

## **Draft Research Plan Assignment – Enhancing the Effectiveness of Group Work**

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### **Introduction/Background**

Educational literature attests to the fact that collaborative learning in the form of group work is a widely used instructional method with significant learning potential, however, as an instructional method it is often ill developed (Scager, Boonstra, Peeters, Vulperhorst, & Wiegant, 2016; Oakley, Brent, Felder & Elhajj, 2004). Simply putting students in groups will not result in students' achieving the benefit of collaborative learning (Scager et al., 2016). In order for students to benefit from group work, instructors must facilitate self-regulatory behaviour within teams and assist groups in creating clear expectations surrounding team functioning (Oakley et al., 2004). This proposed research study looks to examine how the introduction of a group charter (Appendix A) can help facilitate self-regulatory team behaviour thereby enhancing the effectiveness of group work.

### **Literature Review**

#### *Collaborative Learning in Higher Education*

Education research clearly articulates the value of collaborative learning and the positive relationship between collaborative learning and student achievement (Cumming, 2010; Curseu & Pluut, 2013; Johnson & Johnson, 2009; Khosa & Volet, 2013; Oakley et al., 2004).

Collaborative learning may be defined as “a teaching method in which students work together in small groups to perform educational tasks requiring a high degree of interdependence between them” (Curseu & Pluut, 2013, p. 88). Collaborative learning in the form of group work also provides students with opportunities to develop social, communication and conflict management skills and prepare students for entering the workplace where teams are used extensively (Curseu & Pluut, 2013; Myers et al., 2009; Oakley et al., 2004). As stated by Cumming (2010), “These skills, developed through collaborative work, are not only crucial for success in higher education but can also influence an individual’s later employability and career prospects (p. 31).

#### *Problems Associated with Group Work*

As Scager et al. (2016) state, “Just forming groups, however, does not automatically result in better learning and motivation” (p. 2). Research attests to the fact that the benefits of collaborative learning are often not achieved (Khosa & Volet, 2013; Oakley et al., 2004; Scager et al., 2016). Problems relating to group work include varying levels of student motivation, interpersonal conflicts, and logistical problems (Henry, 2006). Another issue mentioned

frequently in the literature is the existence of “free riders” or “slackers” – each term referring to group members who do not contribute equally, or at all, to group tasks (Cumming, 2010; Myers et al., 2009; Scager et al., 2016). To combat these issues students tend to withdraw or take a piecemeal approach to assignments resulting in little to no collaborative learning and group members gaining knowledge of only parts, and not the whole, of a project (Henry, 2016; Myers et al., 2009).

### *Group Charter as an Intervention to Enhance the Effectiveness of Group Work*

How may effective student groups be characterized and what can instructors do to help facilitate effective groups? Cumming (2010) characterizes effective groups as those with “a group process in which accountability, leadership, roles and decision making are shared amongst members, internal conflict is minimal and cooperation among members is high” (p. 42). To enhance the effectiveness of collaborative learning, instructors are advised to assist students in the development of teamwork skills and group process/task work skills (Tombaugh & Mayfield, 2014; “Making Group Contracts”, n.d.; Oakley et al., 2004). Increased learning and satisfaction with group work was found to occur when students were made aware of the processes needed for successful group work before the start of the project (Cumming, 2010). Cumming’s (2010) study explored group management strategies initiated by students in an effort to provide insight into the development of effective groups. Her results indicated that student groups who more frequently set goals and used a timeline as well as discussed group dynamics, roles and conflict resolution strategies were more likely to perceive their group to be effective. She concluded that instructors need “to help students help themselves to work better in groups” (p. 41). Scager et al. (2016), also examined the underlying factors that contributed to successful collaborative learning. They determined that incorporating elements of student autonomy and self-regulatory behaviour fostered a sense of responsibility and shared ownership which led to more effective collaborative learning. One way to facilitate student autonomy and self-regulatory behaviour is have teams formulate their own set of guidelines and expectations of one another in the form of a group charter (Hansen, Owan, Pan, & Sugawara, 2014; “Making Group Contracts”, n.d.; Oakley et al., 2004).

### **Research Questions**

This proposed study will attempt to address the following main and sub research questions:

#### *Main Research Question*

1. How will the introduction of a group charter impact (1) students’ perception of the effectiveness of group work and (2) college faculty’s perception of the effectiveness of group work?

### *Sub-Research Questions*

1. Will a group charter enhance the self-regulatory behaviour of teams?
2. Will a group charter decrease occurrences of faculty intervention stemming from “slackers”?

### **Research Design**

#### *Research Methodology*

This study will use a qualitative research methodology to examine the impact of a Group Charter on students’ and faculty’s perception of group work.

#### *Research Design*

An action research approach is proposed for this study. Action research provides the opportunity for instructors to examine and solve their teaching concerns “in action” (Lesha, 2014). The study will involve the “processes of intervention, observation, data collection, analysis, and reflection” by the instructor with an objective to realize improvements in teaching practice (Elgie et al., 2012, p. 12).

#### *Participants*

Participants in this study will include the faculty conducting the action research who has a formalized group work component in their course. Participants will also include students who have: (1) taken a course with a formalized group work component that did not include a group charter; and (2) are currently taken a face-to-face course at Durham College with a formalized group work component where a group charter will be introduced.

#### *Ethical Considerations*

To ensure ethical treatment of participants in this study, an application will be made to the Ethics Review Board at Durham College. Ethical issues identified for this study are to ensure that consent is received from student participants and that any personal identifying information collected remains confidential. To this end, the researchers will obtain informed consent from student participants.

#### *Data Collection*

During the course where the group charter has been introduced, faculty will observe participants’ actions and behaviours in relation to group work and reflect on these observations. Upon conclusion of the course, participants will complete an open-ended questionnaire to document their observations of their group work experience. Faculty will then

reflect on the results of the questionnaire and make recommendations for future group work interventions.

#### *Data Analysis*

Student questionnaire data will be analyzed by looking for themes/patterns and classifying these themes/patterns as they relate to the main and sub-research questions. Faculty observations in conjunction with questionnaire data will be used to help reflect on the value derived from the introduction of a group charter and to make recommendations for future use.

#### *Significance and Contribution to the Field*

At an institutional level, the results of this study will help faculty at Durham College enhance the effectiveness of group work which is a major component of many programs. These findings can be used to inform decisions about possible modifications to the design of group work and contribute to faculty professional development.

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# Appendix A

The following Group Charter was modified from an existing template (Dyjur, 2014).

## Group Contract

### COMPLETING YOUR GROUP CONTRACT

Your team contract template is divided into four major sections:

- A. Establishing team procedures
- B. Timelines and milestones
- C. Identifying expectations
- D. Specifying the protocol and consequences for failing to follow procedures and fulfill expectations

Make your contract as specific as possible. Include a timeline, and who is assigned to do each step.

The original contract with group member signatures is due in class on (date here). A copy also must be uploaded to each group's discussion board by the same date. Every group member needs to reply to the post, stating that:

- They have participated in forming the procedures, expectations, and consequences stated in the contract.
- They understand the contract and will abide by what has been outlined by the group.
- They will accept the consequences if they do not abide by something stated in the contract.

Once your group contract has been approved, your group is ready to begin working on the project! You may find at some point that the group is not working as effectively as you had hoped. Do not delay in implementing the protocols established in the contract. Seek guidance from the instructor if necessary.

Instructions on the group contract are in brackets. Please delete them when filling in the form.

# (Course Title and Number)

## Group Charter

**Date:**

**Project Topic:**

**Group Members:**

List the first and last names of group members in this section.

### Section A: Team Procedures

#### 1. Communication

- a. Outline how the group will communicate with each other.

List the email address that group members will use for the purposes of the assignment (i.e. DC mail or personal email address). It is the responsibility of each group member to make sure they are receiving communication from the group. The third column can be used for skype addresses, phone numbers, or any other form of communication that your group decides to use.

Name:	Email Address:	Other:

- b. Preferred methods of communication and how they will be used (add, delete and revise as needed):
- Email: To be used for...
  - Group discussion board:
  - Telephone:
  - Other:
- c. Group meetings (specify how often face-to-face meetings will be held, location of meetings etc.):
- d. Asynchronous communication:
- How frequently are group members expected to check their email, and other forms of asynchronous communication?
  - How quickly are group members expected to respond to emails, discussion board posts, etc?
- e. Unavailability:
- If any group members know they will be unavailable for a specific date, please list it in this section.

## **2. Roles of Group Members**

- a. Will group members be assigned specific roles? For example, will there be a project manager, an editor? Will each group member do a section of the project? Who will compile the submissions?
- b. Feedback and editing: Will all group members provide feedback to one another? Is each group member responsible for editing their own work?

## **3. Decision Making**

- a. How will decisions be made? By consensus, majority vote, or by the project manager (if this role is assigned)?
- b. What procedures will you follow when changes are needed to previous decisions?

## **4. Record Keeping**

- a. How will you save evidence of each member's contributions to the project? Note that this is important and the instructor will NOT be able to adjust grades for non-contributing members if the group does not keep track of communication and contributions from all members.

## **Section B: Timelines and Milestones**

### **1. Project Timeline**

- a. Create a timeline for the project. Break the project into stages; for example, you might have the following: proposal, first draft, feedback to others, editing, second draft, revisions, and submission of assignment. Include a due date and time for each stage, and who is responsible for the work.

## **Section C: Expectations**

### **1. Team Participation & Quality of Work**

- a. Preference for leadership (informal, formal, individual, shared).
- b. Strategies to ensure cooperation and equal distribution of tasks and encouraging/ including ideas from all team members.
- c. What are your objectives/goals concerning quality of work; grade expectations?

## **Section D: Consequences for Failing to Follow Procedures and Fulfill Expectations**

### **1. Infractions**

- a. What does the team consider an infraction to be (i.e. not attending meetings; failure to communicate with group within established time frames; poor quality of work).
- b. Will there be different levels of infractions, some more serious than others? Or will any infraction to the group contract result in the same consequence? Outline the differences between any infractions.

### **2. Consequences of First Infraction**

- a. How will the first infraction be handled?
- b. How will this infraction be recorded? Note that it MUST be recorded if you want the instructor to be able to deduct marks or otherwise handle the infraction at a later date.



**3. Consequences of Subsequent Infractions**

- a. How will the second and subsequent infractions be handled and recorded?
- b. Notify the instructor of both infractions and how the group handled them.

**4. Assigning Individual Grade Deductions**

- a. Under what circumstances will you ask the instructor to deduct all or part marks for a group member? Example: We will request that a member's grade will be adjusted by 5% if he/she has not replied to email or used the discussion board for five consecutive days.