections and challenge reasoning in order to take their education and put it to use. They need to learn to think creatively and constructively as they approach the growing world problems that a lack of foresight has created.

Argumentation and debate theory is particularly appropriate for teaching such skills. Makau (1990) encourages the teaching of argumentation as protection against the occurrence of group think. "Unlike groups that engage in Group think, groups trained to employ cooperative argumentation are able to form constructive forms of cohesion...They understand that good group decision making requires questioning assumptions, inferences, and information" (p 53). Argumentation is material that belongs at every level of education. Children can be taught early how to debate and present constructive arguments. They can be taught throughout their classroom years to support their ideas and to examine the ideas of others more carefully. Education will become more than memorization and recitation for students who have learned how to think, question, and analyze.

The second suggestion involves skills related to critical thinking: decision making and problem-solving skills. It seems that students are expected to learn how to make decisions by simple trial and error. They are expected to leave high school capable of making life decisions such as choosing whether to continue their education or to begin work or military service. As they leave college they are supposed to be ready for decisions such as what type of organization to work for and what kind of job to pursue. Somewhere in between, they are expected to learn to make decisions about the future that involve lifelong commitments like marriage and family. Despite all of this, students get little if any direct training in decision making or in the solving of complex problems.

Teachers of any subject can incorporate decision-making training into their curriculum. Teachers can show students how to choose a topic for a paper or they may demonstrate the results of applying a variety of approaches to solve a single question or problem. Step-by-step methods like Gelatt's (1962) career decision-making model can be adapted and taught directly to students through conventional teaching methods or by using scenarios or games. Teachers can also bring their own decision making into the classroom. A teacher that recently purchased a car might informally discuss how the final decision was reached. A teacher struggling with a difficult problem might share how a resolution to that problem is achieved. There is no need for perfection or to show only right methods. Making mistakes and suffering consequences are a familiar part of decision making There are numerous sources to which a teacher might turn for ideas to bring decision making to the classroom (see Baron, 1988; Kim, 1990; Mechanic, 1988; Stice, 1987). Doing so gives students valuable help as they face the choices of the future.

Third, small group communication skills can be made a part of elementary and secondary school curriculum and receive greater emphasis at the college level (see Bormann 8 Bormann, 1988; Fisher & Ellis, 1990). Toffler's (1970) prediction

that the world would become an "adhocracy"-a world nun by adhoc groups-seems to have been prophetic. There are groups in operation at virtually every level of society. Corporations function with boards of directors, city governments work through a group including the mayor and city councilors, and decisions to go to war are made by groups including presidents and generals. Today's students need to learn to function in small groups more than ever before in our history. They need to learn to differentiate between groups that work well and make sound decisions and groups that work poorly and make poor decisions, and they need to know how to effect positive change in the latter. Group think groups can be identified and methods for dealing with such thinking also can be taught. Leadership and "followership" skills are essential for students to be able to apply their knowledge in future decision making. Group activities, group communication theories, and leadership training could be incorporated into virtually any classroom at any level and on any topic.

The final suggestion for the classroom is the addition of conflict-management skills. Again, students of all ages can benefit from the acquisition of basic interpersonal-communication skills, especially those related to the management of conflict with others. Conflict is not a temporary aberration in a typically harmonious world (Hocker & Wilmot, 1985, p. 7; see also Folger & Poole, 1984). It is a normal part of our everyday lives. Skills for managing conflict productively can be useful in group decision making, in personal relationships, and in handling daily affairs. Conflict can become something useful and productive rather than remaining something to be feared and avoided at all costs.

Adjusting the emphasis given the teaching of critical thinking, decision making, small group communication, and conflict management skills can give students the tools they need to become more competent group members and decision makers later in life. They can learn to recognize and avoid the mistakes of the past and, quite possibly, create a safer world. Group think decision making presents hazards to individual, organizational, and national interests. Learning these basic skills may help reduce or eliminate its effect on future decisions.

References

Baron, J. (1988).Thinking and deciding. New York: Cambridge University.

Bormann, E. G. & Bormann, N. (1988).Effective small group communication (4th ed.). Edina, MN: Burgess.

Callaway, M. R. & Esser, J. (1984). Group think: Effects of cohesiveness and problem-solving procedures on group decision making.Social Behavior and Personality, 12, 153-156.

Courtwright, J. (1978). A laboratory investigation of group think. Communication Monographs ,45, 229-246.

Eisner, E. (1983). The art and craft of teaching. Educational Leadership, 40 (4), 4-13.

Fisher, B. A. & Ellis, D. (1990).Small group decision making: Communication and the group process (3rd ed.). New York: McGraw Hill.

Flowers, M. L. (1977). A laboratory test of some implications of Janis' group think hypothesis. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 35, 888-896.

Folger, J., & Poole, M. S. (1984). Working through conflict: A communication perspective. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman.

French, J. R. P. & Raven, B. H. (1959). The bases of power. In Cartwright, D. (Ed.),Studies in social power (pp. 159-1 67). Ann Arbor, Ml: University of Michigan Institute for Social Research.

Gelatt, H. 8. (1962). Information and decision theories applied to college choice and planning. In Preparing school counselors in education guidance (pp. 101-1 14). New York: College Entrance Examination Board.

Herrick, J. A. (1991).Critical thinking: The analysis of arguments. Scottsdale, AZ: Gorsuch Scarisbrick.

Hocker, J. L. & Wilmot, W. W. (1985). Interpersonal conflict (2nd ed.). Dubuque, IA: Wm. C. Brown.

Janis, i. L. (1972).Victimsol group think. Boston: Houghton Mifflin. Janis, I. L. & Mann, L. (1977). Decision Making: A psychological analysis of conflict, choice, and commitment. New York: The Free Press.

Kim, S. (1990).Essence of creativity: A guide to tackling difficult problems . New York: Oxford University.

Makau, J. M. (1990).Reasoning and communication: Thinking critically about arguments. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Mechanic, J. J. (1988). The logic of decision making: An introduction to critical thinking. New York: Peter Lang.

Moorhead, G. (1982). Group think: Hypothesis in need of testing. Group & Organization Studies ,7, 429-444.

Posner-Weber, C. (1987). Update on groupthink.Small Group Behavior,18,118-125.

Stice, J. (Ed.) (1987). Developing critical thinking and problem solving abilities. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass

Toffler, A. (1970). Future shock. New York: Bantam.

Weaver, R. L. & Cotrell, H. W. (1985). Mental aerobics: The half-sheet response. Innovative Higher Education,10, 23-31.

Weaver, R. L. 8 Cotrell, H. W. (1986). Using interactive images in the lecture hall. Educational Horizons, 64 (4),180-185.

Wolkomir, R. (1986). "Old Jearl" will do anything to stir an interest in physics. Smithsonian, 1 7 (7), 112-120.

Young, R. E. (Ed.) (1980).Fostering critical thinking. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

~~~~~~~~

Scott D. Johnson and Richard L. Weaver II Bowling Green State University

---

Copyright of Journal of Instructional Psychology is the property of Educational Innovations and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.
~~~~~~~~