

The Think Tank

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Special Issue: Group Work

Warming Up to Group Work

by Jean-Paul Nadeau, Ph.D.

Welcome to the last issue of the *Think Tank* for the twentieth century. So what if we've only been around for one four-hundredth of that century; we were just getting warmed up. After all, we're the newsletter for the new millenium.

Seriously, though, this issue includes stories about and suggestions for doing group work. Written by fellow Bryant students, this collection of articles emphasizes the importance of identifying group goals, distributing the work load fairly, and staying focused during the process. ❖

Let ACE Help You Form a Think Tank

by Laurie Hazard, Ed.D.

Studying in groups is a very effective way for students to master course material. Study groups enable students to contribute to each other's knowledge base, and, when they are run properly, study groups can be productive and rewarding. Many successful Bryant students elect to form study groups on their own. These students have found that a key to understanding is verbalizing what they want to learn, discussing concepts, and using new terminology.

The staff at the Academic Center for Excellence believes that working regularly with a group of classmates is one of the best ways to learn material and improve grades; however, there are still many students who are reluctant to study in groups because they have not had positive experiences with this mode of learning. Helping students discover the power of putting their heads together in a group to think is one of the

things ACE does best; hence, ACE calls their study groups "think tanks."

ACE staff teach students the art of studying in think tanks through workshops as well as through sessions



with one of our Learning Specialists or Peer Tutors. You'll get answers to questions like: How many people should be in a study group? How often and where should we meet? What should we discuss? What's the best way for the group to prepare for an exam? So stop by soon and let us help you get your think tank going! ❖

Group Goals

by Jessica Dodge, Writing Consultant

I'll be the first to admit that the words "group project" on any syllabus are enough to make my muscles tense and my skin crawl. Although they may turn out alright in the end, group projects present innumerable problems. Because my standards are so high, I run the risk of being less than satisfied with the outcome of my group's effort. Last semester I learned a trick to lessen that risk--communication.

Sounds simple, right? Well, it's something I had previously taken for granted. I always assumed that

Quote of the Month

"I wrote a few children's books...not on purpose."

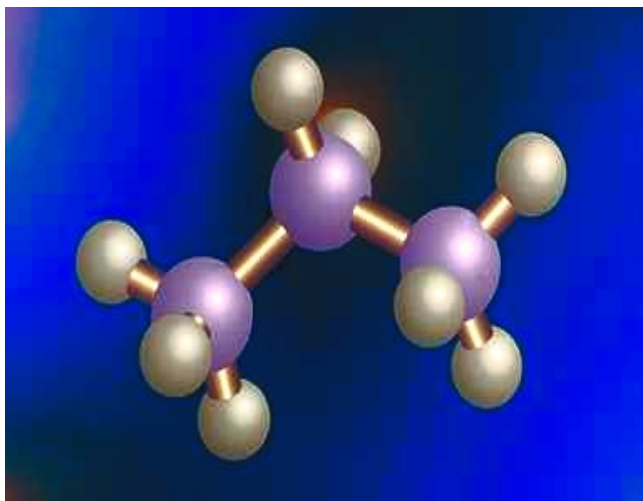
-- Richard Wright

The Think Tank welcomes submissions from students, faculty, and staff. Send submissions to the Writing Center, Hall 6, 4th floor. This newsletter is published monthly through the Bryant College Academic Center for Excellence and the Writing Center.

people were aware of my lofty ambitions and either shared them with me or conceded to take them up for the time being to help achieve *my* goal for the project. A professor inadvertently helped me to realize that a “group project” does not mean achieving “Jessica’s goal”; it means achieving “group goals.”

In this particular class, we did group work like you wouldn’t believe! Before any group project we were forced to take the time to individually write out what our own expectations were, what we planned to contribute to the group, and what our own goal was for the project. Having done this on an individual basis, we proceeded to do the same as a group. We each laid our expectations, contributions, and goals on the table for everyone to see. From there, we were able to establish *group* goals by reasonably combining individual goals. We kept these expectations and goals written down and tucked away. At the end of the project, even before a grade had been assigned, we talked about how we felt about that particular group experience—whether or not we thought we were successful as a *group*.

That was the best group project I’ve experienced, not because it resulted in the best overall project or the highest grade, but because we worked as a group toward a *shared* goal. By communicating with each other from the very beginning, we were able to lend focus to the group, and members were less likely to get upset. Generally, when members get upset with each other it is because they have differing expectations and goals that haven’t been communicated. I learned that communication can make a world of difference in making a group project a positive experience. ❖



Choose or Be Chosen

by Courtney Zullo, Writing Consultant

Picture this scenario: you are sitting in class and your mind is peacefully beginning to wander. You are thinking about what is going on this weekend or maybe even tonight. You wish the professor could speak softly so that you could catch up on some of that sleep you’ve been missing. Your head gets heavy, despite his loud tone. Suddenly, you snap alert when you hear the words “group project.”

There are usually two kinds of groups. One of them is the kind where you decide who you’ll be working

with and the other is the dreaded “assigned group.” I don’t know which choice is better.

When the professor says you are able to make your own group, your first thought is, “Great!” However, if you happen to be unlucky, like myself, this option is always presented in the class in which you do not know a soul. There is always that group of friends who sit near you who are always laughing and talking. They will obviously form a group. You stare at them with envy. You promise yourself that next semester you’re going to pick only those classes your friends are taking.

When you are done making these promises to yourself, you start to panic and ask anyone sitting near you to be in your group. You do this in fear of being the “loser” who doesn’t have a group when everyone is done choosing. A calm washes over you as you have the right number of people. You exchange numbers and make arrangements to meet next week.

As you lay in bed that night, trying to fall asleep, another panic attack begins. You are stricken with terror as you realize who is in your group. The girl next to you that you were so quick to “grab” failed every test *and* quiz so far this semester. You realize that this is the first time you have ever seen the guy who sits in front of you, who is now in your group. You picked the third kid because he always said “hi” outside class, but you wonder if that’s because that is all he *can* say. Needless to say, you can only fall asleep after you make another promise to yourself: to withdraw from that class first thing in the morning.

The other choice the professor has is to assign groups. When you hear the professor utter those words, you want to die. Your stomach drops as you quickly scan the classroom to see who you’ll be stuck with. You see the kid passed out in the corner, drooling. When the professor calls his name to be in the first group, his head suddenly pops up and grunts. You look across the room, near the window. You watch the girl with the green hair as she studies her nails, picking the black polish off. The professor calls her name. She is so busy with her nails, she does not even make the effort to respond. Your eyes finally set upon a girl who you have never heard speak. You have said “hi” to her once or twice, but she just stares at the ground. As the professor calls her name, her face turns bright red. “Maybe she’s smart,” you say to yourself. Maybe she’s the group member every group wants. At this point, you are praying that your name won’t be called. Of course, it is.

You don’t even hear the rest of the groups being called. You sit, wondering how this always seems to

happen. You wait for the professor to say, “Get into your respective groups.” Everyone slowly complies. When we are in our groups, we stare blankly at each other, wondering what to do next. Everyone knows that feeling. You admire the other groups, as most of them know each other. You see your friends. It always seems that they get to be in one group, while you are the unlucky one who gets stuck with a bunch of strangers. The drooling kid’s eyes are starting to get heavy so you break the ice and ask, “So...when do you guys want to meet?” When no one answers, you suggest next week. You always suggest next week because you don’t want to seem too anxious. At this point, you realize that you will be the “mediator” of the group and the one who does most of the work. You exchange phone numbers and the process begins.

No matter whether you are shy, lazy, or controlling, groups are an inevitable part of a college education. We need to understand that in order to get a decent grade (opinions always differ on exactly what that means), everyone needs to put forth some effort. To those who usually do nothing, anything would be good enough. To those who always do everything, try and relax. Take some stress off yourself and divide up the work and see what happens. Your group members may surprise you.

Finally, remember that your effort will be reflected in the group grade. Prioritize group meetings, because the outcome means something for everyone in the group, not only yourself. I will never forget the words of one person in my business group first semester, freshman year. When I suggested meeting around six, he stared at me with astonishment, his mouth dropping to the floor. It was though I ran over his dog. He replied, “Sportscenter is on at six!” ❖

Coping with Conflict

by Melissa Kendall, Writing Consultant

It’s the first day of school and you are day dreaming as your professor is going over the “life-line” for that class, *the syllabus*. All of a sudden, you hear the professor mention a group project and your ears perk up. You suddenly pay close attention to what the professor is saying because you love the idea of a group project. To you, a group project is going to be the best thing that will happen in that class because it will be a collaborative effort and will not take up as much of your time, compared to working by yourself.

As the professor begins the lecture, you day dream about what your group is going to be like. It is going to be the perfect project for the perfect semester! Looking around the room, you begin to wonder who the professor has assigned to your group. Are they

smart? Are they cooperative? Are they organized? Are they creative? These are some of the important qualities that you have, and, of course, you want your group members to have them as well.

You begin to picture that first day when you all meet in the library, the day you begin the project. Everyone shows up on time, just as excited as you are. The four of you sit down and begin talking a mile a minute because there are so many ideas. The first thing you do is devise a plan of action. You all sit down and easily set up appointments for future meetings. Then you divide the project up into different sections and assign each group member a certain section to accomplish. By the time you have your next meeting, everyone has their part of the project done and by the time you meet for the third time everyone has the final copy of their part and all you have to do is put it together. After that, you hand in the project. Since everyone did an excellent and equal job on his or her own sections, you will obviously earn an “A.”

You are soon faced with the reality of your group, however. The first day you and your group members are supposed to meet, only one of your group members arrives on time. The two of you begin small talk while you wait for the second member to arrive. Looking down at your watch, you realize that it has been ten minutes and the other two members are not there yet. Fifteen minutes later, the third member of your group arrives, apologizing for being late because she “lost track of time.” The three of you decide to begin the project without the fourth person. You begin to devise a plan of action. You think it’s best if each person is

responsible for a certain section and has that completed for the next meeting for group review. The second member thinks that all four members should work on every part together, and the third member just wants to do certain sections and hand them in to the group the day before the project is due. What do you do with three different strategies?

As the semester continues, you find it more and more difficult to work with the group. You feel as if you and the second member are the only two people who are contributing any real effort to this project. The third person is only putting in half the effort and relying on others to pick up the slack. The fourth member of your group is MIA; he says he’ll come to the meetings but always has an excuse for why he can’t make it.

If something like this ever happens to you, there are



a number of ways to cope. One solution is to talk it out. First, talk to your group members and see what they have to say. Explain how you feel and what you think needs to be done. If nothing changes after that, feel free to talk to your professor and/or an ACE staff member who can talk with you about running a think tank.

Many group projects last an entire semester, so plan accordingly. Make sure that you have a plan of action that will cover meetings at least every week throughout the entire semester. You should also have a goal set for what should be accomplished at each meeting. A system should also be setup to periodically check on the group's progress. This will help to ensure that everyone is doing work that meets the standard that is required by the group. ❖

Group Projects: Invigoration or Aggravation?

by Shannon Naujock, Writing Consultant

What can you do to make a group project as tolerable as possible? Keeping an open mind does not guarantee the success of your group, but often, the difference between invigoration and aggravation in such a situation depends upon your attitude.

Harboring a preconceived notion about the competence or work ethic of a fellow group member, for example, will only invite future trouble, because you will have initiated a point of conflict. Communication is a key element in any project, and often a preventive measure against disagreements. If responsibilities and expectations can be clearly defined for each member at the start of the project, then the chances of future problems can be reduced significantly. Furthermore, respect goes a long way in creating an environment where everyone feels like an integral component of your working unit.

When obstacles do arise, such as non-contributing group members, insufficient information, contradictions between collaborative efforts, or missed deadlines, you should take action. Possible solutions include reassigning or reiterating responsibilities within the group, talking with your professor, or visiting the Writing Center and/or Academic Center for Excellence. At the Writing Center, we can assist your group in organizing the separate pieces of your project into one coherent document. At ACE, we offer the service of helping your group to understand the content of your work, as well as what the professor expects you to learn in the process of completing your assigned



task. The tutors and consultants at both Centers can be used most effectively if they are incorporated into your group project from the start, assisting the group throughout the process.

Remember that no matter what problems you may encounter, you decide whether the group project will be a valuable learning experience, a temporary thorn in your side, or the end of the world as you know it. Like it or not, you will have to collaborate and cooperate with your fellow members in order to complete the assigned project. Attitude, communication, respect, and outside resources such as the Writing Center and ACE can help to make the group experience a positive and productive one. ❖

Making a Bad Group into a Successful One

by Daniel R. Pepin, Writing Consultant

I don't think that I've ever been in a group that was good from the very start. It takes time for the group to gel. If the group members work together and eliminate problems from the start, the group will be much more productive in the long run. Here are a few pointers to help you convert a "bad" group into a successful one:

1. Always attend meetings with an open mind. This means trying to get along with everyone in the group. Let's face it, no matter what happened in the past, you have to work with these people now.
2. Set a meeting time and place convenient for *everyone* in the group. Nothing is more frustrating than trying to negotiate when to meet every time you schedule a group meeting.
3. Do your assigned work before the meeting. The meeting will run much more smoothly and your group will be more productive.
4. Decide who will do what work between meetings. If you can't decide who gets what part of the project, draw straws!
5. Confront laggards. These are group members who, for whatever reason, choose not to do any work or show up to meetings. Be diplomatic when confronting them (sometimes there is a legitimate reason), but get your point across that they must do their part or leave the group.
6. If you know you are a laggard, be gracious when other group members criticize your participation. Don't give excuses. Instead, structure your time so you can give the group your attention. Everyone's grade, not just yours, is at stake.
7. If problems exist beyond your control, consult the professor or group leader. ❖