

**Students' Experience with Group Assignment
in a Nigerian Library and Information Science School**

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Abstract

This study explored master degree students experienced with a group assignment at the Department of Library and Information Science, Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria. The study adopted quantitative approach. The students were assigned to groups of 4 – 5 each to work on topics in collection development course and were required to orally present a seminar at the end of the first semester of the 2012/2013 academic session. At the end of the seminar presentation, the students were requested to each list five benefits they derived and five problems they encountered in the course of the group assignment. The responses were collated, analysed, tabulated and used for this paper. Frequency counts and percentages were used to analyse the data. It was discovered that group assignment enabled the students in this study to build team spirit, share ideas; learn information search, presentation, and management skills. However, majority of the students observed that some members did not cooperate in the group assignment. The study provided primary data which could assist lecturers to improve on administration of group assignment.

Keywords: Group assignment, Collaborative learning, Group learning, Pedagogy, Nigeria

Introduction

Group assignment is an activity in educational setting which requires students to work together in order to acquire knowledge and develop interpersonal and leadership skills. The course lecturer can select the students to work in different groups or requests the students to choose those they can work within a group. The number of students forming a group varies depending on the number of students in the class or on the tasks.

Group assignment, also known as collaborative learning or group learning, is an important skill which students will need in their professional life. It is a type of active learning in which students make a group assignment together, and learns by exchanging views on substantive issues, but also by having to make practical agreements, and solving possible problems together, in order to reach a joint end product (Deft University of Technology,

n.d.). Group assignments are becoming very popular in education. While some academics would admit that they lessen their workload, many would say group assignments give students the “real world” group experience that is needed for later employment (Ford & Morice, 2003). Lecturers set group assignments for the following three reasons (University of Canberra, 2012):

- *To prepare students for professional future.* Lecturers set group assignments in order to prepare students for professional situations. Students need to be prepared for the real world in which they will almost certainly have to work in groups usually not groups of their own choosing. They have to be able to pull together and reach a successful goal.
- *To give students a chance to tackle significant projects:* Students can achieve much more if they have a group of people working together, contributing their different talents and perspectives and, above all, their time. In group assignments students can tackle much more significant projects, and often these are projects of professional importance.
- *To enable students to demonstrate teamwork skills in their curriculum vitae:* A record of good performance in a group assignment is an excellent contribution to curriculum vitae. Employers are particularly interested in teamwork skills and a better way to impress them is to show them a really professional piece of work an applicant has produced in a group assignment.

Joint efforts to complete a learning assignment encourages students to discuss the problem at hand from various points of view, to activate and share relevant knowledge, generate ideas on how to solve the problem, and search for and negotiate the use of information sources (Sormunen,, 2013). Group assignments can enable students to learn from others and share ideas, learning to work in a group, which reflects real industry, learn social interaction, engage in division of work, assist them to achieve more – a larger project and better quality as well as gaining communication skills (Ford & Morice, 2003).

In the same vein, it has been noted by Weimer (2013) that students can learn five things when engaged in group assignment:

- i. *They can learn content, as in master the material:* Whether they are working on problems, answering questions about the reading, or discussing case studies, when they

work together on content, they can master the basics. This is because, when students work with content in a group they figure things out for themselves rather than having the lecturer tell them what they need to know.

- ii. *They can learn content at deeper levels equated with understanding.* When students try to explain things to each other, argue for an answer, or to justify a conclusion, that interaction clarifies their own thinking which often clarifies the thinking of other students.
- iii. *They can learn how groups function productively.* Students must fulfill individual responsibilities, in order for groups to function productively. Productive group members come prepared, contribute to the group interaction, support each other, and deliver good work on time. In order for students to function productively in groups, they have the right to expect the group to value their individual contributions, to address behaviours that compromise group productivity, and to divide the work equitably among members.
- iv. *They can learn the reasons groups make better decisions than individuals.* Students can see how different perspectives, constructive deliberation, questioning, and critical analysis can lead to better solutions and performance. If students take an examination individually and then do the same examination as a group, the group examination score is almost always higher because students share what they know, debate the answers, and through that process can often find their way to the right answer.
- v. *They can learn how to work with others:* Group work enable students learn how to work with people outside their circle of friends, including those who have different backgrounds and experiences. They can also learn how to work with those who disagree with them, and others they might not “like” or want as friends.

However, Weimer (2013) has noted that it is absolutely not true that students do any of these things just by being put together in groups; that student attitudes about group work are often negative and that is because they have been in lots of groups where they did not learn anything other than the fact they do not like working in groups; that much of the group work used in college classrooms is not well designed or well managed but that when group work is carefully constructed and lecturers help students deal with those group dynamic issues that

compromise group effectiveness, students can learn the content and the skills listed above (Weimer, 2013).

There are some problems that occur in group assignments. These are misunderstandings about responsibilities, lack of commitment in some group members, personality clashes. Students who are not used to group assignment sometimes feel anxious about managing the group work activities and process, and often find it difficult to keep a team together (University of Canberra, 2012). Group assignments are not always completed by the entire group, some students do more than their share of the work to ensure the highest grade possible, some students do not care when others do more work, either; but when the group does not contribute equally, problems can arise. ((Value Of A Degree.com, 2014).

However, successful group work requires attributes such as tolerance, consultation, inclusivity, assertiveness, sensitivity to other cultures and values. In order for a group assignment to work well, students will need to get to know each other, know how to get in contact with each other, make sure that everyone in the team knows what is going on, establish clear goals from the outset, work out their time frame, plan and attend regular group meetings, keep notes of what has been decided, allocate tasks fairly as well as deal positively and quickly with those who do not pull their weight in the group (University of Canberra, 2012).

Ford and Morice (2003) have identified negative aspects of group assignment to include the inequality in the contribution of members, timetable and other logistical problems, conflicts, the fact that marking does not reflect differences in contributions, the fact the some members lack required skills and being dependent on other people. This study explored the benefits and problems master degree students experienced with a group assignment at the Department of Library and Information Science, Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria.

Methodology

The population of this study consisted of all the master degree students of the Library and Information Science programme of the Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria. They were 41 students in all. The students were assigned to groups of 4 – 5 each to work on topics in collection development course and were required to orally present a seminar at the end of the first semester of the 2012/2013 academic session. At the end of the seminar presentation, the students were requested to each list five benefits they derived and five problems they encountered in the course

of the group assignment. The responses were collated, analysed, tabulated and used for this paper.

Findings and discussion

The data in Table 1 reveal that there were more female than male students in the class.

Table 1: Gender of respondents

Gender	No	%
Male	18	43.9
Female	23	56.1
Total	41	100

Table 2: Benefits derived from group assignment

Benefits	No.	%
Built team spirit	23	56.1
Facilitated interaction/sharing of ideas with classmates	23	56.1
Facilitated understanding of the topic/broadens knowledge	17	41.2
Enabled me to learn/improves on my information search skills	12	29.3
Learnt/developed presentation skills	10	24.4
Facilitated better understanding of group members/course mates	10	24.4
Cheap to execute because cost is shared	9	22.0
Learnt tolerance	6	14.6
Created room for friendship/socialization	4	9.8
Enabled one to gather/collect useful materials	4	9.8
Developed research skills	3	7.3
Helped to overcome stage fright	3	7.3
Helped to develop management skills	1	2.4
Reduce workload	1	2.4

Several benefits were derived from the group assignment by the students as shown in Table 2.

“Built team spirit” and “Facilitated interaction/sharing of ideas with classmates” were each indicated by 23 (56.1%) of the students. The library and service sector regularly requires personnel to work together and interact/share ideas with co-workers and users. It is therefore

good for trainee professionals to develop these skills while in the formal library and information education programme. This finding is in line with view of Weimer (2013) who noted that group assignment enable students to learn how to work with others; with people outside their circle of friends, including those who have different backgrounds and experiences. They can also learn how to work with those who disagree with them, and others they might not “like” or want as friends.

“Enabled me to learn/improve on my information search skills” was mentioned by 12(29.3%) of the students. Information professionals are in the business of providing users with information which is often obtained through search process. This information search is, in some cases, done for the patrons by the professional. A library staff who cannot conduct information search will not be able to provide the information needed by the patrons in such cases. Developing/learning information search skills in the LIS school will assist the trainees to conduct information search in libraries and information centres after graduation.

Group assignments can enable students to learn from others and share ideas, learn to work in a group, which reflects real industry, learn social interaction, engage in division of work, assist them to achieve more – a larger project and better quality as well as gaining communication skills (Ford & Morice, 2003). The data in Table 2 confirm these benefits identified by Ford and Morice (2003).

Table 3: Problems encountered with group assignment

Problems	No	%
Unwillingness of some group members to contribute financially/lack of financial contribution from some members	29	70.7
An individual left alone to write the assignment	21	51.2
Frequent disagreement/quarrels/misunderstanding among group member	21	51.2
It is difficult to get members to assemble for the work	13	31.7
Difficulty sourcing materials	10	24.4
Poor representation of the group by an unprepared member when called upon to do oral presentation	9	22.0
More time consuming than individual assignment	6	14.6
Some members do not contribute intellectually to the work	4	9.8

“Unwillingness of some group members to contribute financially/lack of financial contribution from some members” was mentioned by a majority of the students – 29(70.7%) – as a problem they encountered while involved in the group assignment. The group assignment required the students to write scholarly papers on assigned topics, word processed them, print and bind with soft covers, make copies for distribution to students and the course lecturer. Group members were expected to jointly bear the financial burden, which should ordinarily reduce the amount that would be contributed by each member. However, the data in the table indicated unwillingness of some members to contribute their quota to the execution of the assignment. It is thus possible that the financial involvement was borne by few members.

“An individual left alone to write the assignment” was indicated by 21 (52.1%) of the students, while 13 (31.7%) of them stated that “It is difficult to get members to assemble for the work” and 4 (9.8%) of them mentioned that “Some members do not contribute intellectually to the work”. These imply that not all the group members participated in the assignment in their groups. This corroborate the view that group assignments are not always completed by the entire group; that some students do more than their share of the work to ensure the highest grade possible; some students do not care when others do more work, either; but when the group does not contribute equally, problems can arise. ((ValueOfADegree.com, 2014).

“Frequent disagreement/quarrels/misunderstanding among group member” was mentioned by 21 (52.1%) of the students. The possible reasons for this are that the students were from different backgrounds and might not have had the opportunity of working together on assignments.

Conclusion

Group assignment is a learning activity that enables students to work together on an academic tasks. It has enabled the students in this study to build team spirit, share ideas; learn information search, presentation, and management skills. However, majority of the students observed that some members did not cooperate in the group assignment. It would be help for a lecturer to give orientation to students before requesting them to engage in group assignment. The lecturer can stress the need for group members to contribute financially and intellectually to the task; ask all of them to endeavor to meet for discussion and sharing of ideas towards the work.

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