

“Only a group that breathes good dynamics can produce good results”- A case study of a Postgraduate student’s group experiences

*S Unjore **
SEN Department
Mauritius Institute of Education
Réduit
E-mail: sanju-18@hotmail.com

Paper accepted on 22 July 2015

Abstract

In colleges or universities, groupwork remains one of the experiences that all students have to go through, often to collaborate for a presentation, a project or an assignment. The teaching and learning that happens within groups usually depends on the group dynamics that is shared amongst all the members of the group. Taking a qualitative approach, this paper explores the group dynamics that Shahid (pseudonym), an Indian postgraduate student in Architecture experienced in two of his groups, one at undergraduate level in Delhi and the other at postgraduate level in UK. One salient finding of this study revealed that often in higher education contexts especially in one year masters degree in a foreign country, groups do not have enough time to go through the development phases properly as they have to start performing quickly and this leads to poor group dynamics which subsequently results in poor output.

Keywords: *group work, Group dynamics, Group development phases, Groups in Higher Education.*

**For correspondences and reprints*

1. INTRODUCTION

At University level, students often have to conduct groupwork for projects, presentations and assignments, and the quality of their end-product and their grades often depend on the group dynamics between the group members. Group work is usually defined as ‘pupils working together as a group or a team’ (Blatchford *et al.*, 2003, 155) or simply ‘students working together in small groups’ (Lumpe & Haney, 1998, 123). Groups usually evolve through four phases namely formation, transitioning, performance and dissolution. However, due to the institutional constraints in educational contexts, some of these phases are skipped at the detriment of developing proper group dynamics. Using a case-study approach, this paper aims to uncover the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ group dynamics that Shahid (*pseudonym*), an architecture student experienced in two particular groups during his learning days.

2. GROUP FORMATION

Ehrman and Dörnyei (1998, cited in Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003) identified several features of what constitute a group: (1) interaction amongst the group members (2) the group members perceive themselves as one unit and demonstrate a level of commitment to it (3) there are common goals and a purpose for being together (4) the group stays together for a reasonable period of time (5) the group develops an internal structure of rules and behaviours (6) the group is accountable for the action of its members.

The main phases of group development

According to Ehrman & Dörnyei (1998), there are many similarities in the group development processes of several groups which allow us to generalize the main phases of a group’s evolution. They suggest four primary group developmental stages namely: (1) Group Formation (2) Transition (3) Performing (4) Dissolution.

In the formation stage of a group, the members start getting to know each other using their best behavior and their interaction would usually resemble polite

cocktail party talk (Yalom, 1995). In the midst of this subtle negotiation, members are drawn by each other through Initial Attractions while others may also start disliking some members. Some examples of Initial Attractions are: physical attractiveness; perceived ability and competence; attitude and personality similarities; shared hobbies; similar living conditions and proximity; and comparable economic status. At a later stage this Initial Attractions can become Acceptance (Shaw, 1981; Schmuck & Schmuck, 2001). Acceptance can take the form of learning about each other; a decrease in physical distance; contact; interaction; and cooperation.

In the transitioning or the rugged transition stage, the peaceful and courteous negotiations are replaced by conflicts and the emergence of individual differences. Dörnyei & Murphey (2003) state that many groups cannot start performing without going through this chaotic phase of transition. At this stage, the group needs to decide about the rules and the tasks that need to be allocated to each group members.

In the performance phase, which overlaps with the transitioning phase, the group has developed a solid foundation of trust and they are able to make decisions as a group and move forward in the tasks allocated. At this stage, cohesion is developed amongst the group members and this cohesion helps the group to create an adequate working atmosphere so that they can all work together towards reaching the group goals. The contrary is also true where some groups are not able to move beyond the transitioning phase and due to the approaching deadlines, they have to move into the performance phase rather quickly. Hence performance occurs in an atmosphere of conflicts and uncertainty rather than in cohesion and serenity.

In the dissolution phase, the life of the group is about to be terminated as the group has met its objectives. Dörnyei & Murphey (2003) states that abrupt termination of groups can leave gaps and cast a shadow on the life of the individual group members. Hence it is encouraged that there is a proper group

closure in the group dissolution phase which can take the form of a final get-together or a dinner at a restaurant. And in groups where members have developed a deeper bond through cohesion, they would often stay in contact for a longer period of time through social networking and they would still meet for various social activities post the group termination phase.

Description of the learner

Shahid (*pseudonym*) is a 25 year old Indian male student who is doing a Masters in Architecture and Urban design at a University in UK. He is my flat mate and friend. He was chosen because his field of study (architecture) and his current postgraduate course consists mainly of group-projects, thus making him a potentially good informant for this study. Shahid’s first language is Hindi and he has a very outspoken personality.

Procedure

Forsyth (2010) states that case study is one of the best ways to understand groups in general and in many cases data about groups are collected from the interviews of its members, descriptions written by journalists or members’ biographical accounts. Then the researchers would relate this data with variables that interest them and try to determine the extent to which the case supports their hypotheses (Cahill *et al.*, 1995; Yin, 2009; cited in Forsyth, 2010).

In this study, a semi-structured interview of about 30-40 minutes was conducted in English to gather data. The informant was told about the purpose of the interview in which he had to share his ‘good’ and ‘bad’ group experiences of one group in particular. An interview log was prepared beforehand which contained the questions as well as some useful prompts in order not to miss any important details. The interviewing place that was chosen was the University’s common room.

As part of an ice-breaker and also to test the reliability of the recording device, we engaged in a casual conversation at the start of the interview.

Description of the two groups

Good Group

The good group experience that Shahid shared happened during his undergraduate years in Delhi (India) when he was doing his undergraduate degree in Architecture. He formed a group with two other male classmates, who were also his closest-friends and flat mates. They worked together on a housing project and an urban design project, which consisted of designing plans and presenting them in front of the class. As flat-mates and students of the same institution, they met every day and they would have group discussions at least once a week, in one of their flats or at the institution for a period of two years.

Bad Group

Shahid shared many general views on bad group experiences and narrated one bad group experience that affected him in particular during his master's degree in UK. The postgraduate group consisted of four members: two female members and two male members, one Chinese girl and one Chinese boy and one Indian boy (himself) and one Indian girl. They worked together on designing plans, preparing reports and presenting them in front of the class. The group would meet rarely, communications were done mainly through emails; they met once or twice in a month for the finalization of work for a period of 6 months.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Group formation and acceptance

The 'good' group of Shahid was formed on the basis of 'initial attractions' amongst the three members. Shaw (1981), Schmuck & Schmuck (2001) identified several factors that cause initial attractions amongst class members: physical attractiveness; perceived ability and competence; similarities in attitudes, personality, hobbies, living conditions, and economic and family status.

In the case of Shahid's undergraduate good group experience, the members had already been friends for several years:

Before we formed the group we were already mates....., I knew them for three, four years...

They presumably knew each other’s personality well and they already shared some common grounds, such as hobbies or interests, as part of their friendship. This friendship helped to generate significant initial attractions amongst the members.

As per Shahid, the members also perceived each other as having similar abilities and competencies as well as common beliefs towards architecture:

In architectural course everybody is subjective about architecture, people who group up they always try to pick people with the same kind of architectural faculty...

All the three members were living with the same condition:

...actually it’s just the number of people in the group, everybody, like everybody staying in the flat, flat mates.

This was another attraction point for the members as they knew that they would need a common place that was easily reachable and accessible to all in order to be able to meet up regularly for groupwork sessions. Hence, living in the same flat was seen as advantageous for their future collaboration.

Dörnyei & Murphey (2003) state that in a ‘healthy group’, initial attractions are slowly replaced by a stronger bond amongst the members; this is known as acceptance. Acceptance is the ability to accept others irrespective of their likes and dislikes. This group achieved the acceptance phase quickly due to a solid foundation of initial attractions and the acceptance phase is described by Shahid in the following words:

So there were three people in the group, all mates. I felt it was very comfortable to work...

On the contrary, initial attractions were clearly absent from the postgraduate bad group experience of Shahid. The group was formed circumstantially rather than out of choice:

There were 11 people, everybody was asked to form a group, there was already a group of three and there was already a group of four, there was another group of two, so another two was left out. They were looking to be in a group and they just had to be in our group.

Like Shahid states, often groups are formed due to an unexpected turn of events or it can also be formed forcefully by a higher authority like the teacher: 'Sometimes the group is just chosen by others', 'the faculty or somebody.' Groups that are imposed by the teacher can backlash especially as the teacher is often unaware of the pre-existing dynamics among class members.

Rogers (1983) describes acceptance as 'unconditional positive regard' where the individual is seen as possessing conflicting values and imperfections. In this group, acceptance was not reached and this is shown by Shahid's perspective on the inability of some of the group members to show that they belong to the group:

But then we will find out that he is not interested or she is not interested, then the group mates have to go through it...

Leadership style

In the good group, the democratic model of leadership was present. Forsyth (2010) states that the democratic leader would usually discuss all activities with group members before making a decision. The group evolves in an egalitarian atmosphere where members are allowed to make their own decisions on work projects and partners (Forsyth, 2010).

When asked about the type of group leader they had in the Good group, Shahid explained that there was one boy who was their leader and he described the dynamics generated by the group leader as:

He could talk really well. There is always the thing you know in a presentation, a person who can talk and put ideas through very well is the person who actually has to talk. He could talk very well so he was kind of. He was heading the discussions and yeah other ways scheduling and so on we used to sit down and decide.

It’s not about language, it’s about categorising and structuring. He knew how to structure the presentation properly so he... some people might be good in design, they might be good in things in architecture but when it comes to presentation, ... when it comes to talking they kind of lag behind in that...

Shahid highlights that in architecture, many people can be good in design but for presentations, the same people can ‘lag behind’. One can observe that the leader was chosen on the basis that he was a good orator and he could deliver the final presentation. This unique and important skill gives additional credence into choosing that one person as their group leader. It is also interesting to note that while the leader was ‘heading the discussions’, all the members were included as they all sat down and decided together in a democratic style.

On the other hand, in the bad group, the laissez-faire style of leadership was found. Forsyth (2010) states that the laissez-faire leader does not intervene in the group activities as all decisions are made in a rather ad-hoc fashion without any supervision.

When asked about the presence of a group leader in the bad group, Shahid explained that there was no group leader:

There was no group leader in that group. It’s a report submission, it’s just everyone sit up and put down stuffs but when you call for meetings they never turn up.

In the laissez-faire style, there is often an absence of a clear leader that leads to a chaotic atmosphere. In such a group, the work is usually accomplished in a more

ad-hoc fashion and there seems to be reluctance from the group members to endorse the role of the leader. This reluctance can be justified by some existing problematic structures in the group that no group members want to face as a leader. And this problematic structure is revealed by Shahid who states that communication was the main problem:

Well what we can do is to sit down and try to communicate through means like by sketching out. We have to show them by showing images something. Communication is the main issue, they cannot put their ideas and contribution becomes very less... We cannot contribute much because of the same problem and we step back into doing the mediocre stuff like making 3ds and Photoshop...

This internal communication problem seems to be generated mainly by the poor English communication skills of the Chinese students. This is further discussed under the **Group cohesiveness, conflicts and closure** heading of this paper. It can be seen that the daunting task of managing a group with underlying difficult communication structures lead to the laissez-faire style of leadership where no group members wanted to endorse a defined role of leadership.

Group cohesiveness, conflicts and closure

Cohesiveness consists of three components, namely interpersonal attraction, commitment to task and group pride (Mullen & Copper, 1994). While interpersonal attraction has already been discussed as initial attractions, commitment to task in the group can be seen by the common group mindset that is adopted by the members while performing, the group task: ‘... we had the same kind of frequencies and ideas’. Although convergence in the same way of thinking helps to commit all the members to the task, it can also dangerously lead

to ‘groupthink’ where the group members become unwilling to challenge the ideas of others in order to maintain a peaceful relationship within the group.

Shahid shows his pride and belonging to the group by comparing the group’s ideologies with other groups:

Internal evaluation is just like anybody puts up anything and they have to get mark for it... We did not take much in the internal evaluation; our main focus was to score in the external evaluation because that is what matters a lot.

One should note the strong use of ‘our’, ‘we’, ‘anybody’ and ‘they’. Putting emphasis on the difference between ‘us’ and ‘them’ can also be seen as dangerous if it leads to exaggerated rivalry or competition like it can happen in sports. However, groupthink can also lead to a high degree of cosines whereby the members are unwilling to challenge each others’ ideas.

In this case, it seems that the right degree of cohesiveness was achieved as there were no exaggerated cosines or excessive rivalry within the group.

The group subsequently matured and it became part of their identity as they decided to keep the same group for a second year:

We continued the same group in our fifth year too because we felt that the group that we made last year was very good and we did really well in our projects.

If a group is working well and is seen as an enjoyable experience as well as an effective group, the members will want to reproduce its dynamics by forming the same group for subsequent groupwork or projects.

Closure or group dissolution is often a difficult and sensitive phase. Kemp & Taylor (1992) state that closure is about accepting the past and devising the path for the future while also enjoying the present moment. In Shahid’s group, there was regular contact between the group members as their friendship continued even after the closure of the group as pointed out by Shahid:

We had lots of fun during all the group years as well as after that, we used to party a lot and have fun. I always keep in contact, I am still in contact.

The strength of their group and the fact that they shared ties other than just the groupwork helped them to negotiate the closure of the group in a better way. Today in the technological world, keeping in contact has never been easier, especially through social networking; hence, it is never a definite goodbye to the members of the group, but it is rather an end to the purpose of the group after its goal has been accomplished.

On the other hand, cohesiveness was never attained in the bad group experience of Shahid. There seems to have an excessive of rivalry or rather miscommunication within the group that disrupted the entire cohesion of the entire group. Yet a milder rivalry could have benefited the group to generate ideas that are more interesting and impactful. Erhman & Dörnyei (1998) state

that past research has shown that there is a positive correlation between group cohesiveness and productivity. Communication problems between the various members due to their different nationalities and their different baggage in architecture not only created conflicts between the members and prevented cohesion but they also affected productivity negatively:

The problem is that since everybody is from different backgrounds and nationalities, some people are not even good in their skills in English, they do not understand, they do not kind of get what we are trying to tell them. It becomes difficult, communication becomes difficult... they cannot put their thoughts and ideas, their input becomes very less.

Oyster (2000) explains that in subgrouping, members can form coalitions and can try to control the group when it develops. While this process is often identified in

the early years of groups when they are undergoing a rugged transition, in the case of Shahid's bad group experience, there was the formation and sustenance of a subgroup which seemed to be detrimental to the cohesiveness of the whole group:

Then the group mates have to go through it and they have to neglect the fact there is another group member.

Often in postgraduate courses as seen in the bad group experience of Shahid, there is not enough time to go smoothly through all group development phases and this can lead to the radical formation and sustenance of subgroups as the group needs to start performing quickly in order to reach its goals.

4. CONCLUSION

For Shahid, a good group experience is when all the members of the group ‘...can contribute equally and can have a mutual understanding...’ In the case of his good group experience, one can highlight the strength of initial attractions and the sharing of a common philosophy as key in helping the group members to create a cohesive group that generated interesting group dynamics. On the other hand, in case of his bad group experience, one can highlight the lack of time for the group to develop through all the phases properly. Often in higher educational contexts, groups are formed overnight and are given specific goals by teachers, goals that have to be accomplished in a specific time-frame. And in the case of Shahid’s bad group experience, it can be said more time and communication was needed in the transition phase especially considering that the group members came from different backgrounds both in terms of culture and architectural knowledge.

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