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We Shall Not be Moved: Adult Learners' Intransigent Attitudes about Group Projects

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Abstract: This study explored the effectiveness of a structured group project planning process on perceptions of accountability, communication, satisfaction, and attitudes about group projects with adult learners (N = 66). Results indicated the structured planning process had little impact on adult learners' attitudes about group projects and highlighted the power of prior group experiences in impacting future attitudes about group projects.

Introduction

The benefits of cooperative learning as well as the challenges involved with group work are well documented (Gottschall & Garcia-Bayonas, 2008; Morgan, 2003; Roberts & McInnerney, 2007).). However, the vast majority of research examining student attitudes about group work has focused on traditional-aged undergraduate students. For example, Pfaff and Huddleston (2003) found that undergraduates' attitudes about group projects were best predicted by the grade received on the project, perception of workload, in-class time devoted to teamwork, use of peer evaluations, and perceived absence of free riders within the team. Unfortunately, few studies have examined adult students' perceptions of graded group projects, even though group projects are frequently utilized in graduate and undergraduate programs that serve adult students. Consequently, advice, opinions, and recommendations about using group projects with adult learners rarely includes empirical evidence, seldom considers adult students' attitudes toward group projects, and almost never examines whether adult students believe group projects actually enhance learning.

In one of few studies examining teams in accelerated degree programs for adult learners, (Favor, 2012) found that 48 - 60% of adult graduate and undergraduate students enrolled in associates, bachelors, and master's business programs disagreed with the statement *If given the choice, I would prefer to work as part of a team rather than work alone*, and less than half agreed that they *learn more with my learning team than I would learn on my own*. Further, online students were much more likely than on-campus students to dislike teamwork, in general, and report that being in teams did not increase their learning (Favor & Kulp, 2015). These authors noted the need for well-designed group projects and instructional strategies that purposefully increase group member accountability and timely intra-team communication, particularly in online courses where communication delays can impact task completion and quality. All too often, adult educators assign group projects with minimal direction and limited accountability processes (less structured) and assume adult students are self-directed, highly motivated, and capable of working and learning together effectively. Unfortunately, this is not always true.

Knowledge gleaned in the aforementioned study was used to develop the structured group project process and project-planning document (PPD) used in this study. This new process was designed to eliminate some of the accountability and communication issues that irritate adult learners and ultimately improve the overall group project experience. The new

process was tested informally by the first author as part of the normal group project evaluation process in two online adult education graduate courses (N = 37) over two semesters in 2015. Pre-course data showed that 57% of adult students entered the course with a strong preference to complete assignments alone. Post course data revealed 30 students (81%) believed the prescribed PPD was helpful for the group project. Additionally, 19 students (54%) believed the group project went better than they expected, 13 (37%) believed it went the same as expected, and 3 (9%) reported the group project went worse than expected. Student comments included "very functional group…think we were successful because of the planning document" and "…this is the best project we have ever done…the project plan helped us get organized from the beginning. We were able to understand what each others' expectations were and how much work we are expected to get done for each week." These pre and post project data and student comments suggested the proposed group project planning process and PPD might improve accountability, communication, satisfaction, and future attitudes about group projects.

The purpose of this study was to further examine the effectiveness of this structured group project planning process and PPD with a broader sample of adult students enrolled in online courses. The primary research question was "Can a structured group project planning process improve accountability, communication, satisfaction, and attitudes about group projects?" Secondary questions included "How do adult students feel about group projects at the beginning of an online course?" and "How do adult students feel about group projects at the end of an online course?"

The input-process-output (IPO) model of group effectiveness (Steiner, 1972) provided a conceptual framework for this study. According to this model, various individual student inputs each member brings to the group like skills and abilities, motivation, communication style, and attitudes affect the group interaction process and ultimately, group task and social outcomes. In an ideal situation, these individual inputs are complementary and lead to effective group processes, performance, and satisfaction (output). Unfortunately, sometimes individual inputs students bring to their groups like attitude, work ethic, and communication style disrupt group processes and cause conflict or other process losses, which in turn, may result in decreased satisfaction, learning, and potentially even worse attitudes about future group projects.

Methods

An experimental static-group comparison research design was employed, using pre- and post-course electronic surveys to evaluate whether exposure to structured project group planning processes would affect students' attitudes about group projects. Instructor and student participation was voluntary and the Institutional Review Boards of both PI's approved the study.

Instructors who used group projects in accelerated online courses at a small, private Midwestern university in the 2015-16 academic school year were asked to encourage students to complete a pre-class electronic survey during the first week of class, and a post-project electronic survey at the conclusion of the project. Some instructors were given a specific instructional strategy such as a PPD and/or encouraged students to construct a team charter in their course (experimental group), and some were not (control group). Ten instructors participated in the study and administered the survey to 12 different classes of adult learners enrolled in an MBA program. Over 150 students volunteered to take part in the study, but the sample was narrowed to 66 students who completed at least one group project in their class and completed both the pre-class and post-class survey.

The pre-class survey inquired about students' age, sex, preference for working in teams,

and whether prior experiences working on group projects had been mostly positive or negative. The post-project survey asked the same team preference-related questions, but also inquired about the kinds of group projects completed in the class, group size, methods and frequency of communication (email, chat, video conferencing, texts, phone calls), and whether the group used a team charter or the proposed group Project Planning Document (PPD).

Results

Means tests compared students' overall attitudes about teamwork in class, and whether the PPD affected attitudes toward group learning. In the former analysis, an independent t-test compared pre-class and post-project survey results. In the latter, comparisons were drawn between three categories: students who took the pre-class survey (N=66), students who were not exposed to the PPD (N=35), and students who were exposed to the PPD (N=30). Because of the comparison of three categories, a one-way ANOVA was used to compare means, and Tukey's post-hoc test evaluated statistical significance at the .05 significance level. Multivariate (OLS) regression analysis was utilized to reveal whether the PPD, the team charter, or any communication methods would be correlated with improvements in perceived accountability, communication, satisfaction with group process, or improved perceptions of group projects.

Table 1. Means Comparisons of Student Attitudes toward Group Projects in Classes

	Pre-class Survey	Post-Project Survey
I generally enjoy working as part of a team. (N=65, 66)	3.55	3.71
Working as a member of a team increases my ability to perform effectively. (N=66, 64)	3.49	3.41
When given the choice, I prefer to work alone rather than as part of a team. (N=66, 66)	3.46	3.33
In classes, I enjoy working on group projects. (N=66, 66	3.08	3.33
I prefer to complete class assignments on my own rather than with a group. (N=66, 66)	3.70	3.56
Group projects allow me to learn more than I would learn working on my own. (N=66, 65)	3.42	2.99*

Note. *p ≤ .05

As shown in Table 1, students' attitudes between the pre-class and post class surveys reveals remarkable stability, suggesting that involvement in a group project - with or without a PPD - does not tend to alter feelings about group work. The only exception was the final item: "Group projects allow me to learn more than I would learn working on my own." After students were exposed to a group project, they felt that group projects were less likely to contribute to their learning than working on their own ($\bar{x} = 2.99$, SD = 1.10), (p = 0.02). However, using the PPD appeared to mitigate this precipitous loss in confidence regarding group project learning. A Tukey test revealed a clear and statistically significant difference in the means between pre-class survey attitudes toward group projects ($\bar{x} = 3.42$, SD = 1.02) and those who were not exposed to the PPD ($\bar{x} = 2.80$, SD = 1.10), (p = 0.02), verifying the significant divergence of means in table 1. However, the means difference between pre-class survey attitudes toward group and those

who were exposed to the PPD ($\bar{x}$ = 3.14, SD = 1.09) was not significant, implying that exposure to the PPD tended to prevent students' attitudes from growing worse.

Multivariate regression analysis showed that only one structured project group planning process had a measurably positive effect on student perceptions of teamwork. Students who utilized a team charter were more likely to believe that "everyone in my group completed tasks in a timely manner" (β = 1.92, p ≤ .05) and that "all group members encouraged participation from others" (β = 0.76, p ≤ .05). The PPD produced no statistically significant effects.

A more consistent finding was the relationship between students' feelings about past group projects compared to their feelings about working on their current group project. Students who had positive past experiences with group projects were more likely to "generally like working on a team" (β = 0.59, p ≤ .001) and "enjoy working on group projects" (β = 0.45, p ≤ .05). They were more likely to believe that group members in this project "worked well with others" (β = 0.36, p ≤ .05), "communicated in a timely and consistent manner" (β = 0.36, p ≤ .05), "completed tasks in a timely and consistent manner" (β = 0.40, p ≤ .05), "completed high quality work" (β = 0.46, p ≤ .05), did their "own fair share of the work" (β = 0.52, p ≤ .005), and "contributed to the project nearly equally" (β = 0.50, p ≤ .05). Past positive experiences were also correlated with the belief that group projects increase "my ability to work effectively" (β = 0.44, p ≤ .05) and "allow me to learn more than I would learn working on my own" (β = 0.55, p ≤ .001). Positive past experiences with group projects were also positively correlated with students' attitudes toward the project planning document (β = 0.44, p ≤ .05) and the group project (β = 0.56, p ≤ .001). Favorable past experiences with group projects were negatively correlated with a desire to "complete class assignments on my own" (β = -0.31, p ≤ .05), suggesting that those who had good experiences in groups are more open to subsequent group projects, and perhaps conversely, that those with bad experiences in past group projects prefer to work alone.

Students also employed different modes of communication depending upon their attitudes toward group work. Those who preferred to work alone were less likely to utilize chat sessions (β = -0.05, p ≤ .05) and videoconference meetings (β = -0.21, p ≤ .05) with teammates.

Discussion

The primary purpose of this exploratory study was to investigate whether a structured group project planning process and project planning document (PPD) could improve accountability, communication, satisfaction, and attitudes about group projects with adult learners. Results indicated that the PPD had no meaningful effect on any factor, but a team charter appeared to improve perceptions of participation and timely completion of tasks. The difference between students' perception of team charters and the PPD is not altogether clear, although there are notable differences in approaches. The PPD is highly structured. It expects teams to coordinate weekly, delegate tasks, adhere to weekly deadlines, and log their activities and responsibilities within the learning management system where the instructor can see it. A team charter may be a required assignment with some guidelines, but does not require a specific set of accountability measures, or require the instructor to check on these interim measures. Instead, accountability measures are negotiated by the team rather than imposed and enforced by the instructor. It is possible that the decentralized "team charter" approach may enhance student "buy-in" and thus be more appealing to students than the required PPD. Further research is needed to confirm this possibility.

The most notable finding in this study was the consistency of student attitudes regarding

group work. In essence, if adult students had poor prior experiences with group projects or had a strong preference for working on assignments alone, they did not change their minds, regardless of whether a structured group process was utilized. Conversely, if students entered the course with positive attitudes about group projects, they reported more favorable experiences overall, including the use of more structured group project processes such as the PPD or team charter. Somewhat surprisingly, even the communication variables did not appear to improve the group project experience. Students with negative attitudes about group projects were less likely to use meetings, phone calls, and chat sessions, than were students who liked group projects.

In regard to perceptions of learning, students who were not exposed to the PPD had even worse attitudes about their learning while working on a group project. Thus, while the PPD did not create a net improvement in perceived learning, it apparently prevented some students from thinking - to put it loosely - that they were not totally wasting their time on the project. To that extent, there may be some value in the PPD in preventing a negative quality of group experience.

We optimistically hoped that structuring the team process would improve students' overall perception of group projects by increasing accountability and communication. Results did not support our optimism. The additional structure appeared to have little or no effect on students who prefer to work alone. These results were somewhat surprising, because informal test pilot applications of the PPD yielded positive feedback from students. However, there were at least two notable differences between the administration of the pilot and this study. First, in the pilot, a single instructor was closely involved in the structured group process, strongly encouraged video conferencing to enhance communication and build a sense of community and cohesion within groups, and required group members to rate themselves and other members as part of the group project evaluation process. Bailey, Barber, and Ferguson (2015) found that instructor involvement was positively related to communication, cohesion, and planning, and that instructor evaluation techniques were directly related to students' perceived benefits of group projects. In this study with 10 different instructors, it was impossible to control how involved instructors who utilized the PPD were or whether they required peer evaluation in the evaluation process. Interestingly, instructional effectiveness, evaluated via end-of-course student surveys, was linked to perceptions that team members "contributed to the project nearly equally" ($\beta = 1.47$, $p \leq .10$) and that groups had timely and effective communications within groups ($\beta = 1.38$, $p \leq .10$). Instructional effectiveness as well as the role instructors play in group processes and future attitudes about group work is worthy of additional exploration.

A second important difference was that during the pilot study, known social loafers in one class were grouped into a single team, thus protecting other groups from potential "bad apple" scenarios. Social loafing is one of the most commonly reported complaints about group projects (Hall & Buzwell, 2012), and undoubtedly impacts future attitudes about group projects. The grouping arrangement chosen in the pilot may have resulted in more teams having a good experience and rating the PPD more positively than would have occurred with self-selected or randomly assigned teams.

It is also possible that different levels of conscientiousness between the two samples impacted results. Highly conscientious students may appreciate the added structures designed to improve accountability and communication during group work. Less conscientious students may not. Similarly, more extraverted students may appreciate additional communication expectations and opportunities, while more introverted students may despise this expectation. Future research should probe the relationship between personality, communication, and attitudes toward group work.

Conclusion

Ultimately, there may be little an instructor or institution can do to overcome adult students' well-established feelings and attitudes about group projects. However, it is important to remember that students' attitudes about group projects do not negate their value as pedagogical tools, or the value of instructor involvement and well-structured assignments. Students tend to dislike writing papers and hate taking exams, but these attitudes will not likely put an end to these practices. As with any learning or evaluative tool, adult educators must weigh the value of the project and its appropriateness for the curriculum, and consider the pedagogical advantages to a structured approach toward team projects. Student "buy in" on team assignments may offer a more positive educational experience, and positive experiences may yield greater learning. However, removing group projects from the curriculum or mismanaging them could rob students of valuable experiences that may help them navigate real teams—in their families, workplaces, and communities.

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