

Building Teamwork Skills in the Arts Management Classroom

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When I introduced a group assignment during one of my first semesters teaching at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG), my students stifled a groan. “What’s that groan about?” I asked. “I thought this would be fun!” After a little coaxing, the students told me that the project sounded fine, but they hated doing group projects. I waived it off, telling them that working in groups was important.

But I soon realized that I couldn’t dismiss their response. As I watched one of the groups present their assignment, I saw a student jolt upright and his eyes grow big as his fellow group member spoke. He was surprised at what she had said. When his time came to speak, he genially opened his remarks by saying he was changing his talking points on the fly because another group member said something he was going to say. Clearly, they had not coordinated their work, but simply split it up between themselves.

Now I got it. My students didn’t like working in groups because they didn’t know how to do it effectively. I felt a sense of urgency: I needed to get them ready to enter a field where teamwork IS the work. In this article I will describe the method I developed for building teamwork skills as part of preparing my students to enter the arts management profession. I will share results from the first attempt and improvements I made afterwards.

Course Context

The course where I first used this process is AAD 301 Arts Management, a course taken primarily by majors and minors in the Arts Administration Program. Arts Management follows a 200-level course in our core arts administration curriculum. AAD 301 has 15-30 students, depending on the semester.

I developed the process described here after asking students about their dissatisfaction with group work. The discussion surfaced three main areas of concern: uneven distribution of work, lack of accountability for the students who do less or lower quality work, and communication problems. These issues resulted in students experiencing stress, developing resentful feelings towards classmates, and eroding their confidence and interest in working collaboratively. Students described feeling helpless when a peer didn’t fulfill their commitments and they felt like they needed to complete the other student’s work, too. They were conflict-avoidant, uncomfortable with “calling in” a classmate. I recognized these problems from my

professional arts management experience, so I felt confident that developing their skills would be useful to them after they graduated.

My primary goals were to develop their collaborative skills and increase their confidence in working in groups. I designed the following process as part of a graded group project. The groups create a new program for an arts organization to which they are assigned. Then, they write a grant proposal and deliver a presentation on their program. After the first round of the proposal, they move on to the second stage in the fictional grant process, and again write a grant and give a presentation. This two-part design creates an incentive for the students to sustain their relationships and commit to improvements for the second part of the project. With one-off group projects, students told me they didn't try to fix any problems. Addressing difficulties didn't seem worth it because the project would end soon enough, and everyone would go their separate ways. I wanted to give them a reason to work through interpersonal and communication challenges.

Literature Review

Group work can be an effective complement to other forms of learning such as lectures. It can improve student satisfaction through learning activities that are challenging yet achievable (Federman Stein & Hurd, 2000). Roger Johnson, David Johnson, and their collaborators recommend five elements of effective learning in student teams: interdependence, accountability, frequent face-to-face interaction, teaching of or support for relevant social skills, and opportunities for students to reflect critically about their processes (in Meyers & Jones, 1993). Teams go through stages of development as a social group that impact and shape their work. In the case of the classroom, their work is learning. Tuckman's classic framework for describing these stages is widely used in both professional and educational contexts: forming, storming, norming, and performing (Tuckman, 1965).

Learning in an active and cooperative way, where the teacher is not the only source of feedback, is often a new experience for students. Sibley et al. guide instructors through not only the design of creating a team-based course, but in explaining and getting buy-in from students on working in groups so they see the value in collaborative learning (Sibley et al., 2014). For example, students may feel intimidated by a big project when working on their own. A majority of students (56%) in a 2023 survey by *Inside Higher Ed* shared that students feel they are helped when instructors break down large assignments into smaller parts (Flaherty, 2023). Sibley would

recommend instructors support their students to make each step manageable while working in coordination with others and explain why this planning is necessary.

Arts administration is a collaborative profession. The administrative or management function of an arts organization is typically divided into departments. In turn, departments work collaboratively across their specializations to deliver the work of the company (Byrnes, 2003), whether the task is creating and sharing professional artworks with the public, advocating for the arts in the community, or delivering arts education at the community level. In a 2020 survey conducted by the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U), employers named “the ability to work in teams” as their highest ranked “essential learning outcome” from higher education (Finley, 2021, p. 6). A motivation to learn a new skill, such as its usefulness in the profession the student wishes to enter, paired with an expectation that the skill can be learned, such as having a relevant project and supportive and experienced instructor, contributes to students achieving learning outcomes (Ambrose et al., 2010).

Course Summary

In this section I’ll describe the process I used in the first semester to build students’ teamwork skills. In the Evaluation and Discussion sections, I’ll describe the results and improvements I made after the first implementation.

On the first day of class, I told students that group work will be an important component of the course. I gave a broad overview of the group work they’d be doing. I shared that I often hear from students that they don’t like group work, but reassured them we would be working differently. To increase their investment in the course’s group work, I showed them the information from the AAC&U survey referenced in the literature review indicating that employers value teamwork highly.

About three weeks later, we spent two class periods on group work before they started their projects. Before the first class session, the students read two articles written for an audience of business professionals on the skills of high performing teams and watched two videos that I created, one on active listening and one on running meetings. In class I guided a discussion that incorporated the readings and videos and how groups are used in the arts administration profession. We aired their past experiences with group work. We talked through ways to

proactively prevent some of the challenges of teamwork, and how to handle them when they do arise. The goals of this class session were to validate their experiences that group work is difficult interpersonally, reinforce that teamwork is a skill that can be developed, and give them some tactics to use during their group work. The students left class with a shared vocabulary and a shared experience that made it easier for them to try the techniques they learn together.

In the second class session, the groups developed team agreements. I provided them with a template for their agreements with categories where they wrote agreements on topics such as communication, meetings, handling conflict, and deadlines. They were not required to use the template, but most groups did. I offered brief guidance before they started, encouraging them to have balanced participation in their discussion and practice affirmative consent rather than taking silence from a classmate as agreement. They turned in one copy of the agreement via our online learning management system.

The students moved on to working on their project over the next two weeks. They worked both in class and outside of class. I observed them working together and supported them as they progressed, without impinging on the autonomy and confidence I wanted them to build. I told them I could help them with their group relationships if they needed me, but I encouraged them to try to work things out on their own first.

After completing the first part of the assignment, a written grant proposal and an oral presentation, they debriefed during class in their groups. I gave them guided questions for their discussion and a template that they were invited (but not required) to use for a joint written group reflection to be submitted. The first part of the assignment had not been graded when they had their discussion, though I gave them some informal feedback, especially if they had not met one or more of the assignment requirements. The intention of holding a debrief after the first part of the assignment was for the students to have the opportunity to:

- reflect on their process collectively and individually,
- get and give feedback to each other individually and collectively,
- agree on changes to their group process or individual approach before they moved on to the second part, and

- build their sense of self-efficacy and confidence in their relational and communication skills.

After the second and final part of the assignment, they again debriefed together. I solicited individual, open-ended feedback from the students after the first and second part of the assignment and UNCG solicits anonymous course evaluations at the end of the course.

Evaluation

Overall, this process worked well, but I made improvements in subsequent instances of the course. Three of the improvements I've made are: more guidance on making useful group agreements, adding self evaluations and peer evaluations after both parts of the project, and guiding the groups to make a work plan.

Making a work plan has been the most impactful improvement. My observation in the first semester of this process was that the students weren't planning as effectively as they could be, so the strides in their interpersonal work in their groups were more challenging than they needed to be. They weren't planning ahead, but instead just doing what they thought they needed to do in the moment. In the following semester, I guided the students through breaking down the project into steps, creating a timeline, and assigning tasks. I encouraged them to refer to the plan whenever they were meeting together to check progress and adjust as needed. This was a breakthrough. The students worked together more smoothly, and peer-to-peer accountability was much more effective when they were working from a plan.

Discussion

The purpose of layering the development of teamwork skills onto learning content was to build the students skills and confidence in working with others so that they are ready for and will enjoy the process of working with colleagues that is ubiquitous in the arts management profession. I have found that the keys to success for developing these skills are:

- making sure the students see the connection from the skill of teamwork to their professional future,
- reassuring them that teamwork is a skill that can be learned, not a talent that a person has or lacks,

- acknowledging that speaking up for oneself, directly addressing conflict, compromising, and compassionate accountability is difficult, and
- giving them tactics for thriving teamwork and ways to prevent problems, making time for them to use those tactics in class, and structuring the project so it includes accountability that they use those tactics.

The results of the first semester were good; the results after I added the step of having the students create a work plan were excellent. The process I developed alleviated many of the problems the students had experienced previously in group work in their college careers. Formal and informal feedback from students expressed that they felt more confident in their collaborative skills. For a short video about this process, go to UNCG's University Teaching and Learning Commons YouTube channel. Direct link: https://youtu.be/-Y_TIRlj7k0.

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