Group Norm Setting: A Critical Skill for Effective Classroom Groups

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Abstract

The authors assert that cooperative learning techniques coupled with effective group norm setting can produce more highly functional classroom groups at the college level. After reviewing the types of educational groups and the elements of cooperative learning, procedures are discussed for establishing positive group norms. Re-visiting these established group norms is stressed as a means of creating optimally functional groups. This information is useful for college teachers.

Introduction

So, you decided to do group work in your classes and you have found that a few groups have done well and some have barely completed the work. Besides that, some students are really angry with you because the group project was a shared grade and some feel that they put in more work than their partners. What happened here? Isn't group work supposed to be a most effective way to teach? Why were some of the groups dysfunctional?

When students groan at the time a significant group project is announced, then they have probably experienced being in a dysfunctional group in the past. It is probably not too much of a stretch to say that everyone has experienced this situation where each individual's norms seem to be different. Johnson, Johnson, and Smith (1998) describe educational groups as follows:

> **Pseudo Learning Group** -- students assigned to work together but who have no interest in doing so.
> **Traditional Learning Group** -- students agree to work together without seeing the benefits of doing so. It is basically individual work with talking.
> **Cooperative Learning Group** -- students placed together to accomplish shared goals and perceive they can reach their goals only if other group members reach their goals.
> **High-Performing Cooperative Learning Group** -- a group that is cooperative and outperforms expectations given its membership - collaborative.

We all want our student groups to be highly functioning, so how can we get them to this point and beyond? The use of cooperative learning is suggested by Johnson et al (1998) which includes five elements (see figure 1.)

*Figure 1. The Five Elements of Cooperative Learning (Johnson, Johnson and Smith,1998)*_____

1. **Positive Interdependence**
   The perception must be that one cannot succeed unless everyone else succeeds. Each person's efforts benefit all.
2. **Individual Accountability and Personal Responsibility**
   Each member must be accountable for contributing a fair share of the work.
3. **Face-to-Face Promotive Interaction**
   Through interpersonal interactions, cognitive learning is increased. This includes things like discussions, testing each other, cooperative note taking, shared work sheets, and jigsaw type procedures.
4. **Interpersonal and Small Group Skills**
   This is the ability to practice effective group skills, including leadership, decision-making, trust building, communication and conflict management.
5. **Group Processing**
   This includes discussing how the group is working. How effective are relationships? Are goals being met and is the task being accomplished? How well? How can the group improve?
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For a group to be a high functioning cooperative learning group, all of the above five elements need to be included continually in the group strategy. If the classroom teacher builds in all these elements and provides the motivation to continue group processing, then a higher functioning team will grow with more student learning.

A very important part of cooperative learning is the ability of individuals to function well as a group -- that is, to have effective group skills. Group skills include such things as setting common goals and norms, understanding leadership roles in educational groups and processing progress in these areas while at the same time working through the conflicts that will arise. Of course, a comprehensive understanding of group dynamics and leadership would be optimal, but some basic knowledge can really help the students along.

As a college teacher, you may not have considered that some class time must be devoted to the teaching of group skills and to do group maintenance if you want the groups to be functional rather than dysfunctional. Giving the class a substantial group project (formal cooperative learning) without enabling them to work on group skills can be, in Dewey's (1963) terms, "mis-educational."

Avoiding Dysfunction and Mis-education

We surely do not want to disenchant our students from our subject areas, or from working together so we must include the time needed and give support to group skills and group maintenance. Not only will this help to prevent mis-education, it will allow practice in skills that will likely be required in

the work place. This may mean that either some course content must be cut or done by students as homework instead of "in-class". What kinds of things can be done to move the group along to the group goal of being high functioning?

This paper will focus on getting started which is probably the most important stage for the teacher to consider in educational group development. To enable the students to begin to function effectively, the setting of group norms and understanding how to monitor these norms is a key factor. The setting of group norms can not only help students to function well in small groups, it can also help develop good behavior for whole class situations. Imagine a three-hour evening class with forty or so seniors who for the most part have "senioritus" where a few at the back are continually chatting through a lecture. Enabling the students to "police" this poor behavior is more effective than the teacher becoming an austere disciplinarian. This kind of behavior modification can best be achieved through good group norm setting.

Group Norm Setting

Norms in a group will evolve even if nothing purposeful is done, but of course these norms might be negative. So it is better to set norms than to allow them to just evolve, especially as changing them is almost always more difficult later. There are different ways to set norms, but it is essential to emphasize two points. First, emphasize that the norms are extremely important and second, make sure that they are not confused with rules. Rules are often "handed down" and, as they are not cooperatively set, they most likely will **not** be monitored by students. To emphasize the importance of norm setting, the students' own group experiences can be solicited to provide a ray of hope for those who have had negative experiences that their full participation will ensure that this experience will be more positive.

One way to begin is to allow about forty minutes for students to cooperatively set group norms during the first class period. Go through the course outline and spend the remainder of the time doing norm setting. Using a framework the first time helps the students to think more broadly. Paul Petzoldt (1984), who was a mountaineer and "expeditioner" with vast experience of groups in stressful conditions (he climbed to above twenty-six thousand feet on K2 in 1939), referred to norm setting as the setting of expedition behavior.   In the classroom we can use the first three of his behavior headings – Individual to Individual Behavior, Individual to Group Behavior, and Group to Individual Behavior. If three columns are drawn on the board, or there is a flip chart with these headings, the class, in small groups can

brainstorm what behaviors they would like to see in the class as a whole and in small groups working in and out of class. An example of the heading format can be seen in figure 2.

Figure 2. Group Norm Headings

Individual to Individual Behavior	Individual to Group Behavior	Group to Individual Behavior
Examples	Examples	Examples
No put downs	*Be on time to meetings*	*No scapegoats*
Give praise	*Be prepared*	*Bring everyone into the Group*

This exercise can include both positive and negative comments such as "be supportive" and "don't be late to meetings."   All the suggestions should be added to the lists in the three columns. Some comments may fit all headings, but need only be written down once. About thirty to forty minutes should be allowed and each heading needs to be covered so care must be taken not to focus on one heading for all the brainstorming time. The teacher can request clarification and amplification of examples so that each norm is well understood by everyone. The teacher can also contribute, as for example, "No chatting while someone is addressing the whole class."   The class group norms includes only enough teacher involvement to ensure that it is class norms and not the teacher's rules which are being instituted. Figure 3 shows an example of a set of norms developed by a class.

Figure 3. Example of Group Norm Setting done in an Academic Course at California Polytechnic State University

Individual to Individual	Group to Individual	Individual to Group
• Be considerate	• Respect "off" days of an individual	• Do your fair share
• Stay in touch during projects	• Don't gang up on anyone	• Support each other
• Respect each other's space	• Give each other a chance to explain themselves	• Don't talk if someone else is speaking to class
• Share assignment loads equally	• Show respect in general	• Don't be defensive
• Keep commitments	• Listen attentively as a group when an individual is talking	• Be able to take constructive criticism
• Be considerate of feelings	• Share helpful ideas	• No put downs
• Communicate no matter what!	• Don't leave if someone is talking	• Don't smoke
• Help classmates who miss class	• Don't pick on anyone (scapegoat) or make fun of anyone	• Be aware that there are more classes with other assignments
• Be supportive		
• Have patience		
• Be flexible and agreeable to change		
• Be enthusiastic	• Be a good listener as well as a speaker	• Leave quietly when existing after a test
• Offer notes if class is missed and collect handouts		
• Be open to others ideas		

- Take all ideas seriously/openly
- Don't interrupt

- Be on time
- No unnecessary noises
- No chewing gum

- Don't pop gum

- Be prepared (bring materials)

- Use positive and creative feedback
- Be responsible for duties, meetings and emergencies and

- Allow everyone to participate
- Call and remind members of study groups
- Make everyone feel comfortable and encourage individual response

- If you can't make it to a meeting, notify others
- Use eye contact
- Don't be absent
- Control negative comments
- Be open & courteous to entire class & instructor
- Meet commitments
- No chit-chatting in cliques
- No cliques

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Once the suggested norms are completed, then a consensus must be reached to accept the norms, so a question such as "Does anyone disagree with any of the norms?" A consensus is reached when the whole class agrees, or no-one disagrees. If someone takes issue with something, then this needs to be resolved by removing the statement or modifying it to get everyone's approval. Having a student write a neat copy through the process will enable a master that can then be typed and copies distributed to everyone. Later, if someone wishes to change anything, it is important that the whole group is involved in the change. The consensus making process is important to build in a sense of ownership and leads to empowerment for the next important aspect to address, which is, 'Who is expected to make sure that everyone keeps to the norms?'

Monitoring Group Norms

A first question after consensus is reached then might be "Who is responsible to address situations where norms are broken?" The answer is *everyone*. This leads to the concept of distributed leadership. This concept according to Johnson et al (1998) is the idea that anyone who moves the group forward in either task or relationship is doing a leadership role and that especially in educational

groups, this should be strongly encouraged. These are actually what Jane Warters (1960) classified as

positive group roles (see figure 4)

Fig. 4 Waters' Positive Group Roles

Task Roles
Initiating activity: solutions, new ideas, etc.
Seeking opinions: looking for an expression of feeling
Seeking information: clarification of values, suggestions and ideas
Giving information: offering facts, generalizations, relating one's own experience to the group problem.
Giving opinions: concerns, values, rather than facts.
Elaborating: clarifying examples and proposals.
Coordinating: showing relationships among various ideas or suggestions
Summarizing: pulling together related ideas and related suggestions.
Testing feasibility: making applications of suggestions to situations, examining practicality of ideas.

Group- Building Roles
Encouraging: Being friendly, warm, responsive to others, praising others and their ideas.
Gate keeping: trying to make it possible for another member to make a contribution to the group.
*Standard setting: expressing standards for the group to use in choosing its content or procedures or in evaluating its decisions, reminding the group to avoid decisions that conflict with group standards (and norms).
Following: going along with decisions of the group, thoughtfully accepting ideas of others.
Expressing group feeling: summarizing what group feeling is sensed to be, describing reactions of the group to ideas.

Both Group-Building and Maintenance Roles
Evaluating: submitting group decisions or accomplishments to compare with group standards, measuring accomplishments against goals.
Diagnosing: determining sources of difficulties, appropriate steps to take next, analyzing the main blocks to progress.
Testing for consensus: tentatively asking for group opinions in order to find out if the group is reaching consensus.
Mediating: harmonizing, conciliating differences in points of view, making compromise solutions.
Relieving tensions: draining off negative feelings by joking or pouring oil on troubled waters, putting tense situations in a wider context.

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* Standard setting and keeping is the key group or distributed leadership role for monitoring group roles

All of these roles help move the group forward both in the task and in relationships, but the key

role in relation to group norms is the Standard Setter (and keeper). This role sets and monitors

standards in the group. It must be emphasized that everyone in the class can do any of the group roles,

especially the standard setter/keeper of the group norms. Skills that a good standard keeper requires

would be the ability to give feedback appropriately and to manage conflict – both these skills are "group"

skills that need to be understood and practiced.

The actual group norm setting so far may have taken forty minutes. Can we, as

teachers, rest easy now that the class has their behavioral expectations?   If the students are excellent

standard keepers, then yes, you as the teacher/class facilitator may rest easy, but the chances are that

the students have had very little practice in these skills or group processing of any kind, so things will

probably go awry. Re-visiting group norms periodically then, is a real a necessity.|

Re-visiting Group Norms

One of the common pitfalls for the teacher using groups, even if doing a good job of facilitating the setting of group norms, is to address a norm violation as if it were a personal affront to themselves rather than ask the class how they wish to address it. As group norms will be broken and as students may not address them, the teacher should check on how things are going. One way is to request that the students write on a piece of scrap paper one thing that they are doing well (in the norms) and one thing that they feel they need to improve on. The class passes comments to the teacher, or a student facilitator, to read out loud. This can just be a reminder to do better.

If things don't improve, then brainstorming reasonable consequences can be done. An example suggested by one class that worked well for tardiness was that the tardy student must answer two questions about homework before they sat down. Again, care must be taken not to reduce the norms to rules and consequences must be agreed upon by the whole class. Of course, both norms and consequences also have to be in sync with the policies of the university and this should be stated. Students must and generally do realize that you as the professor are not handing over the teacher responsibilities, albeit you are allowing them to monitor their own behavior. Most students welcome this opportunity and are pleased to be learning the skills to make their groups and the class work effectively. However, occasionally group norm setting and monitoring might not work with an individual.

The Non-conforming Student

For a non-conforming student, an individual meeting that confronts the questionable behavior may be necessary when the behavior affects the whole class. For students working in small groups, they should confront the behavior and, if unsuccessful, can request that the teacher mediate the conflict. If this too is unsuccessful, then it is better that the student be removed from the group by the teacher. The whole "group" project would then be completed individually. If any points were being awarded for group process, they would, of course, be sacrificed by that individual.

Summary

Many college teachers may have given up on student group work if dysfunctional groups have resulted in complaints and general negative behavior. Setting appropriate behaviors through purposeful group norm setting puts students "on the same page" so guesswork about what the class would like to see with regard to behaviors is removed. The fact that the behaviors are cooperatively set means that they are more likely to be upheld by class members. The teacher, however, must support students in this endeavor by teaching group skills and giving time for group processing to find out what needs to be fixed so that the class and its project groups can become high functioning. The complexities of group skills, concepts, and processing for college students are addressed in *The Group Book: Effective Skills for Cooperative Groups* (Phipps and Phipps, 2000)

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