

REFLECTIONS ON MANAGEMENT

WITH TOM GALVIN

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT



Are There Ways to Assess Effective Collaboration?

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Please note: This transcript has been edited for clarity.

From work to education, much of what we do is measured in individual achievement and assessment of individual outcomes, job performance, grade point averages, final exams, so many things are based on the individual. Now, for some time now, collaboration has become much more the norm and much more important in work and in educational settings. But we haven't really figured out how to assess group effort. Apart from the sum of individual efforts, in my experience, group assessments run up against some very strong barriers. Can we overcome them? Perhaps one experience from my educational background provides a baby step forward.

My name is Tom Galvin and these are my Reflections on Management.

As I was assembling the script for this particular episode, a colleague of mine from the talking about organizations network Frithjof Wegener, from the University of Delft in the Netherlands, just finished releasing a podcast episode. I'm referring to a podcast run out of the Delft University of Technology in the Netherlands, and this is called Out of the Blue. And this particular episode, Frithjof was moderating with a conversation with Ianus Keller and Marco Steinberg -- Marco Steinberg was the guest. I'll provide the link in the Web site for this episode. I focus on the final five minutes of the podcast [episode], because it was actually somewhat unrelated to the topic. But it went along the same line as as my preface and was very much in support of the same idea that I had. And they discussed the difficulties of doing proper assessment of group work and some of the barriers that they had come up with -- some of the same ones that I will address in this episode here shortly.

It was just kind of striking to me that there are a number of folks who are recognizing that we seem to have an issue where we cannot actually properly assess group outcomes in educational settings. We do a lot of group work. I do a lot of group work in my education programs. The hard thing is when we're trying to figure out how to actually assess the group work. It still kind of comes down to our social anchoring, if you will, to the idea of individual achievement and individual performance and contribution. We're either going to say that if the group did a B, then we're going to assign B's to everybody. Or we try to break up the individual contributions to the group. If we have the ability to observe it and say, OK, these two contributed a level work and this one contributed D level work or something like that, it is very difficult to really have a good conversation about how did the group actually perform. There's lots of writing out there, lots of literature about how groups fail to perform. Group dynamics can be very, very inefficient. You know, it's easy to talk about what's wrong. What does right look like?

I actually have a fairly recent experience. A few years ago, as I was going through my doctoral program, I underwent an experience that actually kind of helps illuminate what right might look like. And I think it's useful because it is a forum. It is a activity that has collaboration built into it. And the effort or the intention of the activity is to assess -- in a summative fashion -- to assess group work as a major outcome, [i.e.] as the central outcome of the activity.

This was how my comprehensive exam was administered. It was actually a group oral comprehensive exam. I took mine in the January of 2014. And so this was about six years ago from the time that I've recorded this episode. Of course, when you're a doctoral student, you kind of think the whole world, you know, acts like your doctoral program, I suppose. And I thought that because this was this seemed like so natural to the program that I was in that, you know, yeah, everybody [must be doing this]. Or there must be others out there who do group examinations -- only [for me] to find out, "No, actually, I don't know of any group or at least I haven't been able to identify any others that do this." And I was thinking that it was such a successful format that it may deserve actually looking at because it seems to provide at least a partial answer to some of the things that we are addressing here -- in terms of how do you really assess collaborative work?

So let me talk to you about the experience. What is the format? How did this work? Because you're thinking, you know, a group oral, comprehensive? How does that work? In my program, my program was the Executive Leadership Development Program, or ELP, at George Washington University in Human and Organizational Learning.

So certainly in terms of organizational learning, this is a pretty apt type of a format. In going back and talking with some of the original faculty when the program started, because they they started the program some 30 years ago, they started it with an group oral comprehensive. It was their innovation. And they did so because at the time this was thought to be the perfect way to encourage greater collaboration in scholarship, especially among scholar-practitioners. This was a program that was designed for scholar-practitioners, folks who were in the field as managers or a budding executives, even chief executive officers themselves. You know, folks who were fairly high up -- [looking] to get a doctoral program in human and organizational learning, which included change, culture, leadership.

So what they did was they created what is known as a comprehensive practicum as a program geared for scholar-practitioners. We did a lot of practicum courses where we delved into matters of practice that supported the theory that we were learning in all of these fields. And so one of the practicums was a group comprehensive practicum. And our cohort was divided into groups of five, and we were assigned the task of essentially working as a group which would culminate with the oral examination that would occur in January.

The format went as follows. Five questions were given and we deliberated on the questions in advance. That was basically what we did during the entire course. Each question had a theory, a practice, and a research component. We had to lay out all the theory. We had to talk about matters of practice. We had to develop a research study largely on the spot to a certain extent that this was going to be semi-structured, but the fact was that we actually were expected to collaborate and

exercise dialogue as the examination. And we were gauged on the quality of the dialogue. So we weren't trying to come up with an answer [necessarily]. This was a process. We weren't addressing the faculty necessarily. We were addressing each other. And what we had to do was, without any notes [and] with [only] access to a whiteboard, basically, we had to deliberate on the question. Conduct debates, argue all sides of an issue. And part of the rubric for passing the examination was the ability for equitable participation among all five members. But five was enough where you really couldn't script things, or at least you could try, but it wouldn't work. The group dynamic sort of took over.

And as we addressed each other, you know, we weren't ... addressing the panel. The panel wasn't paying attention to us. It wasn't looking at us anyway. Their heads were down and they were scribbling notes like mad, trying to keep up with our conversation and watching the group dynamics. So then, you know, there were basically pass-fail. It was all about whether you passed or failed. But there were basically two ways that you could pass or fail. One was that if the group did not show equitable contribution and good, solid collaboration, the group failed, even if an individual was laying out the great answers or whatever. If it was all one person and it was not a sense of collaboration, the group would fail. And then the second part, of course, was whether all of the relevant theory and the answer that we were giving was laid out on the table and deliberated upon. Whether everything in practice was deliberated upon, and whether or not the research study that we crafted was worthwhile.

What was even more interesting is once we did our own internal dialogue, when it came time for the panel to engage us, the same rules applied. We had to be very extemporaneous and able to collaborate towards the answer to respond to the question. If a single individual just barked out an answer, well, that wasn't going to do. It was expected that their questions, which were very broad and open ended, were deliberated in the same fashion as a way of demonstrating whether or not we collectively mastered all the theory and could design a research study on the spot.

It was a very, very difficult exam. It was very difficult because the group dynamics were definitely there. We had some challenges trying to make sure that we were working together collaboratively. We had to get over the idea that we were trying to present an answer and instead that we were expected to provide a thorough dialogue. That's a barrier in itself, because if you try to try to think that, well, the answer is to deliver an answer, [saying] "This is it. That's all. That's all we're going to do," you actually stand a pretty good chance of failure because they're simply not going to accept the idea that this is the narrow answer and you haven't brought in and discussed and presented the pluses and minuses of other theoretical perspectives. By the way, you know, we were given the five questions, one question was aligned with each of the major topic areas and you had an interdisciplinary question, basically only asked three during the exam. So we didn't know in advance which of the questions we were going to do.

So it was actually fairly efficient examination. A group of five students would be done in a morning or an afternoon session. So they basically did about 10 students a day. So basically with a group, we were able to get through the entire cohort in a fairly short amount of time without burdening too many of the faculty, because, of course, the faculty are busy, too. It was efficient. It enforced collaboration. And it you know, it seemed to work.

Now, I was so excited about this. I thought, "Man, you know, maybe in the program that I presently teach in this, this would be a good way to bring it in." But unfortunately, when I did try to introduce it elsewhere, it was met with immediate resistance because, again, it's rooted in the individual achievement that we're sort of accustomed to. [But] there's more to it than that. And I obviously, if we were to take this idea and put it elsewhere there, there would have to be some issues addressed that that could be very, very complicated. I'm going to draw on an article from 2006 by Ahmed Hassanein who wrote about student experience of group work and group assessment. And he addresses the group barriers that would have to be addressed. Some of them have to do with ideas of equal credit for unequal work.

How do you ensure that people can judge group dialogue, group collaboration in order to avoid things like what we call social loafing, the one free-riding member of the group who just simply doesn't pull weight? [As for] communication challenges and anxiety? Our group, and I would say that our cohort overall, was very much attuned to and actually found the group setting to be anxiety reducing. But I don't think that everybody would feel that way. And to what extent that matters, I don't know, because certainly if you're talking about our group -- we had one of our students was from Singapore that was a good English speaker, just, you know, with an accent -- if you're talking about a setting where you're having to combine folks [in which] English is not their first language or accents are severe, it could really cause anxiety within a diverse group. And how do you address that as a as an anxiety factor? That's one of the things that has to be addressed in in any group assessment anyway, because those sorts of communication barriers affect group outcomes.

And then another one is conflicting work ethics, and it's different views about scheduling timelines. You know, in my doctoral program because was like a hybrid distance. You know, we we had a lot of challenges getting people together because we had we came together for the resident weekends at George Washington. But then in between, we had to do everything by teleconference across multiple time zones because folks were coming in from from everywhere, including Singapore. And that's you know, that's a challenge that can really drain the energy of the group as it's trying to, you know, just be able to get together and make things happen.

Personality differences is always going to be there as well if you have a conflict. How do you manage the conflict would be very very difficult. I mean, one of the things I certainly am glad that was not done was we weren't graded on any sort of a scale. It was strictly a pass-fail. You pass the exam, or you didn't. I can imagine that if we're dealing with a setting where the need for grading to, say, group work being good versus excellent, where personality conflicts could doom a group. That has to be something that's addressed.

Overall, I think the experience, you know, the benefits of the experience of a sense that we were we were forced to exercise good collaboration. And by doing it as the tail end of our practicum course where we really, no kidding, worked together over a period of months, we learned a lot about working together as a group that we probably wouldn't have if it wasn't such a summative event.

I think it's something to consider. You know, what can we learn from that experience that can encourage quality collaboration and perhaps understand a little bit better about what does quality collaboration mean? What does right look like? How do we measure it? Does it really require long lead times or, you know, all of the structure associated with, say, an examination? Could it be done in? Are encouraged in a different way. But at least in this case, you know, the key was to emphasize the process of learning as opposed to the outcome or the result. That may be a challenge for some people.

As my friend Frithjof and his team had shown, you know, that the question of collaboration is "how do we assess it?" It is out there. It's a very important thing because it's becoming so much more [important in] the environments that we're in.

... And that's all for now. The views expressed are my own and do not necessary reflect the United States Army War College, the United States Army or the Department of Defense. Thank you for listening and have a great day.

ALL THE BEST!

TOM GALVIN