

Building Community and Collaboration Through Social Function in Group Projects

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Introduction

In agricultural education, group projects are an essential component of the learning experience. Collaborative learning enhances content retention, creativity, and engagement, making it a powerful tool in modern education (Bruffee, 1999). However, students often struggle to establish strong working relationships, which can impact both the collaborative process and project outcomes. Research by Tuckman (1965) outlines the four stages of group development as forming, storming, norming, and performing. In the preliminary stage known as forming, participants of the group may have misconceptions as to how they “fit” into the group or the overall purpose of the project. Without the establishment of roles and identifying strengths amongst the group, negative outcomes can arise such as lack of communication, frustration, and loss of project efficiency. The group then finds itself in the storming phase where conflict and friction prevent the group from moving through the remaining stages, hindering progress toward the outlined goals (Tuckman, 1965).

To address the challenges of group dynamics and help students build stronger relationships, an innovative approach was implemented in a team leadership class. This approach emphasized the value of having a social function, an informal, out-of-class social event designed to foster personal connections among group members before academic work begins, and reflection as part of the forming stage of group development. By allowing students to interact in a relaxed, non-academic setting, the social function helps establish trust, communication, and rapport early in the semester, ultimately leading to more effective collaboration throughout the project. The need for this idea stemmed from the observation that group cohesion is critical to successful teamwork yet often overlooked in traditional classroom settings.

How It Works/Methodology/Program Phases/Steps

Students in a team-based leadership class were assigned to criterion-based groups, chosen according to their perceived individual strengths. The first step of group development, forming, occurs at the beginning of the semester and is crucial for fostering group cohesion and trust. At this point, students are introduced to one another and begin to navigate their roles within the group. It is during this stage social functions take place. This process is essential for any group dynamic, whether the group is working on a semester-long project or a smaller assignment with a shorter time frame. For smaller group projects, while social functions may look different in terms of activity or scope, the forming stage remains equally critical for establishing a foundation of trust and open communication.

The key rule is that the social function should not double as a business or work meeting. Students are given the autonomy to choose the activity that best fits their budget and preferences. This could range from a low-cost activity like a walk, coffee meet-up, or free campus event, to a more expensive option like dining out or bowling, with the understanding each student will bear any costs associated with the event. After the social function, each team member submits two items: a reflection paper articulating insights gained from the social function and evidence of team participation. Following the social function and reflection, the group develops a team contract. This contract outlines the expectations, roles, and responsibilities for each group member throughout the semester. It serves as a tool for holding each other accountable and guiding the team's collaboration moving forward. While developed during the forming stage, the

team contract plays a crucial role in the norming and performing stages of group development, it helps set clear expectations and fosters mutual respect among team members.

Throughout the semester, students complete reflection assignments to track their progress and assess the evolving dynamics of their team. These reflections allow students to evaluate how their group is progressing through each stage of development. They assess how their initial social function influenced the group's cohesion and communication during the forming, and how their teamwork developed during storming and norming. The final reflection at the end of the semester is a more comprehensive analysis of the team, where students evaluate the progression through each stage and how their relationships evolved from the forming to the performing. By reflecting on each stage, students gain deeper insight into the processes contribute to effective group work, helping them understand how their early social function, team contract, and continuous reflection shaped the group's dynamics, success, and project outcomes.

Results to Date/Implications

Feedback from students indicates this approach improves collaboration by creating a sense of camaraderie and mutual respect, students develop a stronger sense of team cohesion, which can reduce the stress and conflict often arise in group projects. Students can understand personal strengths and weaknesses of the group members and establish a sense of normalcy. Once these dynamics are understood, they transition into the performing stage more easily. Additionally, it fosters better communication and problem solving when students are tasked with working together later in the semester. Students who have not participated, missed, or were not active in their group's social function often are quickly moved to the out-group and have to work to move back into the in-group. Furthermore, previously classes who have not engaged in this activity have spent significantly more time in the forming and storming stages, which negatively impacted their experience and their success.

Future Plans/Advice to Others

This approach will continue to be refined and adapted based on feedback from students, including qualitative data on how the social function influences project success. Additionally, exploring the effectiveness of this method in different class structures and for varying types of group projects will provide valuable insights into its versatility and potential for wider application. For others considering a similar approach, a key piece of advice is to ensure the social function is distinctly different from academic work. Encouraging students to view this time as a genuine opportunity for relationship-building, without any academic expectations or pressure, will create a more relaxed and productive environment for socializing. Instructors should be open to adapting the format depending on the specific needs of the group. For smaller projects, a different type of social function may be more appropriate, but the forming stage remains vital. Regardless of the project's scope, taking time early on for students to build trust and establish rapport sets the stage for more effective teamwork and improved project outcomes.

Costs/Resources Needed

There are no set costs associated with the event. While the social function is mandatory, students may choose a more costly activity at their own expense. The main resources needed are the time and commitment of students to participate in the event and complete the reflection.

References

- Bruffee, K. A. (1999). *Collaborative learning: Higher education, interdependence, and the authority of knowledge* (2nd ed.). Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Tuckman, B. W. (1965). Developmental sequence in small groups. *Psychological Bulletin*, 63(6), 384-399. doi:10.1037/h0022100