

Group Building for Improved Instruction in Postsecondary Social Science Classrooms

*Lawrence Lyman, Harvey C. Foyle
Emporia State University*

The social sciences invite active involvement, collaboration, and cooperation in postsecondary classrooms. Creating and nurturing a collaborative environment, however, does not occur by chance. Postsecondary students often remain passive during classes and isolated from other students. In some classes, a few students can dominate class discussions, discouraging participation from less confident students.

Group building activities are activities which are structured by the professor to promote the skills and attitudes necessary for collaboration and cooperation. Appropriate use of group building activities can help to create the environment needed to realize the well-documented academic and social benefits of successful collaboration and cooperation in the classroom (Lyman, & Foyle, 1990; Millis, Lyman, Jr., & Davidson, 1995). Group building activities can be used at the beginning of class to get students actively involved and to begin class on a positive note. During class, group building activities can provide a time for transition between topics or activities. As the class period is concluding, a group building activity can energize the students and provide an upbeat ending to the class session.

One of the benefits of group building activities, especially early in the semester, is the opportunity for the professor to learn more about his or her students. While observing student interaction during group building activities, the professor can assess the collaborative skills and attitudes of individuals in the class, as well as, the overall ability of the students to work together as a group. These observations provide valuable data for the professor to use in structuring collaborative activities for students and for selecting cooperative structures which align with student characteristics and course objectives.

Lyman and Foyle (1998) provide the following observation guide for professors to use when observing interaction during group building activities:

Observation Guide for Group Building Activities

1. Which students are leaders in group building activities?
2. Which students have good verbal skills?
3. Which students are socially skilled?
4. Which students are knowledgeable about course content?
5. Which students are shy, withdrawn, or reticent?
6. Which students have difficulty communicating?
7. Which students do not actively participate?
8. Which students seem to have trouble interacting with other students?
9. What collaborative skills seem to be strong with this group of students?
10. What skills or attitudes are needed by this group of students in order to be successful in future collaborative and cooperative activities?

Group building activities can provide opportunities for students to become acquainted with each other and promote mutual respect. Students should be grouped so that they have opportunities to work with all students in the class at various times. As students become acquainted with each other, attitudes improve, and students seek to help one another. For example, when get-acquainted group building activities are

appropriately implemented, students may express genuine concern for a student who is absent and assist the professor by collecting handouts or sharing notes with the student (Lyman, 1999).

Well-structured group building activities promote positive interdependence among students in the groups. To promote positive interdependence, the professor can design the activity so that one student would be unlikely to be able to complete the activity without assistance. Limiting materials to one set per group may help the group to work together. The professor may assign roles such as 'writer' and 'reporter' to individual group members to encourage active participation from all group members (Lyman, 1995).

As the students are working on group building activities, the professor circulates throughout the classroom, observing group interaction and positively reinforcing appropriate behaviors in the groups. Problems with communication, verbal put downs, or other negative behaviors can be identified and addressed before they become barriers to collaboration and cooperation. Individual accountability for positive participation in group activities is facilitated by the professor's proximity to groups as they are working together. The professor can provide the following activities for group members to discuss and note together as examples of get acquainted group building activities (See Figures 1 & 2).

Group building activities can also provide opportunities for critical and creative thinking, problem-solving, enrichment, or review of content related to the course. Group building activities can also encourage interest and involvement as students work together. Group reward is an important component of successful group building activities. When group building activities promote interest and involvement, the group reward for working together is a feeling of acceptance and belonging to a group. Activities which are fun and enjoyable also reward group participation and collaboration (See Figures 3 & 4). It is important that group building experiences provide opportunities for success for students as they work together.

Group building can help to improve student interaction and engagement in postsecondary social science classrooms. Professors can learn about their students, and the students can learn about each other while interacting in get acquainted and content group building activities. Improved attitudes and a foundation for better collaboration and cooperation are important benefits of using group building activities.

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Figure 1
Multiple Intelligence People Search (Lyman & Foyle, 1999)

Verbal and linguistic intelligence	Find someone who can tell you the first six words of the Gettysburg Address.	Find someone who can tell you what two words were added to the Pledge of Allegiance during the 1950's.
Logical and mathematical intelligence	Find someone who can tell you the street address of the White House.	Find someone who can tell you the approximate population of the US.
Visual and spatial Intelligence	Find someone who can tell you whose picture is on the five dollar bill.	Find someone who took pictures of the places they visited on their last vacation.
Musical and rhythmic Intelligence	Find someone who can hum a patriotic tune.	Find someone who can play a musical instrument.
Body and kinesthetic Intelligence	Find someone who likes to dance.	Find someone who played on a high school or college sports team.
Interpersonal intelligence	Find someone who has been elected as an officer in a club or organization.	Find someone who has worked on a committee whose members worked together well.
Intrapersonal intelligence	Find someone who classifies their political affiliation as 'Independent'.	Find someone who has written a letter to the editor of a newspaper or magazine.
Natural intelligence	Find someone who can tell you what mineral brought settlers to California in 1849.	Find someone who can tell you the name of an extinct animal or plant.

Figure 2
Matching Game (Lyman, Foyle, & Azwell, 1993)

something we like to do on Saturday mornings	a place we would like to visit	an historical figure who we admire
an author whose books we enjoy	something we expect of a friend	a holiday we look forward to
something we would do if we had an extra hour each day	something that makes a class worthwhile	something we would like to see more of in the world

Figure 3
Content Group Building Activities

<p>What Do These Celebrities Have in Common?</p> <p>George W. Bush, President of the United States Captain Planet, animated environmental superhero Jimmy Carter, former President of the United States George Jetson, animated citizen of the future Scabbers, Ron Weasley's rat Vincent Van Gogh, artist</p>

<p>What Do These Things Have in Common ?</p> <p>January 20, 2009 Laura Bush 42 cents Delaware a Band-Aid® breakfast George Washington the ship is sinking</p>
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Figure 4
Popular Culture and Political Awareness
What Do These Persons Have in Common?

Jack Bauer James Bond Maxwell Smart	Professor Flitwick Professor McGonagall Professor Snape	Astro Snoopy Santa's Little Helper
David Archuleta David Cook Sysha Mercado	Bob Dole Michael Jackson Britney Spears	Susan B. Anthony Dwight D. Eisenhower Sacagawea
Sam Brownback Pat Roberts Jerry Moran	Ruth Bader Ginsburg John Roberts, Jr. Samuel Alito, Jr.	Dick Cheney Nancy Pelosi Robert Byrd

Answers to Group Building Activities

Figure 3
What Do These Celebrities Have in Common? Answers

All of the names have a mode of transportation in them.
 Bush = bus, Planet = plane, Carter = car or cart, Jetson = jet, Scabbers = cab, Van Gogh = van

What Do These Things Have in Common? Answers

All are first in something. January 20, 2009 is the first day of the new President's term. Laura Bush is the First Lady. Postage for a first class letter is 42 cents. Delaware was the first state to ratify the Constitution. A Band-Aid® is first aid. Breakfast is the first meal of the day. George Washington was first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen. When the ship is sinking, women and children leave first.

Figure 4
 Popular Culture and Political Awareness Answers
 What Do These Persons Have in Common?

secret agents from movies and television shows	heads of houses in the Harry Potter books Flitwick - Ravenclaw McGonagall-Gryffindor Snape-Slytherin	television cartoon dogs Astro - <i>The Jetsons</i> Snoopy - Charlie Brown, <i>Peanuts</i> Santa's Little Helper - <i>Simpson</i>
top three finishers on <i>American Idol</i> , 2008 Cook - 1 st Archuleta - 2 nd Mercado - 3 rd	all have appeared in commercials for Pepsi	all have appeared on U. S. dollar coins
Kansas senators and 1 st district congressman (use local representatives)	Supreme Court Justices	Presidential succession Cheney - Vice-President Pelosi - Speaker of the House Byrd - President Pro Tempore of the Senate