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Dyadic processes in postgraduate education: Insights from MBA student experiences



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ABSTRACT

Working productively with others is an expected norm in the work environment today. In the higher education milieu, most of the preparation for this reality is encouraged through group work. This study examines the phenomenon from a student perspective and provides insights into the challenges and learning opportunities embedded within dyadic group work. Postgraduate students enrolled on a management programme at a South African university were required to complete a short reflective paper on a group experience. Content analysis was used to analyse 440 student papers. The results showed four broad themes that included: communication strategies; intended future behaviours; fit, synergy, and learning; and issues of conflict. Collaboration and cooperation are sought-after graduate skills and academy's role must be to engender these competencies as part of higher education's contribution to developing individuals who can work effectively with others in the 21st century workplace.

1. Introduction

Institutions of higher learning have a responsibility to prepare students for the modern workplace where there is an expectation that graduates have developed the ability to collaborate with others (Hancock et al., 2009; Yorke & Knight, 2004). Thus, high-quality relationships have become increasingly important within dynamic and ever-changing organisational environments (Grant & Hofmann, 2011). Furthermore, the ability to relate to a wide range of people and make a contribution to the team are considered essential graduate attributes in South Africa (Griesel & Parker, 2009). Certainly the goal of a business school, beyond the academic prospect, is to develop professionals capable of consistent and productive interaction with others (Jackson & Chapman, 2012; Krass & Ovchinnikov, 2006).

Group work in its variety of forms has been defined as a pedagogic strategy where students work together without direct lecturer interaction or supervision towards a common objective (Killian, 2003). While various terms have been used to describe the practice of group work including cooperative learning and collaborative learning (Drake, Goldsmith, & Strachan, 2006) the process remains understood as one where students work together to achieve a common goal. Given that dyadic relationships are the central building blocks of organisations through daily interactions between people at work (Liden, Anand, & Vidyarathi, 2016), many existing management education programmes include some variation of group work. Collaboration with peers is thus considered an essential form of learning (Summers, Bergin, & Cole, 2009).

While anecdotal evidence from both faculty and students indicates varying degrees of success with group work, there is a paucity of research in this domain in South Africa. Furthermore, while garnering some attention worldwide, research around dyadic relationships – those interactions occurring between two individuals (Joshi & Knight, 2015) – is still relatively undeveloped within the academic sphere. This qualitative paper explores the experiences of postgraduate students who worked in dyads for a Master in

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Business Administration work-based project. The study presents the findings drawn from 440 student reflective papers. Through the submission of a short assignment detailing their learning and insights, students individually reflected on their six weeks of working with a randomly allocated partner. The study explored whether dyadic group work detracted from or enhanced individual learning.

2. Literature review

2.1. Dyadic relationships

While group work is generally thought to consist of three or more individuals, dyadic relationships involve person-to-person activities. These relationships are pervasive in organisational settings and occur in several ways, such as leader-member, teammate-teammate and co-worker interactions (Liden et al., 2016). There are three key aspects to relationships in dyads that are pertinent to this study: interdependence, reciprocity, and exchange. Other contributory elements to the dyadic relationship include person perception – where first impressions are made and trust is established – and relationship development – the development of shared values and attitudes and role definition. Dyadic relationship efficacy is said to occur when both parties in the relationship attribute their peer's behaviour and intentions as authentic in terms of mutual benefit (Dasborough & Ashkanasy, 2002). This authenticity ensures that peers respond with a reciprocity of effort.

High interdependence of the task – such as a paired assignment set for students – requires sharing and exchange of critical information, resources, and skills to achieve the objective (Courtright, Thurgood, Stewart, & Pierotti, 2015). In an earlier study, Watanabe and Swain (2007) showed that there are several forms of peer-peer interaction such as collaborative, dominant/passive, expert/passive, and expert/novice. Regardless of pattern of interaction, the implicit expectation of a dyadic relationship is that peers depend on one another. Within an academic setting that draws on dyadic pedagogy, it may therefore be useful for the academics to scaffold the peer process and provide related support.

2.2. Benefits and potential rewards of working with others

Although studies have found evidence to the contrary (Bacon, 2005), the obvious benefits to working with others are that students are actively engaged in the process of learning (Freiberg & Driscoll, 2005) and that this process facilitates individual learning (Borredon, Deffayet, Baker, & Kolb, 2011; Olivera & Straus, 2004). An early meta-analysis revealed that, compared to settings that do not utilise any form of group-based methodologies, collaboration among students improved learning (Lou, Abrami, & D'Apollonia, 2001). The transfer of skills and knowledge between individuals is possible as students can build on each other's ideas. One way this occurs is through engagement in collaborative dialogue. This has been described by Swain (2006) as a process whereby students engage in joint problem-solving and build and shape knowledge through language. In this practice, students learn to create 'new' knowledge. When this method is effective, collaboration can improve understanding and develop higher order thinking (Litecky, 1992). The process can also assist students – especially individuals engaged in interactions with another – in developing critical social and emotional skills through dealing with possible interpersonal issues in a constructive manner (Jacques, 2000).

2.3. Challenges of working with others

In dyads, performance does not solely depend on individual skills, knowledge, and attributes. Relationship quality, communication, and personality differences between two independent individuals have the potential to affect output (Eberly, Holey, Johnson, & Mitchell, 2017). While responses to group work in educational contexts have mostly been encouraging (Elola & Oskoz, 2010; Shehadeh, 2011; Storch, 2005), several dynamics influence the process of working with other individuals and can result in negative attitudes. These issues include dysfunctional member behaviours (Cole, Walter, & Bruch, 2008); peers disliking each other (Sampson & Cohen, 2001); and social loafing, or free-riding. These aspects have been found to reduce the enjoyment of working with others (Hall & Buzwell, 2013; Simms & Nichols, 2014). A lack of coordination by team members may also cause ineffective functioning (Lu, Yuan, & McLeod, 2012). Within dyads, the inability to hold and cultivate open lines of communication and interaction can derail peer efficacy (Bornay-Barrachina & Herrero, 2017). These kinds of difficulties – if allowed to occur and to remain unaddressed – may negatively affect the capacity of students to learn from each other and their experiences and thus diminish the purpose and performance of dyadic relationships (Ren & Gray, 2009; Rusbult, Hannon, Stocker, & Finkel, 2005).

3. Methodology

The participants of the study were postgraduate students enrolled at a South African university. All students were pursuing a Master in Business Administration degree at the time of the research project. A collaborative task was designed to allow students to gain experience in conducting a small-scale research project at a company. At the start of the course students were randomly chosen to work together in pairs on the project. The dyads were expected to remain involved throughout the process, from deciding on the topic focus to delivering the final written project. In-person and online academic support was offered to the dyads during the task. After the submission of the project, students were required to reflect on the experience of working with others. A short one-page reflective assignment – completed individually – was an assessed component of the course and students were encouraged to be forthcoming and authentic about their interpersonal interactions during the length of the project. In terms of ethical considerations, all student submissions had numbers randomly assigned to ensure confidentiality of responses. These numbers and associated

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