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Small Groups: Effectiveness in a University Classroom and the Role Gender Plays in Group Interactions

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Abstract

Previous studies demonstrate that working in small teams enhances motivation, enthusiasm, and cooperative learning when compared to traditional learning methodology (Davies, 2009; Gaudet, Ramer, Nakonechny, Cragg, & Ramer, 2010). The purpose of this study is to understand the effectiveness and ineffectiveness of working in small groups in classrooms, and the effects that gender roles have. The present survey (N=138) reports on the effectiveness and ineffectiveness of working in small groups on assignments and projects in college level courses. Using a self-reporting paper-and-pencil instrument, the researcher asked if the respondents have had the opportunity to work in small groups and how they felt about the outcome and success of the project assigned to the group, if they learned from working with the small group and if the goals were met when working in groups. It also asked if they believed that they would have been more effective in completing the work if they had worked alone. The students completing this survey were Hispanic and all students at a university in the southernmost region of Texas.

Keywords: Gender roles in groups; Group relationships; Small groups

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Introduction

Small working groups have been collaborating on many work and school related projects for centuries. Everyone has been involved in working in a small group at some point in their lifetime. People have different ideas or philosophies regarding how work should be done. There are few people that like working alone and then there are those that enjoy working in groups for every project or assignment.

Small group work has many reported benefits, including allowing for the collaboration and sharing of useful ideas and information, making the workload of each group member smaller, receiving tutoring and aid from other group members, and learning to communicate within a diverse group of people [1]. Benefits of working in small groups include the facilitation of deeper, more active and collaborative learning as well as increased motivation and enthusiasm [2]. Small group work helps its members to develop cooperative skills, such as interpersonal communication, articulation of ideas, and the ability to problem-solve within a group. Working in small groups may also have benefits for cultural learning. Literature suggests that culturally dissimilar groups rarely mix together.

Material and methods

These findings emphasize the importance of group work and its ability to facilitate multicultural awareness. According to Pollock et al. (2011)

students of differing ethnic backgrounds experienced more equal participation when working in small groups, as opposed to large class discussions. Additionally, from the perspective of an educator, group work can produce better quality of material [1].

There are many advantages and disadvantages to working in small groups. Small group work within a classroom setting has been shown to improve students' perception of several factors, including how useful the class is towards their future careers, their ability to be successful, the instructor's level of care for their students' success, as well as increased interest in the coursework material [3]. Working in small groups, gives group members the opportunity to use their strengths such as expertise, skills and knowledge to help the group to accomplish their goal.

Unfortunately, many students report having negative perceptions of group work [4, 5]. Additionally, instructors report that when it comes to group work, students lack enthusiasm, have complaints about grading or group members "free-riding" and not doing their part, or having interpersonal conflicts. Additionally, Rehman and Hinojosa (2016) developed an instrument to study the Hispanic-American student's attitudes towards group work. Their study concluded that their sample held attitudes ranging from strongly-negative to negative towards group work, however 91 percent of their respondents admitted that the group projects were completed and over 60 percent agreed that they would have done better had they received training in group work and if the assignments were better structured.

Gender roles are also important in a working group because the patterns of behaviors, attitudes and learning differ significantly. Myaskovsky, Unikel and Dew (2005) conducted a study about effects of gender diversity on performance in small groups and one part of the study concluded that women were less talkative and less task oriented in mixed gender groups than in groups where there were only women. For the men, it was concluded that men were more

Talkative in groups where there were only men in groups. Furthermore, it found that men were more task oriented in mixed gender groups than in groups where men were the majority.

When evaluating gender differences, and how they affect group interactions, one must take into account the differing strengths that men and women display when collaborating within a group setting. According to Baxter-Magolda (1992) and Miller (2005), when compared to boys, girls tend to be more socialized in discussion practices, and collaborative problem solving. Additionally, more often than boys do, girls take into consideration their own skill set and personal knowledge. Women tend to have heightened communal traits which lead to having a stronger relational orientation, they are more socially sensitive, and show more emotional intelligence than men [6]. In contrast, when working within collaborative learning settings, men display a more assertive and confrontational communication style [7]. Due to the communal skills that women present when working in collaborative learning settings, the proportion of women within groups is positively associated with a positive emotional climate. Groups that have positive emotional climates display better quality interpersonal interactions within the group.

The small group committee, work groups, task forces, management teams is a primary arena which influences behavior. A growing body of evidence suggests links among evolved psychological and physiological mechanisms, sex differences in social behavior, and the interpersonal context of the small groups (Geary, 1998; Maccoby, 1998). According to Colarelli, Spranger and Hechanova (2006), trait theory and social role theory provide alternative perspectives on the Etiology of sex differences in social behaviors. It suggests that traits primarily influence how people respond to social situations. Men, on average, have more of a particu-

trait than women, men will behave differently than women. These traits are difficult to change because they have been practiced since childhood, but with training, people can develop certain traits they lack and those traits can be learned.

Colarelli, Spranger and Hechanova (2006) identified four patterns relating to sex composition within small groups. First, regardless of the type of group, gender composition had an effect on influence strategies and group dynamics, and the effects appeared to be stronger in naturally occurring than experimentally formed groups. The second pattern found that all-male groups displayed more competitive, aggressive, and exploitative behavior than all-female groups. Third, in all-male groups, a steeper dominance hierarchy developed. Lastly, in groups with both men and women, men were more dominant, although this was not always consistent. Having a group that is diverse of men and women may be more effective than single-sex groups in some circumstances [8]. Mixed-sex groups will bring a variety of skills to the group and will assist in being more cooperative, will expand perspectives and be more productive.

Although the majority of literature supports the idea that men and women display significant behavioural, relational, and collaborative differences, there is a small amount of research supporting the notion that there are no significant differences between men and women. Canary and House (1993) reviewed and summarized fifteen representative meta-analyses of sex differences which included over 1,200 studies on sex difference. They concluded that there are few, if any, differences in the manner in which men and women verbally communicate and they indicate that sex differences in social interactions are small and inconsistent; that is, about

1% of the variance is accounted for and these effects are moderated by other variables. Although in this

Study there are no significant gender differences in verbal communication, there is a large body of evidence supporting differences in behavior and collaborative style.

The Study and the Sample

The present study (N=138) reports on relationships in small working groups. The respondents were enrolled at a state-supported mid-sized university in Texas bordering Mexico. The data was collected in the spring of 2019. All 138 respondents were Hispanic American university students, it is safe to assume that there was cultural homogeneity in the sample.

The data was collected through an anonymous, self-administered paper-and-pencil test where the participation was voluntary and the respondents were not required to disclose any personal identification. The instrument was composed of both closed-ended questions and open-ended questions. The seven closed ended questions were mainly demographic questions

About gender, age, college major, relationship status, etc. There were five questions that were answered using a Likert scale about group work and one open-ended question describing group work experience.

The sample consisted of 138 (39.1%) men and 84 (60.8%) women. The age of the respondents ranged from 18 to over 30 years. The sample was divided into four age groups. The first age group consisted of respondents that were 20 years old or younger and 35 (25.3%) participants were in this group. The second age group was made up of students between the ages of 21 years to 25 years and 79 (57.2%) were in this group. The third group consisted of students between the ages of 26 years and 30 years and 19 (13.7%) students were in this group. The remaining group or fourth group were students over 30 years of age and 5 (3.6%) people were in this group. The purpose of identifying age groups was to identify differences in group

Participation based on age however, there were no significant findings. The sample also consisted of 55 (39.8%) respondents that were communication/education majors and 83 (60.1%) respondents that were business/science majors. In addition, 71 (51.4%) respondents were single, 59 (42.7%) were in a relationship, 8 (5.6%) were married and no respondents were separated or divorced.

We also asked the respondents to rate on a scale from 1 (strongly agree) to 7 (strongly disagree) about group work. The questions asked were as follows:

1. If you want something done, do it yourself. Someone else is likely to do it incorrectly
2. I welcome the opportunity to work in a group.
3. I work much better by myself
4. Group work or group projects are wasteful when it comes to really important issues.
5. Most learning groups will be ineffective unless students are taught how to work in groups.
6. What were some of your experiences with learning groups/group projects that you have had or know of someone else has had.

We created two null hypotheses to test the data on two variables: Gender and Major/Discipline of Study. We hypothesized:

1. There is no difference between men and women in group work.
2. There is no difference in major/discipline of study in group work.

Findings

In our gender results, our findings found that women collaborate more than men when working on projects in small groups. In the sample size of men (n=54), the cooperative index

Mean was 0.4444 and the standard deviation was 2.3993 and for women (n=84), the cooperative index mean was 1.6667 and the standard deviation was 2.1664. The t-test calculation results were 3.1017. It was significant at 0.0023 and the two-tailed p-value equals 0.0023. Therefore, how men and women work in small groups by conventional criteria was statistically significant.

In the results by major, the majors were sorted into two groups. Group one was communication and education majors (n=55) and group two was business and science majors (n=83). For the communication and education major the average mean was 1.5818 and the standard deviation was 2.3247. For the business and science majors, 0.9277 was the average mean and the standard deviation was 2.3106. The two tailed p-value equals 0.1066 and by conventional criteria, this difference is considered to be not statistically significant.

The results in the questions rated by using a Likert scale are as follows. Question 1, "If you want something done, do it yourself. Someone else is likely to do it incorrectly." Women do not agree because they believe that we need to work together as a team (4.4) and men tend to agree that men are more self-reliant (5.5). The t-value >3.6200 and p-value was 0.0004. There was a significant correlation. Question 2, "I welcome the opportunity to work in a group", men scored 4.9444, standard deviation 1.7848 and women scored 5.5000, standard deviation 1.4185. The t-value was 2.0270, p-value is 0.0446. Therefore, it was significant. Question 3, "I work much better by myself", the t-value results were 2.2.539 and the p-value was 0.0258. Therefore, this was also significant. The results in Question 4, "Group work or group projects are wasteful when it comes to really important issues" were not significant. For Question 5, "Most learning groups will be ineffective unless students are taught how to work in groups", the t-value was 1.0361 and p-value was 0.3020. Therefore, it was not significant. For question 6, "What were some of your experiences with learning groups/group projects that you have had or know of someone else has had". The responses were categorized into the following eight categories.

1. No problem

2. Uneven participation
3. Some good/Some bad
4. I did all or most of the work
5. Free riders
6. Learn new things
7. Indifferent or uninterested
8. Social loafing

For both men and women, the top category selected was that they had no problems. The second category selected by both genders was that they experienced uneven participation from group members, and the third category selected was that there were some good and some bad experiences. Both men and women were very similar in their responses except that more men experienced more free riders in their groups than women. Pearson correlation value of $r_s=0.81857$; p (2-tailed) 0.00698, therefore, this was significant.

Conclusion

This paper has stressed the importance of group work in college classrooms, as well as the differences between male and female behaviors and communication styles within group settings. As mentioned, there are advantages and challenges associated with students working with others on assignments and projects in the classroom, however, the literature overwhelmingly stresses the many benefits that group work provides to students and educators.

Since our analysis was focused on two variables: Gender and Major, the data revealed that there was a difference in how university students collaborated in a small group when assigned a group project or task. When evaluating gender differences, it was concluded that women are more collaborative than men when working within small groups, and men reported experiencing more free-riders when participating in group work. Furthermore, as hypothesized, there were no significant differences in how university students of differing declared majors worked in small groups. Due to the differing strengths and behavioural styles that men and women display in group settings it is important that educators take into account gender when forming groups. For future research, it may be interesting to look at working group relationships with members from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

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