

## Utilizing Group Dynamics to Increase Productivity in Student Projects.

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During a recent class group project, while conducting group conferences, I discovered an astonishing statistic. In a class of around forty students, with six groups with roughly six students each, the level of participation of at least two students from each group was far below acceptable levels. In fact, during conferences with students, I found that several students didn't even know what the topic of their group project was. Given that out of each group of six, two don't participate enough to actually get any good out of the exercise — and I think two out of six is a conservative estimate — then about one-fourth are getting nothing out of the lesson and are probably hindering the other seventy-five percent from reaching their potential.

I puzzled over the matter, wondering how the situation might be improved. I came to the conclusion that much of the problem with group activities lies in the concept teachers (and students) generally hold of the word, “group.” Generally, when teachers ask students to form groups, what they really mean is that the students are to form *aggregates*, and what aggregates lack is a carefully defined set of roles and inter-relationships.

The process outlined in the following pages is designed to decrease the tendency of some students to duck under the turnstiles of English education. Most English teachers some times use activities that require forming *groups*, but these groups are short lived. Their composition is usually based on

the seating arrangement that day and the division of roles and responsibilities of the group are either vague or soon forgotten after class. This falls quite short of my definition of *group*.

This course marks a turning point in my approach to English instruction from a teacher-focused style to a one based on the belief that the best class management system helps individuals become autonomous, yet interdependent, members of self-monitoring and self-motivating groups.

I am now experimenting with allocating responsibilities shared in such a way that reduces the need for teacher intervention and circumvents non-involvement on the students' part, by simply making non-involvement less attractive an option than the assigned task. This program simultaneously allows advanced students to excel in a favorable environment, discourages counter-productive behavior and reacts intelligently to that behavior in such a way that treats students as responsible persons.

I believe there are two reasons why some students don't participate. First, many may not participate because they don't have to. They feel that they have nothing to lose by doing nothing. Secondly, some students don't work *because* they have to. Nonparticipation is often an act of self-assertion that undermines later understanding, use and enjoyment of English communication. Therefore, the instructor must work to redirect students back into the program by creating a desire to learn, of course, but also through structuring the group dynamics of the classroom environment so that they students receive behavior-modifying feedback from the other students, not only from the instructor. By placing the responsibility of performance upon group members the teacher may be freed from the role of monitor and become a facilitator for students' interest in foreign

cultures and foreign languages.

I am now testing the hypothesis that a class program based upon sound class management and carefully designed social engineering will reduce the need for monitoring on the part of the teacher. Group members will do that themselves when the relationship between group members is based upon *shared responsibilities*. As students begin to monitor each other and urge each other to complete the task, the instructor may even step back and let the class run itself in an atmosphere of genuine enthusiasm. Times at which a student is not performing the tasks can be treated as an opportunity for communication, and the possibilities for this kind of interaction are increased when the pressure to perform comes first from other group members and only indirectly from the instructor.

Within the current model that I am now testing, the defining point of each group is not the project subject matter (since the subject for each group is identical; nor is it even the central task, since there is no central task. Groups have a *common task*, but no central one. An individual's work is his or her own, but it's each group member's responsibility to see that everybody's work gets done. Each group member's project may be related to the others' thematically, but a common theme is not what defines the group. What defines a group is the common task of each group member helping the others to complete their individual projects. What defines each group are the *shared responsibilities* of all the group member and the understanding that insufficient output from one student will result in more work from the other students or a lowering of the group score.

In my current model a student's final grade is based upon three scores: the group score as averaged from the each member's performance; the grade that each member receives from other members based upon their opinion of his or her

performance as defined in a form provided by the instructor; and the instructor's evaluation of the student's performance.

### **Group Formation and Election to Office.**

Upon beginning, it is important that the students understand (a) the aim of the project; (b) the scope of the project; (c) the demands of the project. The scope of the project is the duration and time to be spent per week. It is also a way of defining how the students and teacher will know when the project is completed. The aim of the project is to reach a higher level of proficiency in speaking and writing about a given subject. (In the current project, the aim is to create a homepage the subject of which is Japanese enka folk music. The details concerning this particular project fall outside the scope of this article and I will mention it only once or twice simply as a point of reference.)

What follows is an abbreviated description of the steps through which students can be led so that they become responsible to each other, not only to the instructor.

First, students need to be divided into groups. The process should be completely random, so that students don't feel that there is any unfairness involved. The instructor may simply shuffle some cards and divide the groups by number into groups of four or use whatever method best suits his or her classroom situation. This step can be made to be short and simple or it may be developed into an entire activity in itself.

Once the students are sitting in their separate groups it is time for them to get to know each other a little better so that they can later decide which position each student should fill. They may or may not already know each other to some extent, but they probably don't know each other in terms that are

relevant to the project. In order to make informed decisions about who should take what role in the group, the students report about each other's prior experiences with English and the instructor needs that kind of information, too. They are also asked to report any experiences they've had in leadership roles. Students are first asked to complete a form asking about their past experiences with English and with the theme of the project, which in this case is enka music. For the purpose of brevity I am not including copies of the forms, but am just describing their purpose and composition.

The first form is called, "My Profile." The form first asks if the student has ever occupied a leadership position in school, team sports, or college clubs. It asks the students questions about their experience with English such as "Do you have a special experience with English? Have you ever competed in an English contest? Have you ever written an English letter? Have you ever read an English story on the internet?" The form also asks about the students experience with foreign cultures. It asks the students if they have ever visited an English speaking country, attended any international conventions or if they have ever spoken to a foreigner, not including the instructor, outside of the classroom. It asks whether the students have ever watched a movie in English (with Japanese subtitles, of course). In my case, moving closer towards the theme of music, the form asks if any of the students know the lyrics of any English songs, if they play any musical instruments. Students fill out the form writing in the first person and simple past and past-perfect tense.

The next form the students complete is the "His / Her Profile." Each student hands his or her "My Profile" form to the student to the left. So, now each student is holding the "My Profile" form of the student sitting to the right. The instructor

distributes the "His / Her Profile" form to all the students. This form simply asks the same questions as the previous one, but has changed grammatically from first-person to third-person. For example, the first question reads as "Has *student's name* ever been the leader of . . ." and the student's introduction of the other member would be "He has been the captain of his soccer team," or "She has been the leader of her brass band." When the forms are completed each student stands and introduces the student to the right, reading from the form. This form has three purposes. It reinforces a basic English grammatical exercise as well as vocabulary. It makes the students more aware of each other's skills.

Now that the students are on the way to becoming a group and not just an aggregate, they are ready to assign each other to the various positions or "offices." These offices include, Leader, Second Leader, Secretary, Second Secretary, First Messenger and Second Messenger. Their duties are described below:

The Leader's primary role is to make sure that the other members all understand each task. Some forms are better explained to six people standing nearby than to the entire class. The leader must encourage every member in his or her group to participate. If a student cannot or chooses not to do his or her work during the lesson, the Leader must help that student complete it later or ask another member to do it.

The Vice Leader's responsibilities are the same as the Leader's. The Vice Leader may be asked to help out when the Leader is absent.

The Secretary keeps progress reports for the group based on the forms that are handed in to the instructor. Some information will be general, such as how many words did each student look up in the dictionary; or specific, for example, who was

helped by who and so on. Secretaries are responsible for making photocopies of forms for both the groups' and the instructor's folders. Secretaries may accompany the instructor to the office for the purpose of making the copies.

The Vice Secretary's responsibilities are the same as the Secretaries'. The Vice Leader may be asked to help out when the Secretary is absent.

Both Messengers are responsible for communication with other groups, for example when the class is pooling research to create a common lexicon. They are responsible for recording the information they gather on the forms provided and for returning those completed forms to the Secretary.

After an explanation of the offices, the students are then given the "Election Form." They then vote themselves and the other group members into each office by writing a group member's name in the blank provided by each office title. The form is reproduced roughly below:

Election	
Group _____	Name _____
I choose _____	to be Leader
I choose _____	to be Vice Leader.
I choose _____	to be Secretary.
I choose _____	to be Vice Secretary.
I choose _____	to be Messenger 1.
I choose _____	to be Messenger 2.

At the front of the room are several ballot boxes, one for each group. Students have five minutes to complete the ballot. The instructor explains that the last student from each group to fill out the ballot must count the votes. After all the votes are in the last student from each group counts the votes to determine

who is the First Secretary; they remain at the front of the room until each group's First Secretary has been determined. Then they each announce to the rest of the class the name of their group's First Secretary, after which time they may sit down. The First Secretary of each group then comes to the front of the room and counts the remaining votes to determine who is be First Leader, Second Leader and so on.

To aid them in this speaking exercise they are given a form, which looks something like this:

Our Second Messenger is \_\_\_\_\_.  
 The name of our First Messenger is \_\_\_\_\_.  
 I'm \_\_\_\_\_. I'm the First Secretary.  
 We chose \_\_\_\_\_ to be our Second Leader.  
 \_\_\_\_\_ was chosen to be our First Leader.

Later, each Second Secretary fills out the instructor's form at the front of the class. That form lists, one group at a time, the names of the students in a box corresponding to the office to which they were elected. This form is for the instructor's records so that he or she can refer to it at any time in order to know who holds each office for each group. While the Second Secretaries are doing this, the newly elected First Leader must prepare a short three to five sentence speech accepting the office.

Now that the groups have been formed and the roles for each have been designated the project may begin. As the work is assigned the relationships between the members will become clearer since their score is based partly upon how well they fulfill their obligations to the group.

It is hope that a method of class management utilizing group social dynamics engineered by the instructor and based upon a

more egalitarian model of a teacher-student relationship will allow the instructor to take on a less authoritarian role while the students rise to the challenge presented by their peers in a system that gives them a voice in the grading process.

I plan to explore this method in the coming year and would like to report my findings in a later issue of this publication.