Group Work at Georgia Southern University: Recommendations from the 2009-2010 FLC on SoTL

Trent W. Maurer, Georgia Southern University
Diana Sturges, Georgia Southern University
Padmini Shankar, Georgia Southern University
Deborah Allen, Georgia Southern University
Saida Akbarova, Georgia Southern University
GROUP WORK
AT
GEORGIA SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY

Recommendations from the
2009-2010 FLC on SoTL

Members:
Trent Maurer, Diana Sturges, Padmini Shankar,
Deborah Allen & Saida Akbarova
Using Group Work in Classes at Georgia Southern: Recommendations from the 2009-2010 FLC on SoTL

In the spring of 2010, the Faculty Learning Community on the Scholarship of Teaching & Learning surveyed Georgia Southern University faculty (N = 93) and students (N = 257) about their perceptions of and experiences with group work. We present the findings below, interpreted within the framework of the existing SoTL literature on group work. ¹

Definitions of Group Work
“Group work” can mean many things. We define group work broadly to mean any activity or assignment, in-class or out of class, graded or ungraded, where two or more students are supposed to work together on something. This would include everything from small group discussions in class to out of class projects.

Students and faculty were asked an open ended question “What comes to mind when you hear group work”? The table below presents some of the statements.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Faculty</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Wasted time, politics, and personal vendettas. “</td>
<td>“Collaborating on projects, learning from each other, sharing knowledge, becoming more confident with the material working with other students to figure out a problem or complete a discussion.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“a group of 4-5 people working together on a project”</td>
<td>“How am I going to grade this?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“who will be the leader and will they be effective “</td>
<td>“Disorganized waste of time.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“ who won't do their part, chaos, confusion”</td>
<td>“Sitting around and wasting time or one person doing the main work while the others do the minimum.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“difficulty getting together, difficult to figure out who is doing what. Oh Crap!!”</td>
<td>“Loss of time”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Thank God I get to work in a group because it will help me understand what we are doing&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Stress of figuring out everyone's schedules to meet”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As can be seen in the graph below, the results of our survey revealed that faculty reported using group work significantly more often than students perceived it was used, particularly when the group work was ungraded or in class. This suggests that students may have a different operational definition of “group work” that blinds them to the full spectrum of ways faculty may use it. From a pedagogical perspective, this means that faculty may need to be more explicit and deliberate about labeling group work activities as “group work” when they are used, so as to help students broaden their way of thinking about group work.

¹ For additional information about sample, methodology, and results, please see our presentation in the 2010 SoTL Commons Proceedings: http://academics.georgiasouthern.edu/ijsotl/conference/proceedings/2010/papers.htm
Benefits of Group Work
The SoTL literature has documented many benefits to group work, including:

- It increases student motivation and academic achievement (Springer et al., 1997);
- It increases student learning on multiple indicators (Cooper et al., 2000);
- Students perform better on group assessments than individual assessments (Knight, 2004);
- Students’ grades improve with required group work, especially for the weakest students (Mahalingam et al., 2008).

Additionally, it has been noted that Millenial students expect team activities (Atkinson, 2004) that reflect real-world working relationships in their classes. The results of our survey suggest that faculty saw significantly greater potential benefits to group work than students did, as can be seen in the graphs below.
Faculty Responses (N = 93) to the question, “What do you see as the advantages/benefits of group work?”

Student Responses (N = 257) to the question, “What do you see as the advantages/benefits of group work?”
The table below presents several statements collected from students and faculty about the advantages of group work.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Faculty</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• “That old adage “Two heads are better than one” sums it up. It is also a division of labor, which puts responsibility on more than one person's shoulders.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “There really are none. It is completely a waste of my time as I am an independent learner and always have been.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “Learning to work with others.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “The benefits of group work include: enhancing communication skills, teamwork abilities, and meeting new people.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “I think group work can make learning the material fun. I also think that it can help people who struggle with lecture style classes grasp the information.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “Learn from each other. Gives people a chance to speak up.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “Learning to work together”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “Solving a task together is an essential skill for a pending career.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “Students can help each other. I don't have to grade as many papers!”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “Less to grade, forces students to interact, gets those who otherwise wouldn't talk to at least talk within the group”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is interesting to note that for students, the single biggest advantage of group work was something not explicitly mentioned by faculty, but that is certainly valued by faculty: exposing students to different ideas, opinions, and perspectives. Of the remaining four advantages mentioned by over 10% of the student respondents, two (help from others and learning how to work with others) were also mentioned by a large number of faculty respondents. The other two (division of labor and collaboration/interaction) are things commonly valued by Millenial students (Atkinson, 2004). These results suggest there is much common ground between faculty and students and that faculty may be able to more effectively use group work if they explicitly point out these advantages when using it.

**Drawbacks of Group Work**

Despite the substantial benefits of group work, the SoTL literature has also identified a number of significant drawbacks, including:

- Students perceive it as a way for faculty to avoid work (Gottschall & Garcia-Bayonas, 2008), often because they erroneously believe it requires less time and effort on the part of the faculty member;
- Students think it’s often a waste of time (McClanahan & McClanahan, 2002);
- Students think it often results in an unfair distribution of work and grades (Furnham et al., 2008);
- Faculty report numerous logistical problems with using group work and that it is very time consuming (Burdett, 2007);
- Faculty note that unless grades are tied to group effort, group members often work individually and just share answers, defeating the purpose (Hawthorn & Ingram, 2002).
In our survey, neither students nor faculty had difficulty identifying drawbacks to group work, as can be seen in the graphs below.

Faculty Responses (N = 93) to the question, “What do you see as the disadvantages/drawbacks of group work?”

Student Responses (N = 257) to the question, “What do you see as the disadvantages/drawbacks of group work?”
Some statements about disadvantages of group work from students and faculty are presented below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Faculty</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• “I don’t see anything wrong with groupwork.”</td>
<td>• “Students not doing their part. Pressure to do other student's work.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “The personal &quot;relationships&quot; in group work are absolutely not worth the hassle of dealing with when nearly every group I have ever been a part of ends up with at least one person attempting to throw someone else under the bus.”</td>
<td>• “Poorly written reports (looks like individual work was pasted together at the last minute)”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “Everyone not participating”</td>
<td>• “Takes lots of time dealing with slackers and members not motivated to get good grade”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “It takes up time better spent listening to an instructor or working through a text book independently.”</td>
<td>• “Easy to get off task, get distracted”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Most people, unfortunately, see group work as an &quot;easy A.&quot; They believe they can rely on the others in the group to do all the work. .. it makes it very difficult to find a time to meet when each member has several other groups to meet with also.</td>
<td>• “You are not able to assess the work of each student”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “Students not doing their part. Pressure to do other student's work.”</td>
<td>• “Social loafing.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this case, one problem, group members doing unequal amounts of work, was a clear issue for both faculty and students, mentioned by roughly half of the respondents in each group.

When asked to check off a list which problems they perceived with group work, faculty and students were mostly in agreement, with four notable exceptions:
For these four items, faculty reported significantly more problems than students. In contrast, as can be seen in the next graph, faculty and students were in agreement about the commonality of the next nine potential drawbacks.

Whereas some problems, like group members arguing over who gets what role or having a group member drop or stop coming to class, were relatively uncommon, others, like concerns about group members having different levels of ability or group members not doing their fair share of the work, were quite common. What is notable, however, is that faculty and students were largely in agreement about the problems of using group work. Again, this suggests that faculty may benefit from explicitly acknowledging these drawbacks when introducing group work and discussing potential solutions with students. Both faculty and students appear to be motivated to reap the advantages of group work and avoid the disadvantages, so a more collaborative approach to these issues could prove beneficial.

Uses of Group Work

Among the 93 faculty who completed the survey who reported using group work, the distribution of frequency and typical time frames was:
With respect to how to assess students on graded group work, both faculty and students reported three common options:

**Time Frame**

- **In Class**: Faculty 50%, Student 40%
- **Next Class**: Faculty 20%, Student 30%
- **1-2 weeks**: Faculty 30%, Student 40%
- **3-4 weeks**: Faculty 10%, Student 20%
- **Over 4 weeks**: Faculty 0%, Student 10%

**Assign Grades**

- **Same grade**: Faculty 60%, Student 50%
- **Diff grade**: Faculty 40%, Student 30%
- **Fixed + Individual**: Faculty 30%, Student 20%
- **Divide Grade**: Faculty 10%, Student 0%
Additionally, both faculty and students were asked to report the strategies faculty used when implementing group work. For the majority of possible pedagogical strategies, faculty reported higher levels of use than students perceived:

As can be seen from the faculty responses, the use of group work requires significant time, effort, and attention on the part of the faculty member.
Additionally, we queried faculty and students about why faculty use group work in their classes.

Faculty (N = 93) responded:

![Faculty Responses](chart1.png)

Students (N = 257) responded:

![Student Responses](chart2.png)

Note here the significant frequency of both faculty and students who reported the use of group work to teach students how to work in “real world” situations. This suggests that faculty have been quite effective at communicating that pedagogical reason to students. However, note also that a significant number of students erroneously perceived that group work required significantly less grading/effort.
Moreover, it is particularly interesting to explore students’ perceptions on “Why professors at GSU use group work?”

- “A mindset that "we will have to work in groups “when in the workforce where these problems will occur. However, freeloaders get fired in the workforce, everyone wants to go home, and we don’t divide my paycheck if I do all of the work.”
- “Because they don't want to lecture.”
- “To have less papers or assignments to grade.”
- “They feel obligated to do so.”
- “Haven't a clue. No one has ever said.”
- “Ggrrrrr”

Group Work Across the University

% of Students Reporting any Group Work in the Following Areas:

Here, note the relatively high levels in many different disciplinary areas. However, keep in mind that these numbers do not adjust for the relatively small percentage of students who take IT or Education courses compared to the large number of students to take core classes in the other areas. To address that issue, we also queried students about each core course required of all GSU students. The graph below displays the percentage of all students responding to the survey that had taken the listed course at GSU and had any form of group work within the course.
% of Students who have taken the course at GSU and had any group work in it:

Note that for three courses, FYE 1220 and both English composition courses, a majority of students reported some form of group work in the class. In contrast, several of the courses with significantly larger class sizes, HIST, POLS, & ECON, had significantly lower levels of group work.

Recommendations for Using Group Work

- Talk to other faculty about how and why they use group work, both faculty in your teaching area and those in other departments or colleges. There are many excellent ideas already in use at GSU.

- Clearly label group work as “group work” and use that as an opportunity to discuss the pedagogical value of group work. Link group work to specific learning outcomes—know why you are using it and clearly communicate that to students. Make sure your assessments reflect those learning outcomes and explain this connection to students.

- Acknowledge that one of the greatest disadvantages of group work is the potential for social loafing and the unequal distribution of work. Work with students collaboratively to identify strategies to address this problem as it applies to your specific group work context.

- Consider using group work in your classroom, but don’t feel rushed or pressured just because many other faculty members do. You need to feel comfortable using any new teaching strategy.
References


