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| National University |
| Creativity and working in groups |
| How much do others add? |

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COM 635

Professor Hillman

**Introduction and Thesis**

 A class devoted to the management of creativity walks a complicated line. Creativity is often thought of as a solitary activity, something that a painter or write does by themselves in the privacy of their home. Of course this isn't a very accurate image given that we watch television advertisements and programs every day, all of which have a team of creative people behind them. These programs need a writer or team of writers, location scouts to pick places that fit the image wanted, stylists, clothing experts/designers, set developers, actors, a director to bring it together and many more people. The programs we which require armies of people coming together and working towards a collective goal. Yet the image of the loan artist persists. To be fair though how often do any of us get to work in groups at all? Outside of particular careers, most of us have little noteworthy experience working with others creatively.

 The other side of the coin is that pesky "managing creativity". Most of us realize on a deep level from our own creative pursuits, that some manager peering over our shoulder isn't very helpful. However taking the television example even further, we have producers, accountants, legal experts, actor agents and even caterers all contributing to overseeing those programs and taking care of the details. That much makes sense, that we need people to take care of the details so that the "artists" can do their thing. However the contributions of the people "outside" making sure the machinery moves along, is at least as important as anyone else's contribution. It would be fair then to argue that these "enablers" are in fact a part of the group and part of the creative act.

 Any class that seeks to discuss the management of creativity has to struggle with the mentioned preconceptions. We have to learn the facets of working in a group, something of the leadership styles needed to direct a group, and some of the legal issues around cooperative creativity. What better way to accomplish all these goals and provide personal insight, than to have the students work in groups toward creative goals, and if these projects relate to creative issues/people, then so much the better. This last month has been the first time I've worked in a group in probably nearly a year. This is strange when one considers that all of us will be working with groups in the real world, or will we? Every job I have ever worked has treated employees as individuals who have given tasks and are not to worry about someone else's, or group settings where the group managers are kept very separate from the rest of the group.

 While the group activities in this class were learning experiences, what exactly did we learn. It is my feeling that we were given opportunities to face preconceptions, get an idea of the true dynamics, see that each of us has something different to bring to the group, and that management is indeed necessary to the cooperative creative process. I believe that my experience this last month working with my group has established that the product of groups are greater than the sum of its parts, and that an overseer or manager is an absolute must for any creative group activity.

**What does the research say?**

 Research on creativity in groups tends to focus on two topics. The first topic is a glowing review on the benefits of cooperative work, and the second part on what behaviors are necessary to avoid the worst results of groups.

Benefits of groups-

 A good group works towards Synergy. Synergy is an openness to the differences represented by the individual parts, in order to consider views that we normally wouldn't and achieve new ideas or results. In order to achieve synergy a group needs to not only tolerate but welcome differences. Everyone has a unique combination of life experiences, knowledge and various social factors like race, religion, social class, etc that makes them who they are. While any given individual has built up their own assumptions and way of looking at things, when individuals come together they can combine their individual parts, to create something that has a sum view that is built upon the differences, and results in something entirely new and unique to itself. This starts with a member throwing out an idea and then others adding their own views/knowledge to look at the suggestion in a new light. (profitadvisors.com, retrieved 2011)

 Groups also bring together an array of skills. Despite many years of standardized education, we all have different comfort levels with different tasks, or skills that we have a natural talent or special interest in. We also all pursue our own interests over our lives that allow us to develop new skills as well. The next advantage of working in groups plays into the possession of individual skill levels. The division of labor allows a group to tackle in a relatively short period of time, a task that would be extremely difficult for an individual to accomplish. A typical school assignment for example can be divided into research, refining research to present an outline, building that outline into a professional looking presentation, and then presenting the project. Someone might not be good at graphic design, but perhaps they enjoy and are efficient at research. By breaking an assignment into parts and giving the parts to the person most qualified to perform each task, you can quickly put together a professional looking project. (Deakin.edu, retrieved 2011)

Behaviors needed to make a group work

 There are a number of behaviors that actively work against groups. Competition between members, one person trying to dominate or wanting to conform to the group can all hurt collaboration. Shy people tend to quickly go along with whatever is suggested which denies the group access to their knowledge. By not putting in their views or opinions on suggestions put forth, the group can't benefit from that person's unique perspective. This limits the groups potential for creativity to the sum of the more active members perspectives. On the other hand someone who takes up too much of the groups time, or who tries to bend others to their perspective, also denies the group its full range of perspectives and thus dampens the creative potential of the group. Communication problems and an inability to accept differences also works against groups.

 In order to prevent these pitfalls groups need to establish an open environment. All members need to feel free to contribute to the group without fear of mockery or judgment. This means setting up some base rules governing basic behaviors and building up trust. Without trust or an open environment a group simply isn't going to achieve synergy. According to http://www.mhhe.com/socscience/comm/group/students/creativity.htm, groups need to do the following-

*Embrace diversity. Group members should seek diverse perspectives and welcome the opportunity to listen to different views and approaches to problems. (see also the module on culture and small group communication)*

*Facilitate a supportive communication climate. Description, problem orientation, spontaneity, empathy, equality, and provisionalism are the hallmarks of a supportive communication climate.*

 *Reward inventive and innovative creativity. Encourage group members who offer unique ideas and alternative viewpoints. Be cautious, however, of "stars" and "stage hogs" who promote themselves rather than address the group's goals.*

 *Foster collaboration. In times of conflict, group members find it easier to avoid, accommodate, or compromise when their goals seem to be at odds. Groups that are committed to collaboration must be dedicated to discovering conflict solutions that everyone can agree on. Collaboration can be time consuming and frustrating, but generally results in innovative solutions to complex problems. (see the Teamwork section in the Pragmatics module)*

*Practice active listening. We can process what others say much faster then they can speak. Typically, we use that "in-between" time to think about what we want to say. In active listening, we use that time to ponder, interpret, and contemplate what others have said, before formulating our response.*

**Did my experience match up with the research?**

 My group got very lucky. Our group members very neatly fit into the roles of research, refine, design and present. There was never a question of what role each of us would take on and none of us ever made a move to step into another members area. This created a very efficient assembly line style creative process. The most difficult part for us was getting started. I was the first to post each week on our group page, the first to throw out suggestions and the first in the assembly line of creation. After some disappointment with the second group project, we'll get back to this in a moment, I actually held back in the last project to see if someone else would take charge and get things started. I still made the first post and was again the first to throw out ideas, but I waited to see if someone would pick a topic and play cheerleader for the group. Nothing got accomplished until Saturday night when Amber jumped in and finalized the topic for the project. However the last assignment also had a requirement to pick a collaborative tool, use it as a group and review that tool in addition to the other topic, most creative campaign of the year. While I was able to then get started on the research for the first part of the project, it took another two days, several posts on the group page and a somewhat frantic email, to get through to everyone that the project had a second part. By the time we got everyone on the same page Monday night, it was deemed too difficult to find a time for all of us to get together and use a tool as a group. Finally it was decided to have Amber review a tool that the rest of us were at least somewhat familiar with, Google documents, which was finally completed and handed off to Sergio Tuesday afternoon. This gave Sergio a day to put together the rest of the assignment and then get it off to Robert so he could familiarize himself with it.

 While everything came together in time for class, it was a close thing and I think hurt the class presentation in terms of quality. As I said earlier, we got very lucky. We had a team where each member naturally fell into a role, people with incredible skills (particularly Sergio's graphic design skills), and a group that had no drama. In got very lucky, but in the end all of the factors working in our favor amounted to nothing when there wasn't someone to keep the group focused and on course.

 So my experience does support the research suggesting that a group can create something greater than the sum of its individuals, particularly in our first presentation, but also the importance and necessity of "management." No matter the skills of a group, things can still go terribly awry if there isn't something to keep the group focused and cheer the group on. However this leads into the issue I alluded to earlier. I was deeply disappointed in the end product of the second project. I pushed for Kevin Smith to be chosen as our subject for a creative individual, did a large amount of research and tried to convey my own passion for the subject in the information I passed on. The end result while visually amazing seemed to fall far short of what I expected. It was clear to me that the rest of the group wasn't as passionate about the project as I was. I felt this was due to taking too great a role in pushing the group forward, which lead me to hold back in the last project.

 While the group projects did reinforce the importance of someone taking on management responsibilities, it also reflected the warnings of the research that too much direction/management is also detrimental. I think what I got from the experience most, was the difficulty of walking that fine line between helpful and harmful management. I'm still not certain exactly where the line falls, and this difficulty does suggest that projects of passion are harder to make work in a group setting.

**How would/will I implement or limit collaboration at work/school/home?**

Work-

 I don't think you can or should even think of not incorporating collaborative work in the work place. A company needs to create an environment that allows it to use their biggest resource, employees, to greatest effect. Employees have knowledge, experience and skills that companies can use to advance themselves. Knowledge Management is a fairly big movement in modern business and any company that doesn't get on board risks falling behind. Companies that properly make use of the expertise of every one of their employees has huge advantages and is more nimble.

School-

 Given how important openness and cooperation will be in the work place, students need to be exposed to group dynamics in a big way. Learning to work with others, accept differences and add to a group, is arguably more important than anything that can be learned in a book or lecture. I think that schools in order to keep up with a changing and more dynamic world, need to put more emphasis on learning in groups, and less on getting by as individuals. I think a deep shift in focus will be needed in education. We need to learn to work with others, find out about the strengths and limits of groups in a personal way, and learn by experience what does or doesn't work.

Home-

 My home pursuits largely tend to be solo activities. I like to read, write the occasional bit, and play games. While the online games support and encourage working towards goals in a group, the other activities are mostly private ones. As I stretch out in writing I will need to reach out to others for feedback and advice to improve, but I don't see a strong application of group collaboration in my personal life.

**Conclusion**

 I stated at the beginning that I thought the research and personal experience would support that groups can result in something greater than any one of the individuals could have created on their own, but that management was also an absolute must. I think both shine true in the end. The research on group collaboration always seems to have a positive view of group products, and my own experience was that others have skills that can be added to anything I do to make it far better. On the issue of management the research warns that a group that doesn't have some rules or someone to keeps things on task may fail to create anything of note. My own experience in the end strongly supported this. I saw that groups need someone to play the cheerleader, get things started, resolve differences, and keep everyone on the same page.

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