

Challenges in Group Work from the Perspective of College Students

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Abstract: Based on sociocultural theory, group work is an effective teaching method that can provide a good learning environment for students and promote their learning and growth. In China, it is widely used in all kinds of educational practices and has long been considered to be improved by joint efforts from teachers and students. In this study, we investigate students' actual experience with group work to better understand the perception of college students and conclude the causes of unqualified group work they can not cope with. The findings indicated that most learners found that challenges resulted from the improper designation of group work, interaction within the small society, and participation of the teachers.

Keywords: group work, constructivism, cooperative learning

1. Introduction

Group work is a teaching strategy in which students are engaged in specific tasks and contribute to an overall theme. In the process of its constant development and differentiation in practice, different group work models have been defined and have varying characters according to several factors(tasks, grouping methods, formality, management)[1]. However, its basic points always remain as: shared aims, interaction and membership. Shared aims stress that group members are not only working for individual development but also motivated by the common aims. Interaction is the communicative exchange method by which group work assimilates the viewpoints of each member. Membership is the symbol of the relationship between individuals in the group. In China, group work is commonly used in different study periods and is considered to be an effective assessment to cope with the increased number of students who have been admitted into tertiary institutions since higher education reform. To deal with the larger numbers of students in class, group work is widely used by college teachers, which provides students with a richer learning experience while improving class efficiency [2].

Students are expected to interdependent on and collaborate with each other to achieve shared learning goals with a formative assessment and feedback from peers. In the present research, many advantages of group work have been concluded, both for short-term and long-term, expertise and comprehensive abilities. Group work provides students with an avenue to promote knowledge construction when they are immersed in sharing and discussing diverse viewpoints with peers. group work is also claimed to develop students' transferable skills for their life-long living(leadership, project management, communication, and teamwork skills) and enhance their persistence, adaptive

capacity, and attitudes toward science. group work is more pragmatic in cultivating talents who are adapted to meet the needs of society, as working in group settings is an essential part of scientific collaboration and professional fields [3]. However, when it comes to how to make group work more effective, limited research findings have concluded factors that influence the outcomes of group work and did not look deeply into their causes and effects in the conduct of later group work. The most summarized problems include free-riding, uneven workload and lack of cohesion. Free-riding in present literature may be slightly different and focus more on the behavior of bystanders who refuse to cooperate to complete the task but enjoy the shared outcomes with other group members. Uneven workload refers to the work division, which does not consider each member's capability reasonably [4]. Lack of cohesion is the discordant atmosphere among the members. When these problems happen to be serious enough to a certain extent, it can result in inefficient group work.

2. The Present Study

Sociocultural theory suggests that people's psychological functions are achieved by participating in cultural intermediaries and integrating into social activities. One framework pertaining to group work is the collaborative learning perspective. Collaborative learning is widely recognized as a situation in which two or more people learn or attempt to learn something together [5]. It emphasizes the importance of interaction and cooperation among members in groups for knowledge construction and understanding. Group work is built upon the circumstance that students are encouraged to ask questions, give elaborate explanations, exchange arguments, formulate new ideas and problem solutions, and so on and demonstrate positive effects on them.

Previous research shows that the way students interact with each other critically impacts their learning process while working together. It is also worth mentioning that these positive results can only be achieved when teachers make proper and adequate instructional decisions. Particularly while students are collaborating, teachers need to monitor which problems students encounter and to intervene when necessary [6].

In current practice, the inappropriate role of teachers or students can sometimes become an unhealthy factor for group work. This vigorous teaching approach can better fuel education practice only when we know the causes inside out and students' real needs from the perspective of the people involved. While group work is one of the most widely used teaching strategies, present studies focus more on how group work helps students build up knowledge and the benefits to them; challenges of group work in practice have been seldom researched deeply and surprisingly, little is known about students' actual experience in group work [2]. From the perspective of teachers and educators, we can see the unreasonable elements in group work by recognizing its causes, but as the causes of this irrationality are often related to individual characteristics, in-depth research is needed to specify countermeasures more appropriately.

To look deep into the problem, our main hypothesis is grounded in the following questions:

- What is the students' actual experience in group work they used to do?
- Were there any challenges leading to group work failure? And what did they do to overcome them?

3. Methods

3.1. Methodological Approach

A qualitative research design has been chosen to delve into the subjective experiences and perceptions of college school students concerning their group work experience. Qualitative methods facilitate a

comprehensive exploration of the participants' viewpoints, allowing for a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

3.2. Sampling & Participants

A purposive sampling strategy is employed to select participants who have experienced at least three group works. To be eligible for the study, participants are currently enrolled in college or have recently graduated (no more than three years) to reduce their memory recall errors. This purposeful selection of participants aims to ensure diversity in terms of age, gender, major, academic performance, and socio-economic background.

A total of 140 students at a college in southwestern China were recruited for the study. The researcher will aim for an even distribution of girls and boys across varying majors. Students' participation was completely voluntary. There was no selection by the researchers. All participants gave informed consent,

3.3. Problem Task

All students received a set of problems in an online questionnaire, which contains both multiple-choice questions and open-ended questions.

3.4. Data Sources

Multiple choice questions in advance help participants to unfold their memories about group work according to the relatively common choices, while open-ended questions allow for a diverse set of answers and avoid the bias that may result from suggesting responses to the participants. As is conducted online, it can ensure a private setting to ensure confidentiality and to create a comfortable environment for participants to share openly. The continuity of the logic between the problems designed will also help participants to talk about their spontaneous perception of their own actual experiences.

4. Data Analysis

In this research, we outline the planned data analysis approach for a qualitative study aiming to investigate what is students' real perceptions about group work as a member and conclude about their ideal group work model. The analysis will focus on identifying recurring themes and patterns related to student's experiences and perceptions, providing valuable insights into the factors of imperfect group work.

Once the data collection phase is completed, thematic coding will serve as the primary method for analyzing the data. Two researchers will independently read and re-read the answers to familiarize themselves with the content. They will then engage in open coding, identifying initial concepts and ideas related to student experiences and perceptions. Through an iterative process, the researchers will discuss their codes and reach a consensus on the main themes.

After the initial coding phase, the researchers will collaboratively identify and refine emergent themes that represent the probability of other challenges that may happen in group work. These themes will be derived from the data and supported by relevant quotes from participants.

Also, researchers will analysis the frequency of the data according to the classified themes to see what challenges occur more frequently and what occur less to identify what challenge is of greater impact.

Based on the existing literature on challenges in group work, we anticipate the emergence of the following themes. However, we remain open to the possibility that themes will emerge from the data that we cannot anticipate in advance:

- Inappropriate task designation: Teachers may ignore the characteristics of the task that is more suitable to complete independently. Some tasks may even prevent group work from proceeding properly.
- Lack of effective communication: Communication is also very important in group work. If there is a lack of effective communication between members, then inefficient group work. This may be due to different mastery of language and communication skills among members.
- Improper workload allocation: Workload allocation is also very important in group work. If the workload is not allocated properly according to skills, experience and other capability of group members, it will lead some members to undertake too many or too few tasks, thus affecting the efficiency of the group.
- Lack of common values and goals: In group work, the common values and goals among the members are very important. A lack of shared values and goals among members can then lead to inefficient group work.

5. Results

The data collected in our experiment to some extent illustrates the traditional problems that are frequently discussed and also reflects the changes of participants' perception from the perspective as students. Here, we divide the causes of inefficient or failed group work into three themes: group work designation, interaction in a small society, and participation of the teachers. Then, some suggestions are made accordingly.

5.1. Group Work Designation

As the designation of group work is complicated, it can be further divided into task selection, methods to form a group and assessment standards.

In a vast majority of cases, the task for students to work in groups is chosen by the tutors and assigned in class. Students have no idea about the topic until they get the entire message about what they have to cope with. Participant A states that sometimes a difficult task would need a lot of time to search for information beyond what they learned in class, so a 5-minute in-class discussion will not work. Others also add that they are more likely to work in a group after class period as it is of more freedom to debate and persuade.

When it comes to the methods of forming a group, teachers usually divide the whole class into small groups in order to strengthen the management and assessment. For example, a class of 100 students may be divided into 10 groups, according to the student ID, each group with about ten students to guarantee equality. Compared with the way of allowing students to form groups by themselves, this grouping mode ignores the personal characteristics of students and even requires them to establish relationships with strangers from different majors in a short time. This situation is a great challenge for some college students as it is not so easy to find a suitable time to meet up with other group members and do the group task while there may be limited time left for them to get to know the expertise of everyone before they get down to their mission. In addition, the order of "student ID" (or other systems arranged according to some standards like majors and GPA), may lead students with similar capabilities to be put in the same group. It has several drawbacks, like relatively fixed members and shared majorities and significantly varied ability between groups, which is not only unfair but also causes of inefficient group work. Students can not achieve their planned development, and the advantage of group work turns to be inefficacy.

Assessment standard is a significant part of group work to help students construct their understanding of knowledge. In our research, we found that students do not always agree with the assessment mode conducted by their teachers. Cases are that some teachers only consider the results of teamwork, no matter it is a simple answer to a question or a presentation, and they make unified assessments between the group leader and group members, between those who spare no effort and the free-riders. However, participants reported that they felt it injustice to be judged affected by the factors of the other group members. In the long run, this approach will erode the enthusiasm of active students, thus affecting the effectiveness of group cooperation for students to build knowledge in communication.

5.2. Interaction in a Small Society

One of the original intentions of group work is to cultivate students' ability to communicate and deal with problems, which is also in the context of the theme of the development of modern society. Only when students arm themselves with the ability to communicate with people and deal with problems can they adapt to the constantly changing society and realize their own development. Generally speaking, a team leader (or even more than one leader) will be appointed by the teacher or selected by their team members. The role of "group leader" can share the burden of their teachers, especially when the size of the classes is too large, as well as the number of groups. Although this approach has improved group management, group members may form a strong sense of dependence on their team leader, including task division, information summary, and so on while the leader plays the role as a second teacher to connect all the others. In the long term, the experienced student gets tired of acting as a mediator, and other members stay the same as the person when they enter college, which is against our previous desire.

Many respondents mentioned the word "communication" in the survey, believing that successful group work cannot be apart from proper communication. In group work, the opinions of students are diverse and participants are bound to have a brainstorm when they disagree with each other. However, as time and energy are limited, they need to improve the efficiency of communication to get through.

There are two situations that lead to weak communication in group work: one is the unreasonable organization made by the group leader. Participants who were selected to take the role as the group leader said one lacks the ability to organize the members to cooperate actively can lead to in-group contradiction and unsatisfactory results. This is not that difficult to solve relatively because the ability will gradually be increased in practice. With the experience of group work, college students can learn from excellent group leaders as one of the team members. Another situation is the lack of motivation. For various reasons, some group members will resist reasonable communication and group activities so that group cooperation can not proceed normally.

5.3. Participation of the Teacher

Under the educational background in China, compared with the relatively fixed learning experience of students in completing the content assigned by teachers, teachers often only assign the direction of tasks, which gives students a higher free choice in specific tasks, partners, work completion methods and other aspects. At the same time, these uncertain factors also become a variety of group cooperation that may lead to inefficiency or even failure.

In the process, the participants also reflected on the unreasonable play of the role of the teacher. In fact, as an indispensable role in group cooperation, the timely appearance and guidance of teachers will greatly reduce the occurrence of conflicts, improve the efficiency of group cooperation, and ensure the learning effect of students.

Participants reported that some teachers only stayed on the platform or went between the groups, thinking that if the classroom discipline was controlled and the teaching schedule could be completed on time. They did not realize that they should participate in the students' discussion, but silently observed every move of the students.

6. Limitations

As with any research, this study has some limitations. The use of self-report data might be subject to participant biases or memory recall errors. Additionally, the specific cultural and educational context of the sample might limit the generalizability of findings to other populations.

7. Conclusion

This study is meant to find out the real need of students in effective group work and aid instructors who are new to group work as well as instructors who have tried group work and experienced difficulties or want to improve their students' experiences and outcomes. By collecting one hundred and forty open-ended questionnaires, we find that challenges can exist in all aspects and steps of group work. Some problems can be avoided by changing the strategy before they get down to working, while other challenges occur more accidentally. Thus, reserving space for group work and its rules, such as flexible assessment for free-riding, are needed. Also, students should also contribute to it by actively building familiarity with group members and instructors and managing time effectively [7]. Hope in future teaching practices, we will further strengthen the research and application of group work to improve teaching quality and effectiveness.

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