Towards A More Effective Collaborative Learning Environment In East Asia

Stephen Lawrence Ward

Institute for Tourism Studies, Macau

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Abstract

This study identifies student-based impediments to collaborative learning being encountered amongst students at the Institute for Tourism Studies (IFT). Collaborative learning has been found to increase mastery and understanding of subject material (Damon, 1984) while it can boost long-term retention of learning (Johnson, Johnson & Holubec, 1986) and with positive interdependence between group members, a collaborative approach may satisfy tacit learning objectives, such as teamwork and professional communications' abilities; career related aptitudes that are required in today's world. (Carol, 1988) It was therefore pleasing to see that 98.1% of this study's respondents encounter collaborative methodologies at a rate of 'continuously' but disconcerting that 42% of the year-two students testified to continuously facing progress hindering issues during group-based learning. In an effort to understand these hindrances, a questionnaire probed students' communication styles, pre-college and college-level teamwork experience and training, the subtleties of problematic cooperative interactions, as well as student perceptions on collective learning. The majority of the respondents expressed a tendency to avoid disagreeing and a preference for passively following other's guidance, leading to a supposition that an 'indirect' communication style, a communicative actuality in East Asia (Hofstede, 2003) on top of a low degree of teamwork experience and training may be at the root of a range of problematic group dynamics. Such findings are significant as many beneficial outcomes of collaborative pedagogy hinge on dynamic 'direct' interaction amongst teammates and passive communicative behaviors can be easily misdiagnosed and mistreated as a motivational issue, or in being language based. Practical implications brought up in this paper will provide rationale for decisions in collaborative learning pedagogy that will be tested with IFT students in an upcoming two hundred-level course on socio-cultural issues in tourism in attempt at seeing those involved get the most out of their collaborative learning efforts.

INTRODUCTION

The objective of this was to identify student-based impediments to the collaborative learning process that first and second year tertiary-level students in East Asia, at Macau's Institute for Tourism Studies (IFT) are facing during their group-work situations. Findings and practical implications will be later used to enhance collaborative pedagogy within a mandatory two hundred-level course on socio-cultural issues in tourism. With an exploratory scope, this study then probes the perceptions, experiences, attitudes, abilities and relevant training a sample of IFT tourism and hospitality students have in regards to collaborative learning and all it entails, such as the communicative behaviors involved, collegial accountability and teamwork/leadership abilities.

At its onset, this study anticipated that local students may not be too experienced with what exemplary collaboration entails nor how to aptly conduct it, while seminal cultural orientations theory, by the likes of Geert Hofstede (2003), implies the students in East Asia may have been socialized within a somewhat 'high-context' culture where indirect communication styles are prevalent – adding another hurdle between the freshman and sophomore students and the career related benefits that collaborative learning can produce. For these reasons primarily, it was assumed that there may very well be room to enhance collaborative learning pedagogy with IFT students.

Enhancing collaborative learning practices is important for a number of reasons. When learning is truly 'collaborative' this method can boost long-term retention of learning (Johnson, Johnson and Holubec, 1986) while it may tap a range of career related aptitudes that revolve around teamwork and communication, which is precisely why Carol (1988) claims that the collaborative learning process promotes life skills required in today's world. While the development of such career related 'soft skills' amongst young adults is a universal aspiration, it is exceptionally important at IFT due to its vocational focus and its commitment to contributing to the region's internationalizing tourism and hospitality sector with competent professionals capable of reaching the upper echelons of their given fields. Therefore, if collaborative learning can be further tailored to help ensure that IFT students can reach their potential in regards to the tacit career related aims collaborative methodologies hold, then this initiative could be considered worthwhile and practical implications may be of value to other educators in East Asia.

LITERATURE

Collaborative learning puts small groups of students into an active mode with three main approaches. Johnson, Johnson and Smith (1991) describe these three 'collaborative' methods with the first being 'informal learning groups' which are less structured clusters of students over the duration of a class that are asked to discuss a reading, or a posed question. Second, are 'formal learning groups', which tackle a project such as a report or group presentation and these groups may be together until the task is complete and the third configuration, especially pertinent to this study, is the 'long-term group' or 'study teams' made up of the same members throughout the semester. In each structure, students discuşs subject matter, help each other learn and

provide encouragement for each other (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1986) and it is the positive interdependence that leads towards many teamwork related, tacit learning objectives. The beneficial nuances of collaborative interaction are broken down by Slavin (1987) who credits the rewards structure as comprising the 'motivational theory' attached to collaborative learning as it promotes positive interdependence and the perception that personal success equates to group success and this motivates individuals to encourage one another and work closely together. The 'development theory' (Slavin, 1987) implies that groups of students interact around a certain task, which increases their mastery of the task (Damon, 1984) and as students share opinions and even debate conflictive angles with one another, the groups' general level of understanding develops. Explaining subject matter, a communicative behavior in true collaborative learning leads to consolidation and increased retention of learning (Johnson, Johnson and Holubec,1986) and Slavin (1987) regards this as the 'elaboration theory' of collaborative learning.

While this study hopes to eventually assist in the sharpening of career related aptitudes through collaborative efforts there are also potential benefits to do with positive attitudes, depth of understanding and development of critical thinking skills. With regards to enjoyment of learning and overall satisfaction with the educational product, Johnson and Johnson (1989) found that the cooperative learning experience encourages positive attitudes toward learning over individualistic methodologies. Slavin (1991), on depth of understanding concluded that cooperative learning makes positive impacts on student success and retention of information while McKeachie (1986) points out that students will more effectively strengthen critical thinking skills through learning how to learn in collaborative situations than through listening to teacher talk.

The wide ranging benefits of collaborative learning are somewhat theoretical and not guaranteed by the process. There are both teacher and student-based impediments that can hinder the potential effectiveness of this teaching method. In regards to the student-based impediments, the focus of this stage of this initiative, a number of obstructions to the best practice of collaborative learning can emerge as Panitz (1996; Alderman, 2000, p.5) found after extensive discussions with a diversity of collaborative learning practitioners over several years. These included:

- preference for 'teacher expert' delivered content
- expectation that they would work alone
- objection to negotiating with others
- belief that collaborative work would not meet their individual standards
- previous 'bad experiences' with collaborative learning
- objection to 'freeloaders' believed to be inevitable in group learning
- objection to open-ended, conceptual learning without 'right answers'

As indicated by Damon (1984) in regards to the array of benefits aroused through the debate of viewpoints and when collectively brainstorming during collaboration, communications are fundamental to tapping the true potential of collaborative learning. As this is an anticipated barrier for some freshmen IFT students, related literate on culture and communication has been brought into this review and is part of this study's framework.

Hofstede (2003), whose seminal cultural orientations' theory is used extensively in International Business courses, concludes that the Cantonese speaking region of Hong Kong has a low Individualism (IDV) orientation as it ranked 37 out of 50 on his IDV scale. Hong Kong is used as an indicator for Macau when analyzing cross-cultural communications as Macau was not part of Hofstede's landmark study. Lower individualism (i.e. collectivistic) implies a high-context and thus indirect communication style where much of the message can be embedded in the situational context with low context communication, a hallmark of more individualistic regions being a direct style, which is far more to the point. (Hall, 1959; Dattner 2004) Iwao (1993) describes how individualists perceive silence in communication as uncomfortable while collectivists see silence as a signal of strength. Hofstede (2003) explains how collectivists avoid verbal directness in order to maintain harmony and preserve relations, where individualist engage in directness even if it risks damaging the relationship. It seems clear that low context verbal directness would lend itself nicely to collaborative learning methods.

Hofstede also found Hong Kong to be moderately high in the area of Power Distance (PD), which equates to a more hierarchical or stratified society. Hofstde (2003) describes how high PD classrooms will typically have a teacher dictating, little interaction and students who perceive the teacher as more of a master than as a facilitator. Throughout higher PD societies, according to Hofstede (2003) those who have less power tend not to speak up and new ideas and opinions from underlings are not overly valued. While this does not sound like an IFT classroom it could resemble learning environments from which local students have evolved through their formative high-school years and such socialization could influence group dynamics in and outside the classroom amongst freshmen and sophomore students at IFT in particular. Moderate PD and low individualistic orientation could very well lead to a general communication style amongst novice IFT students that could be a barrier to energetic collaboration.

RESEARCH METHODOLGY

This study targeted vocationally minded tertiary students in their first two years of college-level study as ultimately the end goal is to help such students develop their teamwork and collaborative abilities early to apply and their internship experiences and further develop in their final years. Seventy-three students participated with sixty-two being local Macau students and eleven exchange students all from mainland China. When making queries on communication style only local Macau students were involved while all were tallied on questions to do with problematic group dynamics and general experiences. Of the local Macau students, thirty-one were year one tourism majors with an equal number of thirty-one hotel majors in year two.

A closed questionnaire was designed and conducted as the starting-point as they allow for insightful patterns to be observed and comparisons to be made (Oppenheim 1992). The questionnaire was designed to be brief with questions laid out with ample spacing giving the document a not too dense appearance. As the students were busy with seven classes it was felt that a dense, long survey would be repelling and would prompt some to tick without thought. Clarity was further bolstered through the use of graded language void of jargon as Bell (1987) comments that questions must
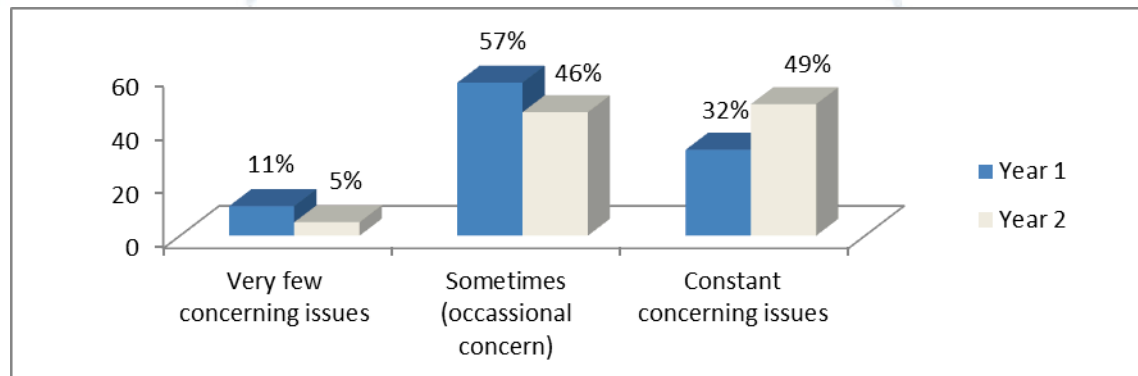
eliminate ambiguity so that respondents understand exactly what the questions are asking. The questionnaire had five distinct sections:

1. Respondent's details
2. Collaborative learning experience prior to college-level study
3. Experience with collaborative learning at the college-level
4. Attitude towards collaborative learning
5. Communicative behavior/style

DATA

Questionnaire data was analyzed through a number of cross tabulation queries using SPSS statistical software. The data has been set in a number of tables with significant findings analyzed and commented on in the Discussion section. Table 4.1 illustrates the sample's perceived frequency of impeding issues during collaborative work through the first two years of study.

Table 4.1 – The Rate of Problematic Issues during Collaborative Learning Situations Sample size 73 with Year 1 and 2 Comparison

Nine potential impediments to group-work with a blank for obscure barriers to be expressed have been compiled in Table 4.2. This data set depicts accountability and a lack of close communications through the collaborative process as major problems.

Table 4.2 – The Frequency of Response on Specific Issues Hindering Collaborative Group Project Progression amongst 73 First and Second Year IFT Students

Ques. No.	Potential issues hindering collaborative group project success	Frequency reported: sample size 74 students
1.	Group members not showing up to group meetings outside of class	71.6%
2.	A lack of close communication amongst all group members	60.8%
3.	Experience with a member(s) contributing very little	56.8%
4.	Evidence of poor attitude(s) towards a project itself	48.6%
5.	Evidence of poor attitudes towards others (other	33.8%

	members)	
6.	Group decisions not being made democratically	29.7%
7.	Group not using each member's strengths very well	40.5%
8.	Group not making a plan or goal setting (time management)	33.8%
9.	Group lacking a clear leader: evident in chairing meetings and directing progress	29.7%
10.	**Other: *four comments***	
a.	The leader uses the poor person's work and then that makes everyone look like poor people	
b.	Students can spend time to meet and do project but they aren't hard working as they play games on iPhones when they should be working with the group.	
c.	Some kinds of people want to show himself/herself off and do not care about others	
d.	Time management is the serious problem	

The teamwork know-how and interpersonal skills developed in high-school was seen as a potential barrier to effective group-work in college. Cross tabulation data of local Macau students' perceived level of student interactivity in high school vs. the estimated class size is displayed in Table 4.4 and suggests fresh students could use some teamwork training.

Table 4.4 – The Degree of Teamwork Training in
High School & College amongst 61 first & second year IFT students

	1. Level of training in how to manage and conduct collaborative group work in High School	
a	"none" – no group work training was given in high school	34.9% agree
b	"some" – only tips on group work only in high school	52.3% agree
c	"ample" – training was provided on group work in high school	12.6% agree
	2. Level of training in how to manage and conduct collaborative group work at College Level	
a	"none" – no group work training has been given at the college level so far	17.4% agree
b	"some" – only tips on group work have been given at the college level so far	49.2% agree
c	"ample" – training has been provided on group work at the college level	33.3% agree

Two questions designed to get a feel for local students' communication style elicited data that reflects Hofstde (2001) claims of East Asia being generally high context, indirect communicators. Table 4.6.A, displays results of a question posed to gauge the preference for active oral contribution vs. more silently following others while Table

4.7 focuses on students' feelings about disagreeing as this is a key communicative behavior upon which several benefits of the collaboration process are derived.

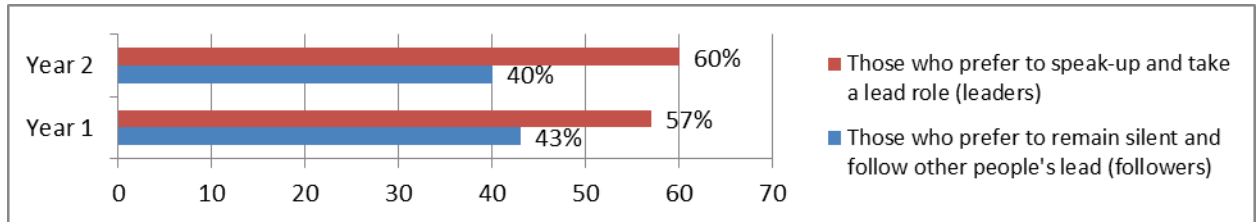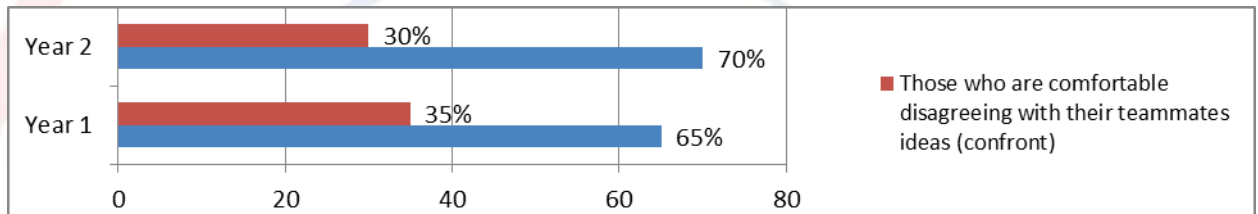Table 4.6.A - Active Contribution: Directly (Leading) vs. Indirectly (Following)

Table 4.6.B - Disagreeing with others Ideas: Directly (Confronting Issues) vs. Indirectly (Avoiding)

DISCUSSION

The frequency of student-based hindrances to the benefits of collaborative learning was greater than expected. The data (in Table 4.1) displays that the respondents are facing an array of problematic issues as 30% of year one students polled reported 'constantly' facing impediments with 49% reporting this most sever rate of occurrence in year two. This indicates there is room for pedagogical enhancement and substantiates this particular initiative and even suggests that the group dynamics may be getting worse in later years, which seemingly defies logic as one may assume that increased maturity, confidence, academic experience on top of familiarity with others would naturally facilitate improvements in group-work ability, meaning the rate of problematic occurrences should decline.

The survey confirmed a range of nine student-based impedances that typically occurs outside of the classroom during progress on major projects. The data in Table 4.2 illustrates that over 60% of the respondents experience team meetings with absentees with a similar frequency of students (at 56.8%) reporting that some teammates in attendance contribute very little. Close to 50% of all respondents experienced partners who have exhibited a poor attitude which has been seen to lower morale. Other issues, each with a significant rate of response at around thirty percent of the sample, include non-democratic decision-making, a lack of close communications throughout the learning process, poor attitudes to not only the project but other group members, a lack of leadership and of goal-setting with written comments regarding poor time-management and students on their smart-phones during meetings.

Data set in Table 4.4 (section one) indicates that at least half of the students are emerging from high schools where class size exceeded 40 students and that a great number of students feel the level of student interactivity in their formative high school

experience was 'none'. In section two of Table 4.4 we see that close to 50% of IFT students surveyed feel they have revived some teamwork tips, which is encouraging but 17.4% still feel no group work training has been provided so far. These are noteworthy findings as they may explain inactive group dynamics that could easily be misperceived and mistreated as motivational or language based problems when many students simply do not fully understand what real teamwork entails and how to go about it.

Two key survey questions with results displayed in Tables 4.6.A and 4.6.B sought to confirm the possibility of a generally indirect communications' style, which is thought to be somewhat reflective of a regional low individualistic orientation. Data illustrated how 43% and 40% of first and second year local students respectively, expressed a preference to operate with a silent approach and follow others' leads while 65% of first year respondents and 70% of the year twos feel uncomfortable disagreeing with others in group-work situations. These results are indicative of an indirect communication style and this is seen as a major barrier to collaborative group-work amongst this sample. Both questions (4.6.A & B) illustrate that this communicative barrier is not diminishing into the second year of study and is a significant finding as this aspect of collaboration is what the development of desirable vocational communicative and teamwork abilities are based on.

IMPLICATIONS

This paper's findings lead to a range of practical implications for collaborative pedagogy with IFT students and perhaps in the wider East Asia teaching and learning context, where students are bringing very little real teamwork experience to the college level while being predisposed to an indirect communication style while also facing a range of somewhat universal barriers to the collaborate process.

Re: Grouping - For grouping students, this researcher has made an effort to create semester-long 'study teams' grouped on the results of a short personal reflection on communicative and teamwork abilities. The aim is to have a balance between those who are apt at directing a group and orally giving feedback with those who are clearly being quieted by tenancies to be indirect.

Re: Weight on the communicative process in class - Small group discussions, not related to the term project, but approached in the same semester-long 'study teams', have been concluded with efficient self-assessments on one's communicative behaviors through the given task - after clarification (early on in the semester) of what is expected in collaborative discussions. Weight toward the participation grade is put on this communicative process while marks for the product may go towards course work. In this particular course participation is a lofty 20% as well which seems to be assisting in adding some extrinsic motivation to small group discussions as well as to general attendance rates as there may be more at stake than 'an absent without note'.

Re: Weight on the communicative process outside of class - A similar approach will be taken to meetings regarding the term project which are held outside of class time, which have not been assessed historically (by the author) aside from feedback on a confidential peer assessment, which seems to have very little impact on facilitating 'professional' collaboration. Groups are expected to meet at least three times at

different stages with a general agenda for each stage. Meeting minutes will be collected after being modeled with guidelines of what is expected in terms of the process. It is hoped this amendment will increase the professionalism of meetings outside of class while helping to weed out those nine hindrances to group work displayed in table 4.2. The minutes and attendance will be weighted rather substantially as part of the projects overall score in conjunction with the confidential peer assessments.

Re: Beyond the course: Enhancement to collaborative pedagogy, in this initiative, is being made within a socio-cultural issues class where cross-cultural communication is a core unit. This means that teamwork and communicative training can naturally be included in the semester plan. This is, however, not something that can occur in other content courses and IFT students could use this insight prior to (in many cases) the spring semester of their second year of study. Perhaps it would make sense, given some insights learned in this study, for a mandatory one-hundred level English support course to include a unit on 'professional' communicative behavior and teamwork upon entering the institute where learning styles may juxtapose high school and some societal norms. In this case, students could effectively put sharpened abilities to use in all other courses through their first four semesters where collaboration is 'constant' and expected.

Re: Project Design: A final implication lays in overall term project design. Action resulting from this paper to date will see the standard group presentation replaced with a 'round-table' meeting where a group discussion, with prepared documents by the various participants with serve as former ppt visuals and will be circulated before the meeting attacks a set of agenda points – with all expected to contribute to the various agenda points that were once divvied up and presented on individually. It is hoped that graded meeting-discussion that resembles a team meeting in the 'real-world' will bring all group members in touch with the material and not only contribute to those career related soft-skills but facilitates deeper understanding and longer-term retention of course content.

CONCLUSION

The objective of this paper was to identify the impediments that a group of vocationally minded students in Macau at the Institute for Tourism Studies (IFT) are facing when working in collaborative situations. This is the first-step towards the enhancement of collaborative pedagogy, which will be put into place in an upcoming semester and within a mandatory two hundred-level course on the socio-cultural impacts of tourism at IFT. It is hoped that the efforts involved will lead to increased retention of learning, deeper understanding of core concepts, while effectively sharpening 'real-world' teamwork, leadership and communicative abilities that along with the core principles, will help IFT students reach their potential. The findings suggest that student-based hindrances to optimal collaboration are a lack of relevant experience prior to tertiary study as well as very little in the way of teamwork, or leadership training. Adding to this general reality was data reflective of an indirect communication style that is reported to be prevalent through East Asia. Culturally based communicative behavior may not be a major issue in highly individualistic, low power distance regions where communication is 'low context' and naturally direct, but when so many desirable outcomes of collaborative learning hinge upon vigorous

communication, the passive indirect style can be labeled as a barrier to exemplary collaborative learning. Adding to these more regional student-based impediments were a range of seemingly universal obstructions ranging from absentees, to morale deflating low contributors, lack of leadership, poor use of member's strengths, poor attitudes towards projects and other members and non-democratic decision making. The data leads to several practical implications for precise enhancements to be made to collaborative learning pedagogy with IFT students in upcoming semesters with some relevance to other educators in East Asia where students face similar impediments to model collaborative learning.

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