

# Fishbowl Discussion: Using Student Voice to Identify Attitudes about Group Work

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## Objective

To provide students with an opportunity to express their concerns related to working with each other in a group environment.

## Approximate Time Required

One class session (50- to 75-minutes). This session could be used as the opening session for the class's segment on group communication or could be used prior to the introduction of the problem solving sequence or the group contract.

## Materials Needed

### *Students:*

- Pen or pencil for completing handout.

### *Professor:*

- Chairs that can be placed into two circles
- Assessment tool for discussion (optional)
- Photo copies of assignment handout

## Rationale

Much of the educational research has shown a shift in learning from a passive process that is performed by someone else, to a more active, personal, and purposeful process. A position paper from the largest U.S. accounting firm stated that "the current textbook-based, rule-intensive, lecture/problem style should not survive as the primary means of presentation" according to *Perspectives on Education ...1989*, p. 11 (as cited in Holter, 1994). Cooperative learning and team assignments in which students work in small, mixed-ability learning groups are replacing the traditional lecture format assignments.

Simply placing students in groups and telling them to work together does not, in and of itself, produce cooperation and certainly not the higher achievement and positive social outcomes that can result from cooperative learning groups. Group efforts can go wrong for many reasons. Group members sometimes seek free rides on others' work by leaving the work to one particular group member. Students who are typically left to do all of the work sometimes decrease their group efforts to avoid being considered suckers (Johnson and Johnson 1990). Other reasons that groups fail include high-ability group members taking over, pressures to conform, or group work may break down due to conflicts and power struggles between members.

Cooperative learning theory states that "each student's responsibility both to himself or herself and to the team as a whole must be clearly understood in order for a team to perform



effectively" (Holter 1994, p.76). Simply forming groups and giving group assignments is no guarantee of increasing learning or enhancing students' ability to engage in effective group problem solving (Michaelson and Razook 1999).

People do not instinctively know how to interact effectively with others and group and interpersonal skills do not magically appear when they are needed. These skills must be taught and students must be motivated to use them. If group members lack the interpersonal and small-group skills to cooperate effectively, cooperative groups will not be productive (Johnson and Johnson 1990). In order to coordinate efforts to achieve mutual goals, it has been found that students must do four things. According to Johnson (1986) and Johnson and Johnson (1987), students must get to know and trust one another, communicate accurately and unambiguously, accept and support one another, and resolve conflicts constructively (as cited in Johnson and Johnson 1990).

Learning to successfully perform group work is very useful training for the outside world because it prepares one to think critically and analytically, requiring one to find and use appropriate resources that are needed to solve a given problem. Students must employ analytical, decision-making, interpersonal, and oral and written communication skills during group work. Students need to develop the skills to work effectively in cooperative groups. When these skills are learned, instead of competing with one another, students engage in a truly cooperative venture as they attempt to help each other master the material. Their confidence in their ability to understand complex concepts improves as they gain support from other students and they begin to take a greater responsibility for their learning.

The cooperative learning literature has found that cooperative learning can and usually does have a positive effect on student achievement but there is a strong consensus that this achievement is not seen in all forms of cooperative learning, but depends on two key factors, at least at the elementary and secondary levels – group goals and individual accountability (Slavin 1989b). Cooperative groups must work together to earn recognition, grades, or other indicators of group success. Simply asking students to work together is not enough. Secondly, group's success must depend on the individual learning of all group members. Studies of methods in which students work together to prepare a single worksheet or project without differentiated tasks show very few achievement benefits (Slavin 1989a). When students of different racial or ethnic backgrounds work together toward a common goal, they gain in liking and respect for one another (Slavin 1989b).

Plausible explanations of why group goals and individual accountability are essential to the achievement of cooperative learning are that group goals are necessary to motivate students to help one another learn; they give students a stake in one another's success (Slavin 1989b). Without group goals, students are not likely to engage in the elaborate explanations that have been found to be essential to the achievement effects of cooperative learning. Group goals help students overcome their reluctance to ask for help or provide help to one another. Without an over-arching group goal, students may be embarrassed to ask for or offer help. Finally, without individual accountability, one or two group members may do all of the work; group members perceived to be low achievers may be ignored if they contribute ideas or ask for help (Slavin 1989b).



What types of skills must students be taught and encouraged to use relating to group communication and becoming effective group members? The fishbowl activity will allow students to voice their opinions about past group work experiences or their concerns about upcoming group and/or team assignments. Based on their responses and the themes that emerge as the discussion continues, the teacher will be able to help the students better understand why group training is necessary and really focus the group training on the students' concerns about past and up-coming group assignments.

If this activity is done during the first day of the group communication segment of the class, the teacher can use the themes brought up by the students about their group work concerns to structure the training for group and team communication. If the discussion is done somewhere in the middle of the segment on group communication, the teacher could use the themes brought up by the students about their group work concerns to show the importance and need to write up a group contract and to use the standard agenda, a problem solving strategy. (The *Additional Readings* section has more information about the standard agenda and the group contract).

### **What To Do Before Class**

- Photocopy assignment handout.
- Create and photocopy assessment tool (optional)

#### *What to do when introducing this activity:*

- Distribute and instruct students to complete the handout
- Set 4-5 empty chairs in a circle, in the middle of the classroom – creating the fishbowl
- All other desks/chairs need to be set up in a big circle around the 4-5 middle chairs – the idea here is that students sitting in the outer circle are looking into the fishbowl Explain the rules of the “Fishbowl.” (See the Student Handout *Working in groups as part of required coursework: A fishbowl discussion*)

### **What To Do During Class**

Encourage or require students to take note of common themes mentioned during the activity. Track who has and who has not yet been in the fishbowl so that the end can be determined.

### **What To Do After The Activity**

Facilitate class discussion about themes. Ask students questions that allow students to critically analyze what they have learned as a result of taking part in this activity both as speakers and listeners.

#### *Sample questions:*

- What are the common themes heard during the activity?
- What might one have learned about themselves as a result of this experience?
- What might your audience members have gained from your contributions?
- What conclusions can we draw as a result of our overall experiences with this activity?



- What surprised you most about this class assignment?
- What are the strengths of this activity?
- What are the weaknesses of this activity?
- What are the limitations of an activity such as this?
- How can this activity be changed to make it better?

Briefly connect student concerns and past experiences with the advantages of training students to work in groups and in employing the group contract and the problem solving sequence or standard agenda, and assign reading of the standard agenda for the next class meeting.

### **Appraisal**

As in assessing any oral presentation, the weight of the elements of student work can vary. For example, if quantity of contributions is important at the point in the semester when this activity is employed, assessment should weigh heavy in the area of quantity. Full class discussion which follows the fishbowl will offer assessment of student learning. Exam questions or a written reflection paper which requires student reflection of learning can better measure student learning and allow the faculty to know if objectives were met. Such reflections should occur after the class has had the opportunity to learn and apply the problem solving sequence or standard agenda and possibly the group contract. The reflection should require critical thinking about skills learned or refined, personal knowledge gained, and the understanding/application of course theory.

Generally, students find the discussion activity and group contract to be useful. The fishbowl activity and themes discussed are identified when students are asked to explain how this particular group experience compares to past course group assignments. Many students refer back to the discussion and its importance in their learning how to participate in a successful group.

### **Alternative Uses or Extensions**

As a narrative study, students could be sent into the campus community to collect stories about the group project coursework experiences of their peers in class assignments across the curriculum.

### **References**

- Holter, N. C. (1994). Team assignments can be effective cooperative learning techniques. *Journal of Education for Business*, 70(2), 73-79.
- Johnson, D. W., & Carson, L. (1990). Social skills for successful group work. *Educational Leadership*, 47(4), 29-33.
- Michaelse, L., & Razook, N. (1999). Making learning groups effective. *Selections*, 16(1), 28-35.
- Ross, M. R., & Fulton, R. B. (1994). Active learning strategies in the analytical chemistry classroom. *Journal of Chemical Education*, 71(2), 141-147.

Slavin, R. E. (1989a). Cooperative learning and student achievement. In *School and Classroom organization*, edited by R.E. Slavin. Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum.

Slavin, R. E. (1989b). Research on cooperative learning: Consensus and controversy. *Educational Leadership*, 47(4), 52-54.

**Additional Readings**

Wood, J. T. (2002). *Communication in our Lives* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). New York: Wadsworth.  
University of North Carolina at Greensboro's Communication Across the Curriculum. Website:  
[www.uncg.edu/cac/](http://www.uncg.edu/cac/)

## **Working in groups as part of required coursework: A fishbowl discussion**

**Task:** Provide an opportunity to orally express concerns related to working with each other in a group environment.

**Goal:**

Identify and understand common concerns of class members

**Assignment:** After completing a brief in-class writing assignment, entire class will take part in a fishbowl discussion.

**Writing assignment:** In the space below, record your thoughts, concerns, and/or past experiences where graded course group work is related. If additional space is needed, use the back of this handout.



## **Fishbowl Guidelines**

1. When not in the fishbowl, students may not speak, the role of the students outside of the fishbowl is observer
2. Every person in the class will need to take a seat in the fishbowl at least once during the class
3. While in the fishbowl students are to take part in the ongoing discussion about group work
4. This is to be a discussion/conversation not a series of speeches
5. Completed handouts need to stay out of the fishbowl to discourage reading instead of discussion
6. Comments are not limited to that recorded on the handout
7. Once a student has nothing else to contribute to the discussion, that student needs to leave the fishbowl
8. Students who wish to return to the fishbowl can do so as time allows
9. When a student leaves the fishbowl, the empty chair must be filled within 25 seconds
10. Discussion does not have to stop while a seat is vacant, but it might
11. Discussion is not over until every person speaks