

Teaching Brief/GIFT

When Group Work isn't Dream Work: Insights to Enhance Students' Active Participation in Group Projects after the COVID-19 Era

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ABSTRACT

Although collaborative skills are essential in public relations due to its interdisciplinary nature, challenges of group projects are always main barriers to successful implementation in higher education. The challenges are exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to decreased student motivation in group work sessions. The article explains diverse strategies derived from intrinsic and extrinsic motivational cues to encourage students' active participation in group projects. These strategies are designed to maximize the intrinsic value of projects while mitigating common concerns and worries about group project work outcomes. Evidence from students shows the effectiveness of these strategies in fostering active participation and positive group outcomes.

Keywords: group project, motivation, intrinsic strategies, extrinsic strategies

Collaborative skills are essential for public relations professionals because of the interdisciplinary nature and task complexity in the field. In fact, proficiency in teamwork boosts performance, productivity, and creativity (Sanyal & Hisam, 2018). Employers value these skills in new hires, underscoring their importance (Baneres & Conesa, 2017). Educational institutions address these skills by integrating group work into public relations courses, helping students develop crucial competencies. Participation in such activities enhances critical-thinking, communication, and problem-solving skills, leading to academic success and career readiness (De Prada et al., 2022; Freeman & Greenacre, 2011; Slavin, 2014).

Despite the advantages of group work, its implementation poses significant challenges, including unequal workloads, irresponsible group members, and perceived unfair grading (Cera Guy et al., 2019; Darby, 2018). Often, a few students end up shouldering the majority of the work because of the lack of commitment and motivation of others (Hilliard et al., 2020), placing excessive burden on leaders while other students may exhibit free-rider behavior (Kanevsky et al., 2022). Controlling irresponsible behavior, such as meeting participation and work progress, proves difficult without external guidelines and policies. In addition, students often perceive group work grading as unfair because some may receive poor grades despite their efforts, but others receive high scores as a result of the quality of work produced by their peers (Grzimek et al., 2020; Zheng, 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the usual challenges in managing courses involving group work. Students showed reduced motivation and enthusiasm for learning, having faced an individual work-oriented approach, lack of commitment, and limited collaboration opportunities during the pandemic (Alhammadi, 2021; Neuwirth et al., 2021; Whelehan, 2020). This has negatively affected their performance

and attitudes toward group projects despite their professional importance. A recent Commission on Public Relations Education (2023) report indicated that student engagement has not fully recovered, with instructors noting challenges with postpandemic student engagement and witnessing a shift in students prioritizing the value of their contributions over time spent on coursework. Overall, students display low motivation to engage with class content.

Ryan and Deci (2020) emphasized the lack of motivation as a significant barrier, highlighting its pivotal role in influencing behavioral intention. According to self-determination theory, motivation fulfills individuals' psychological needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence, leading to increased willingness and autonomous motivation when individuals value the task at hand (Ryan & Deci, 2022). Motivated individuals form attachments to activities, fostering a task-focused competent orientation (Howard et al., 2021). Consequently, motivated individuals are more likely to engage in suggested tasks compared to those lacking motivation, particularly in educational settings where motivation significantly impacts outcomes (Howard et al., 2021; White et al., 2021).

Two main types of motivation drive individuals' active participation in tasks, namely intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation stems from fulfilling inner values, such as personal achievement, success, and self-development. It maximizes autonomy, relatedness, and self-competence, thus improving performance (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Specifically, helping students understand how tasks align with their class goals and personal plans can enhance intrinsic motivation in university settings.

Sometimes, however, intrinsic motivation alone may not suffice to initiate individuals' motivation toward an activity (Filgona et al., 2020). Often, external pressures, monitoring systems, rewards, or penalties—known as extrinsic motivation—prompt individuals to engage in tasks

(Gunawan et al., 2022). Extrinsic motivation may stimulate competence and relatedness to the task, but autonomy is fulfilled only when individuals internalize its value (Ryan & Deci, 2022). Thus, both intrinsic and extrinsic motivational strategies can complement each other to maximize motivation for a task. Consequently, in the class involved in the current study, both motivational approaches were used to enhance students' motivation and performance in group work.

About the Class

The Research Methods in Public Relations course equips students with essential research methodologies for strategic communication. Students learn to craft, implement, and assess research inquiries for various public relations situations. Emphasizing the role of research in strategic decision-making, message formulation, media strategy, and campaign assessment, the course covers methods like secondary research, in-depth interviews, and surveys. The researcher taught two consecutive sections of this course during one academic year at a university in the Midwest with 28–30 students in each. It is a required course for undergraduate students majoring in public relations and strategic communication. Most were juniors, sophomores, and seniors.

The Assignment

The class focused on three research projects (e.g., secondary research, in-depth interview, and survey) to build a comprehensive research portfolio addressing all research processes, results, interpretations, and public relations strategies to enhance a client's communication plan. Students conducted secondary research to analyze the client's internal factors (e.g., communication efforts, resources) and external factors (e.g., media coverage, public perception). They performed a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis to identify areas needing additional strategies. In-depth interviews and online surveys captured public perspectives on client issues, and the students

developed questionnaires, conducted interviews and online surveys while interpreting all the data. Based on this research, students recommended public relations strategies in a comprehensive research portfolio.

Intrinsic Motivational Strategies for a Group Project

To boost intrinsic motivation, several class guidelines were designed to align group work with individual plans and choices, promoting personal achievement. To do so, the following steps were taken:

Group Formation

Group formation is intended to promote student autonomy and relatedness. Using the self-assign function in the Canvas tool, students organized themselves into groups of three, granted the freedom to choose their collaborators for the semester. Most of the students were unacquainted, so the chances of having team members they already knew were minimal; nevertheless, working with friends was allowed. The instructor minimized involvement at this stage, intervening only to assist students needing help joining a group. In addition, groups aimed to maintain a minimum number of members to reduce coordination efforts.

Client Selection

A self-driven work environment was also emphasized for a client selection as well. Rather than the instructor assigning a research project for a predetermined client, each team discussed and selected the most suitable client for them to process in the group project. The students were advised to choose a client from well-known or long-established national corporation, nonprofit organizations, and local organizations to help them gather information easily. To do so, each student was asked to consider possible client options before they began group work, requiring everyone to be prepared for their first group meeting. The instructor also provided team discussion time to exchange their ideas for client selection to offer them the opportunity to make their own choices.

Group Contract and Group Chat

Before group work started, each group was asked to spend some time getting to know one another and creating a group contract spelling out expectations for collective work. This included meeting attendance requirements, the due dates for each member's work, and attitudes toward the progress of the group work. After making the contract with collaborative works, they were asked to sign and submit it. The purpose of the group contract was to make students feel highly involved in the group work process by creating their own policies to follow. Specifically, this activity helped students feel a sense of interdependence, cohesion, psychological safety, and confidence. This, in turn, strengthened the belief that investing in group activities would pay off and encouraged students to engage in the cognitive processes crucial to learning (Chang & Brickman, 2018; Van den Bossche et al., 2006).

Role Assignment

During group discussions, all members determined their responsibilities for a specific section of the group work and collaborated to create and submit a group working plan. To clarify roles, a list of required tasks was provided for each research project, allowing students to select tasks for their group work plans. Because many students were new to research methodologies, most tasks were unfamiliar, but through this process, they acquired new knowledge. This approach allowed every group member to autonomously decide their tasks, clarifying areas of leadership and personal responsibilities while minimizing conflicts and preventing free riders or uneven workloads, common obstacles to group effectiveness (Zheng, 2022). Moreover, it enhanced learning outcomes (Bailey et al., 2012) and student satisfaction (Brown, 2010). This approach also facilitated instructor supervision of each member's progress, ensuring high-quality work (Davies, 2009).

Dual Grading System

To ensure equitable grading outcomes and mitigate the impact

of others' work, the class adopted a dual grading system. If the entire project met high-quality standards, the group received a collective grade; however, if a particular segment was poor or the overall quality of the group's work fell short, each student received individual grades for all components of the assignment, evaluated based on rubrics and assignment guidelines. Negative perceptions about unfair group grades often stem from instances where one student's grade is affected by others' low-quality work (Grzimek et al., 2020; Zheng, 2022), often leading to stress and avoidance of group work. The dual grading system aims to alleviate such concerns and enhance self-oriented motivation among students by providing individual assessments based on their own contributions.

Extrinsic Motivational Strategies for Group Projects

The aim of extrinsic motivational strategies is to provide a pathway for initiating group work through external regulations, incentives, and monitoring processes even when motivation is low.

In-Class Teamwork Sessions

Even if each member has defined roles, a group cannot run smoothly without a system of checks to ensure their assigned responsibilities. To monitor each person and a group's overall progress throughout the semester, the class had in-class team work sessions—with a mandatory attendance requirement—before completing their project. The main benefits of having in-class time include the following: first, the instructor can check each group and each members' work progress by asking questions and reviewing their work. Second, because attendance is required, students could start working or make progress under the instructors' guidance. In-class sessions are an effective way to increase the quality of the group work because having an additional meetings outside the classroom is one of the main barriers to effective team work, resulting from schedule conflicts, poor communication, and low participation.

Mini Presentation

As part of the official checkpoints for monitoring the progress of

group work, each team was required to present the key aspects of their progress to the instructor before the submission date. The primary benefit of conducting these mini presentations was to guarantee that students had completed specific portions before the deadline while receiving direct feedback from the instructor. This approach enabled students to complete their tasks as early as possible and provided ample time for revising certain concepts based on the instructor's advice. In addition, through these presentations, students gained insights from other groups, observing how they approached and completed certain parts in different ways. This series of mini presentations effectively contributed to maximizing the quality of the group work outcomes.

Practice Time Before Implementation

The purpose of another in-class activity was to train the students in using in-depth interviews and surveys in their projects. Before actually implementing the project, each group in the class was paired with another group, allowing students to review and practice with the interview and survey materials each group had prepared; furthermore, they had time for receiving feedback so that each group could see the strengths and weaknesses of their project preparations. This activity exerted some external pressure because each group had to prepare their part to participate in the practice session with members of another group.

Peer Evaluation

Students completed anonymous peer evaluations after each project to monitor group dynamics and mitigate social loafing (Aggarwal & O'Brien, 2008). This system not only allowed students to reflect on their own contributions and those of their peers but also served as a communication channel between students and the instructor. Peer evaluations provide psychological comfort, enabling students to express concerns about group issues while focusing on their individual performances. Compared to end-of-semester evaluations, which can

negatively impact team experiences (Bacon et al., 1999), peer evaluations during the semester are more effective at motivating team members. They allow for adjustments in attitudes and behaviors, promoting reflection, group processing, and individual accountability throughout the semester (Aggarwal & O'Brien, 2008; Brooks & Ammons, 2003; Oakley et al., 2004).

Downgrade System Following Negative Feedback

The class implemented a downgrade system according to the peer evaluation results to make the peer evaluations one of the strong external regulations for the students. Specifically, if a student received two or more negative comments from the peer evaluation, the student's final score was lowered one letter grade. This method served as a robust mechanism to facilitate diligence and quality control in group work because the final grade was the most crucial goal for students.

Extra Credit for Project Leaders and High-Performance Members

Incentives were also provided for the students. Specifically, the class offered extra credit (1% of the total grade) for each project leader and for students who demonstrated excellent performance throughout the semester. Regarding the leadership role, each student in the group took the leader position for different projects, with a minimum level of expectation set to prevent any free-riding situations. Following the review of all the group work, extra credit was applied to students' final grade if they exhibited superior performance. The instructor provided comments on Canvas platform to those students to let them know that they received extra credit for their performance. These incentives proved to be a powerful motivator, encouraging active student participation in leadership roles and the production of high-quality work.

Evidence of Student Learning Outcomes

The aim of the class strategies was to motivate students both intrinsically and extrinsically, ensuring responsible participation and

positive group outcomes. Effective implementation depended on students embracing teamwork and performing well. Peer evaluations and students' opinions on teamwork and class policy were used to assess these aspects. During the previous semester students in the same class, operating without specific motivational policies, struggled with peer evaluations. With new policies, students consistently earned scores of eight out of 10 or higher, despite the COVID-19 challenges of low motivation and negative perceptions of teamwork. These strategies enabled active participation and high-quality results. The effectiveness of the class policies was shown in students' comments as well. Most of them were very positive, for example:

- "I am very pleased with the class. It was the first time I had an experience with no issues in teamwork."
- "The teamwork was exceptionally well-managed. I am thoroughly satisfied."
- "Everyone did the work on time, and we communicated well when we needed to. Everyone put in their best work and was super easy to work with."
- "We all work together really well. I have no complaints."
- "They are so hardworking and dedicated, and I couldn't be more blessed to have them as my group mates!"
- "Very pleased with team's outcome and final product"
- "I have no issues with any of my team members. They are both doing such a great job with everything!"
- "The entire team is very good about getting work done on time and communicating throughout."
- "Love my team and they worked well and I appreciate them and their work."

Overall, student comments on the teamwork policies showed high satisfaction, but some mentioned the stringency of in-class meeting times.

These comments were shared with students at the end of the class. Most feedback about class organization was positive, especially measures taken to motivate students and prevent free-rider issues and unfair grading. The following are examples.

- “Reporting about predefining each team member’s role was highly effective. Thanks to that, there was no need to worry about one person shouldering all the work or another team member hardly contributing.”
- “Sometimes, there can be quality gaps in the content produced by each individual but knowing that it wouldn’t affect the overall score and would be evaluated individually was very reassuring.”
- “Even though each person had their role to play, there was usually someone overseeing and leading the overall effort, and having reward for that made it possible to handle the tasks without much stress.”
- “It was the first time we had consistently applied the same rules for team management throughout a semester, and it allowed us to immerse ourselves in team assignments without worry.”

Discussion

Conclusions

Evidence of students’ positive perceptions and satisfaction with group work suggests that class strategies effectively fostered participation and yielded favorable outcomes despite the postpandemic decline in motivation and enthusiasm. This highlights the importance of class policies based on motivational cues, recommended for public relations educators to enhance students’ professional behavior and workplace expectations (Commission on Public Relations Education, 2023). Key lessons on motivational approaches to teaching group projects in public relations emerged from this experience.

First and foremost, recognizing that intrinsic strategies can effectively prepare students for engagement in group projects; these include enabling students to select their own groups, delineating individual

responsibilities, and employing a dual grading system. These methods are impactful because they encouraged students to internalize the importance of group work as an integral aspect of their primary responsibilities, rather than viewing it as solely belonging to others. As highlighted in the students' comments, these strategies particularly instilled in students the confidence that their contributions would be equitably assessed, thus fostering a sense of ownership over the group project.

Balancing extrinsic motivational cues, like group control and rewards, with intrinsic efforts is essential to improve students' attitudes and participation. Mandatory teamwork sessions, minipresentations, and peer evaluations created a productive environment and allowed progress to be monitored, preventing free-rider issues and ensuring timely completion of work. Rewarding high-quality work throughout the semester encouraged and recognized student efforts. This combination of motivational strategies enhanced class effectiveness, demonstrating that using various approaches together was more effective than relying on a single one or selecting certain strategies while disregarding others.

These class strategies produced additional effects, which boosted the overall outcomes of the class team project, which is consistent with interactions between the instructor and group members. Because each implementation allowed the instructor to focus on each group's progress, the overall communication and comments per person naturally increased, providing an impression of active engagement between the students and instructor.

Future Studies

The success of these teaching techniques may be the result of the impact of COVID-19 on student motivation and learning. Future researchers should explore their effectiveness in stable, traditional settings. In addition, to ease challenges with policies like mandatory attendance, instructors should explain the importance of team projects and address students' difficulties in adhering to them.

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