The Students’ Voice: Experiences of Conflict within Small Learning Groups

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ABSTRACT: This article presents under graduate research of the students’ lived experiences in multiple small learning groups in the Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences program at University of Washington Bothell and the interpersonal conflicts that impede the learning outcomes attributed to small group pedagogies. It argues for a small group learning policy that informs students of the educative processes and conflict’s role in small group activities. Additionally, it calls for a policy that fosters a deeper understanding of various small group methodologies, their uses, and questions how to coordinate the time requirements of small group learning tasks within a community of commuter students.

The University of Washington Bothell’s (UWB) use of small learning groups is not surprising given the research that shows that student learning is enhanced by faculty and peer interactions (Bruffee, 1999; Johnson & Johnson, 2002; Wells, 2000). UWB’s mission is to provide students with a “transformational learning experience” through collaborative engagement (University of Washington Bothell, 2002). In 2005 Sally Rosamond argued in University of Washington Bothell’s Policy Journal that a policy governing their use needed to be instituted. She drew on the case of Samford University, which used Problem Based Instruction as a common frame of reference for all teaching faculty. This article takes up her argument that the Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences program at UWB needs to implement policies to govern the use of small groups, but it advocates a different kind of policy framework that aims, like hers, to preserve the best outcomes of small group learning. Additionally, I provide recommendations to help make group experiences coherent across the curriculum. The evidence for my argument comes from a qualitative study of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences’ (IAS)’s student experiences in small groups and their descriptions of group conflict.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the qualitative study undertaken by myself and other members of the undergraduate small group research team. I will begin with a brief review of two accepted small group pedagogies and describe conflict’s role in these educative activities. I then present evidence that conflict is not functioning to stimulate cognitive/affective intellectual exchanges between students but is keeping them locked in interpersonal struggles about non-task related issues. Based on the evidence, I make recommendations that will improve small group practices across classes. The goal of the small group undergraduate research team is to assist IAS in assessing its educational practices and to stimulate conversation about small groups across the campus as a whole.

Small Group Structure and Conflict’s Educative Role

The organization of various small group pedagogies is different. As Bruffee states, “Collaborative learning and cooperative learning …are two versions of the same thing. Both are educational activities in which human relationships are the key to welfare, achievement, and mastery” (p. 83). He elaborates further stating, “Collaborative learning picks up where cooperative learning leaves off,” and what sets each method apart from the other is the way the activities are structured (p. 87). Cooperative learning focuses on tasks that have a “foundational” or concrete-objective outcome, which requires members to “cooperate” with each other in an attempt to reach the correct answer (p. 84-85, 90). The structured approach provided in a cooperative group task often defines student’s roles, reference materials, and tasks required for the
completion of an assignment. The specificity of the tasks along with the well defined project expectations provides each group member a greater sense of accountability. Additionally, throughout the process, students receive direction from their teachers.

Bruffee contrasts cooperative with collaborative where learners experience greater latitude to explore the complexity in a given situation and receive the personal autonomy to structure their learning with little direction from their teacher (p. 90). The organization of a collaborative learning activity honors the “nonfoundational” or abstract-subjective nature of inquiry, which in turn requires students to interpret questions and ideas that possess a broad range of potential outcomes (p. 85-86). The purpose of this exploration is to develop higher order learning skills through the use of critical thinking, investigation, and reflection, not only of the materials available, but also in collaborative conversation with peers.

The structure and guidance of cooperative learning tasks provide a framework that supports the more challenging tasks of collaborative learning. Each has its own unique approach to group-learning situations; however, these methods are not without shortcomings. Johnson and Johnson (1985) state, “When students are asked to interact with other students while they learn, conflict among their ideas, conclusions, theories, information, perspective, opinions, and preferences are inevitable” (p. 237-238). Advocates of cooperative and collaborative learning feel constructive conflict is central to cognitive development (Bruffee et al, 2004; Johnson & Johnson, 2002; Reynolds, 2005). The introduction of interpersonal conflict occurs as students begin to interact with their peers in cooperative or collaborative small learning groups (Bruffee et al., & Daron, Johnson & Johnson, 2002). As a students transition into learning situations, which expose them to others’ diverse ideas “conflicts of communication or sociocognitive conflicts” can result (Buchs et al., p. 23). A “socio-cognitive conflict” occurs when students jointly engage in a learning task and are faced with a “confrontation [that arises from] different responses to the same task (Buchs, Butera, & Mugny, 2004, p. 292-293). This exposure to a contradictory point of view allows students to explore the same task from a diverse perspective. As they attempt to reach a consensus their “controversies are resolved by engaging in what Aristotle called deliberate discourse (i.e., the discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of proposed actions) aimed at synthesizing novel solutions (i.e., creative problem solving)” (Johnson & Johnson, 1994b, p. 230).

Furthermore, studies have found this type of interpersonal conflict “influence[s] cognitive development, learning, and retention in many important ways when [conflicts] are structured constructively” (Buchs, Butera, Mugny, & Daron, 2004 p. 24).

Research has also shown a correlation between higher order learning outcomes and the presence of positively structured interpersonal conflict within small groups of collaborative and/or cooperative learners when compared to traditional individualized learning methods (Bruffee, 1999; Buchs, Butera, & Mugny; Buchs, Butera, Mugny, & Daron, 2004; Gruber, 2000; Johnson & Johnson, 1985, 1994a, 1994b, 2002; Johnson, Johnson, & Tjosvold, 2000; Mugny, Butera, & Falomir, 2001). Johnson and Johnson’s (1985) study engaged three groups of students in cooperative, competitive, and individual varieties of interpersonal and intrapersonal cognitive conflict. Different task orientations facilitated cooperative or competitive interpersonal conflict within two of the three groups of learners. The third group of students approached the task independently, free of interpersonal conflict. In the final assessment of the three groups, Johnson and Johnson found that both forms of conflict within groups promoted a more complex understanding and fostered more student engagement with their topic than did the individualistic method of learning (p. 240).

In a recent study, Johnson and Johnson (2002) once again compared cooperative, competitive, and individualistic learning outcomes and found that the cooperative small group-learning situation resulted in higher achievement, greater long-term retention of what is learned, more frequent use of high-level reasoning (critical thinking) and meta-cognitive thought, more willingness to take on difficult tasks and persist (despite
difficulties) in working toward goal accomplishment, more intrinsic motivation, transfer of learning from one situation to another and greater time on task. (p. 122)

These findings call into question long held societal and traditional educational beliefs that learning occurs passively through the combination of listening to an expert and an isolated engagement with study materials.

In addition to increased learning outcomes, students who experienced interpersonal conflict reported higher levels of satisfaction in regards to their learning experience when compared to the individualized method of study (Johnson & Johnson, 1985, p. 251). Johnson and Johnson concluded, when individual learners remain isolated within their own thoughts, immune from interpersonal conflict, they tend to develop a “fixation on [their] own information and reasoning” based on a lack of exposure to diverse ways of thinking (p. 240). Additionally, students developed a less flexible frame of reference when attempting to consider contrasting thoughts and ideas (Johnson & Johnson, 1985, p. 240).

Clearly, proponents such as those mentioned so far agree that collaborative and cooperative learning involve interpersonal conflict. These researchers also recognize that “many people are very uncomfortable in conflict situations” (Johnson & Johnson, 1993). This led me to question how students made meaning of their own experiences with conflict in small group settings.

Methods
Setting: UWB IAS Undergraduate Research Small Group Studies

A qualitative research project, currently in its third year, began in response to problematic issues students reported to professors. Students were especially concerned about the frequency with which they were being required to participate in group activities. Additionally, the inherent differences in the organization of cooperative and collaborative small group tasks led to students to perceive a lack of continuity between group designs and requirements across courses. From these concerns, students and professors joined together to explore in a qualitative study of the meanings IAS students give to their small group learning activities.

Two professors and a team of six undergraduate students worked collaboratively utilizing the qualitative data collection method of in-depth semi-structured interviews. The undergraduate researchers recruited prospective participants via e-mail and through personal in-class announcements. Participants were required to have engaged in a minimum of five small group activities on the UWB campus. Student researchers conducted interviews with eighteen UWB students (six men and twelve women). The interviews varied in duration with the average length being 60 minutes. After the interviews were transcribed and analyzed by the student team, student researchers led focus groups to explore the themes that emerged from students’ descriptions of their experiences.

Data Analysis

The qualitative method of grounded theory is an inductive method of data analysis that allowed me to work from the language of the participants as they discussed group conflict. Henwood and Pidgeon (2003) notes, grounded theory allows researchers “to capture the detail, variation, and complexity of the basic qualitative material” (p. 136). The beginning phase of analysis requires the reading and review of each transcript line by line. This reading results in an opening coding that identities concepts and themes. After the initial coding, I used the qualitative software Atlas.ti to facilitate further coding, expressly the sorting and grouping of already coded categories. The electronic availability of the data allowed me to organize categories across the data set as prescribed in the method of “constant comparison,” a process through which the researcher compares codes as they emerge (Henwood & Pidgeon, p. 136). Through this qualitative method, I could develop a theory about group conflict in a program where students are required to participate in multiple groups.
Results

The participant’s responses to open-ended questions that purposefully did not directly question them about experiences with conflict affirmed the presence of conflict within small learning groups at UWB. Further, their responses described repeated aspects of conflict that occurred during the course of small group projects at UWB. Three themes emerged:

1. UWB students wondered why they were assigned small groups activities. Skepticism about learning outcomes led to intrapersonal conflicts due to misunderstandings of the educative purpose of small group activities.

2. UWB students were uncertain how to complete group assignments. Students experienced confusion regarding organizational tasks generated by the differing structures of small group activities, which led to interpersonal conflicts. At times these relational and/or organizational conflicts obscured the presence of cognitive/affective intellectual exchanges between students.

3. UWB students questioned when they would find time to schedule meetings to complete small group assignments. Time constraints led to a variety of interpersonal conflicts. Additionally, students attributed their own and fellow group members’ non-participation and/or unequal participation to a lack of available time for small group activities.

Why do we do group work?

A chief concern that arose from my exploration addressed the intrapersonal conflicts students reported in regard to their general lack of understanding and/or confusion of the purpose of small group activities. In one interview a participant reflected on the stress she encountered in group projects and correlated it with a possible motive for the incorporation of small group learning activities in the IAS program. Her words may come as a surprise to the members of our educational community; she said,

That’s what these groups are for. You have to get it done whether you like it or not. And if you don’t, you don’t get paid, or you don’t get the grade. … I hadn’t really thought about it [like this before]? Maybe the [small group] policy doesn’t need to change because it is a little dose of reality. And here I find that … the [IAS Professors] want to make everything really nice and serene, and that is great, but is it really how it is?

The questions that she posed to me during our interview, that compared the products of small group learning activities with the “reality” or bottom line of the business world, raised many questions for me as a student, a student researcher, and a future educator. Clearly her statement is diametrically opposed to the UWB’s Vision and Core Values Statement: “We value engaging our students in transformational learning experiences that challenge their expectations, broaden their horizons, and stimulate their ambitions” (University of Washington Bothell, 2002). In addition, this student seemed to be arguing that IAS professors do not want conflict in their groups.

Other students also noted that their groups seemed purposeless: “Most of my group work hasn’t been very helpful…mostly because there didn’t seem to be a lot of point to what we were doing.” Still another student had some idea about the possible benefits but remained suspect about the actual learning outcomes. He stated, “I really didn’t appreciate small groups, for an actual learning value. I mean, I know, I enjoy talking and meeting other people, different people from all over the world…I knew that was a benefit, but other than that, I really didn’t grasp why and what it was helping me to do. [It] is weird.” The feelings of ineffectiveness and skepticism that our participants shared often led them to discount the importance of current and/or future small group activities. De Lisi (2002) warns that unpleasant past experiences can negatively affect a student’s attitude toward future group activities. Her warning raised a concern that indicates the need for a policy that could foster an understanding about the purpose of group work. Students need to recognize that problem-solving and diverse views help strengthen intellectual development and interdisciplinary thinking. Inquiry-based interactions aid in the development of a deeper understanding of...
course content (Bruffee; De Lisi; Johnson & Johnson, 1985; 1993).

**How do we do these different group assignments?**

In addition to students’ misunderstanding of the educative purpose of group process, they also seemed unclear in regard to the various structures of small group learning methodologies utilized within the program. Rosamond references these irregularities and inconsistencies expressed by students in small groups in IAS as feelings of uncertainty and frustration that left them thinking that they had to “re-learn how to ‘do groups’ for each course” (p. 83). Participants expressed an inability to determine exactly what it was they were to do in groups that lacked defined goals, as is common in collaborative learning activities. Additionally, at UWB when students engage in multiple open learning situations, and lack an understanding of the benefits of collaborative group activities, they can misinterpret the purpose of the assignment. A participant noted his frustration when faced with this dilemma. They said, “If they [IAS professors] want group work done, as we [the students] see that group work is ‘heavily’ relied on here [at UWB], they need to spend more time thinking out the assignment and what objective they expect out of the members of the group. And they [IAS professors] need to come out and ‘tell’ people [students] right up front!” Another participant recalled how a collaborative task left group members at a loss. She said, “Some of [my group members] had been really confused about the assignment and [they were] unable to grasp what we were doing.” Another reflected on the guidance of their instructor as a key component of group success. He said, “I think that there are some instructors [that who] put people in small groups. But give the small groups ... no direction. And I think for small group work to really succeed, for all the members, it needs to be moderated [and/or] mediated, [to see] if it’s working.” He also believed that “some set of standards [should] come from the instructor.” To allay the student’s confusion and discouragement due to “no direction,” it seems imperative to inform them of the multiple structures of group learning activities as well as their benefits.

The frustration associated with unstructured collaborative learning tasks resulted in a tendency for students to prefer group interactions that take place on a highly structured electronic Blackboard Learning Systems™ program. Furthermore, the participants expressed a higher level of security and satisfaction in connection with highly structured group activities over the loosely structured tasks. One participant commented that the convenience of “groups on Blackboard [allowed you to] get more participation from [the group] because people are at home. They’re comfortable and they’ve got their books right in front of them.” Another noted how combining Blackboard with a structured group project resulted in a very positive learning experience. He recalled how “after [their group project] was all over (because we did a lot of our group discussions on blackboard) almost everybody said; ‘Wow, that was such a great experience. [That was] the best group I’ve ever been a part of and we had a lot of fun.’” These students recognized that the exchange of information, that the Blackboard had facilitated, added an additional element of interpersonal communication that made their learning experience successful. De Lisi states, “Students will form ideas or concepts about peer learning based on their previous peer learning experiences. These ideas will have both a cognitive and an affective component, and as such, influence students’ behavior in subsequent peer learning activities” (p. 10). Interpersonal communication (in person or electronic) can rectify a lack of communication between group members. However, it can not erase the negative experiences that occurred prior to creating a new understanding.

In terms of a policy for small learning groups in IAS, it is of paramount importance to establish clear lines of communication early in every student’s experience at UWB. No student should have to recall an event such as the one a participant shared as she rejoiced in the positive end of a group project; yet, she prefaced her story with mixed emotions concerning a lack of communication. She said, “I had been coming [to UWB] a year and a half
before I took his class, and [this professor] really had a commitment to… [small group] work.” She added, “What really helped [her] is that [the professor] was very clear [in] his expectations. He not only spoke about it, but he gave [students]...the tools to help [us] figure out how to get there.” It is fortunate that this participant now feels comfortable engaging in small group activities; however, it is also rather tragic that the majority of her group work at UWB had not given her “the tools to help” with small group tasks. Rist (1999) notes that policy formulation must begin with “an understanding of the policy issue at hand” (p. 548). What did this professor do that others before him had not? In the process of developing a policy for small learning groups, the IAS program should note the variability of experiences reported by our participants. Unpredictability within a system, as Rist suggests, is a strong indicator for the establishment of a policy. A policy could address the issue of continuity in the framing of instructions and project expectations across courses within the IAS program to circumvent misunderstandings of small group processes.

Among the confusion and frustration reported by our participants due to a lack of understanding of the educative purpose or structures of small group tasks, they also find themselves involved in interpersonal conflicts with other group members. Disputes and conflicts emerge as students either blow neglect to complete a loosely framed task, or when they divide divvy up a very structured task. One participant was thankful that “none of [her] coursework ha[d] included what [she] would think of as traditional group work.” She explained her definition of group work as “you...go off on your own and each [of you] do[es] a particular part and then [the group members] come together and complete [the] assignment or paper or presentation.” As previous mentioned by our participants there is a preference for structured group projects. In the following statement a participant shared her rationale for this preference as she correlated unequal participation with the lack of a defined task in an unstructured group activity. She said, I’ve been in classes where you form a group, but then it’s really confusing as to what is supposed to be done, or what needs to be done. ...And so other members of the group,...or some members of the group will... slack off. So it’s easier when...there’s a specific project.

Another participant reported, “My anxiety level increases with group work when I don’t feel like everybody is taking the project as seriously as I am, or if I feel like I’m doing an extra amount of work.” Still another stated plainly, “I’ll be there, I’ll be there, I’ll be there. But when it comes down to the nitty gritty, you know, they [other group members] are not there.” The issue of unequal performance or— in the words of our participants—the presence of a “slacker” is an one commonly reported in small learning groups (Bacon et al., 1999; Linden, Nagao, & Parsons, 1985; Lizzio & Wilson, 2005). However, in our participants’ reports this issue seemed to take on a complexity not present in the literature available on this topic.

**When can we do group work?**

Our participants expressed anguish when addressing the time constraints placed on them to complete small group activities, especially outside of routine class time. Linden et.al. noted that non-residential college students faced challenges that are less prevalent within residential college communities. Similarly, as a community of commuter students, a majority of UWB students have multiple of f- campus responsibilities, and the time demands of some small group projects can result in conflicts. One participant recalled how “going to school at night after a day of interacting with people and...coworkers and then family when you get home... and then coming to school, you just don’t want [any]more [group interaction].” She continued, adding a note of surprise, that in a day time course she found “it [was] interesting because of lot of them were not full time students. They did work too; ...some of them worked different jobs, night jobs, and things like that, so I’m thinking people within the group...had kind of a variety of schedules.” Time constraints and busy schedules left another participant feeling disappointed as he recalled how his...
group of five were unable to manage multiple limitations. He said,

Actually, we ended up with seven minutes of film and three of us basically did it. And [the unequal participation] wasn’t as much a lack of desire. But … you’re dealing with limited times when you can use the media center, conflicts of schedule, a movie that is not available outside, [or] readily available outside. There were so many restrictions. I think as a group we were disappointed because we had a good movie to use. We had beautiful clips. But we couldn’t keep … we couldn’t keep people working on it and … that was what felt disappointing.

In the initial steps towards the creations of a small group learning policy, it is important to understand the character of UWB’s non-residential commuter campus. A majority of students regardless of their educational status (full or part-time students) have a variety of responsibilities that limit their available time for group activities outside of regularly scheduled classroom hours. It is also important to recognize that despite the busy lives of UWB students and their conflicting time schedules our participants noted that their peers were engaged in their educational goals. A participant shared how he “realize that they’re [other students are] coming back to school because they want to. It’s something they’ve wanted to do for a long time…they’re not forced to be here as much.” Additionally, participants expressed a willingness to put aside social aspects commonly associated with campus life in favor of their academic pursuits. One student reported, “On this campus [students] are [here] to go to school. That’s the point of coming to a commuter campus…they don’t need the fraternities, the sororities, the sports, the meetings, the after school activities… all the extras.” However, it seems that UWB’s commuter-campus culture that lends itself to a population of students with multiple responsibilities, also finds itself means that students need to prioritize their education within the broader confines of their lives. The urgency to make it all happen is evident in a participant’s description of the typical UWB student’s shortage of time; she said, “They’re like, ‘I’m here to learn, I’m here to get in and get out with my degree as fast and as efficiently as possible.’” When time constraints and educational aspirations combine they create a perplexing issue in regard to the creation of a policy for small group learning in the IAS program. A participant expressed her frustration stating, “How do I facilitate and manage other people’s time? I can’t; I have no control over that.”

Students’ time constraints combined with their misunderstandings that stem from a lack of understanding in regard to group structure and task objectives have created a tension within groups that precludes many students from achieving the potential learning outcomes commonly associated with small group pedagogies. Research has shown that for members of small learning groups to engage in cognitive/affective intellectual exchanges, also referred to as socio-cognitive conflict (Buchs, Butera, Mugny, & Daron, 2004, p. 23), they must progress through stages of group formation. Tuckman’s (1965) theory of the “Five Stages of Group Development” outlines the process that groups typically move through on their way to becoming productive. Initially a group enters into the “forming stage” (Tuckman, p. 386) in which all members are become acquainted in a polite and agreeable manner and avoid direct confrontations, while also assessing the group’s dynamic for leadership, safety, and diversity. Groups then move into the “storming stage” (Tuckman, p. 386) where members assert themselves as they attempt to find their position within the group as related to the task. This stage often results in disagreements. It is not until the “norming stage” (Tuckman, p. 386) that group members begin to share ideas as they attempt to find their position within the group as related to the task. This stage often results in disagreements. It is not until the “performing stage” (Tuckman, p. 387) group members have the ability to adjust their performance to suit whatever task is required of them individually or in groups. The underlying focus is on task and the group is highly motivated to meet their desired goals. The final “adjourning stage” (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977) occurs at the conclusion of the group activity and serves as a farewell and celebration for the collective accomplishment of the group.

From my Coding of the interview data...
reveals that, many negative experiences with groups at UWB seem to occur during the “storming stage” of group formation (Tuckman 1977, p 386). One participant mentioned, “I try to be like a peacemaker if I can” when reflecting on the role that he typically takes in group projects. Another participant recalled when a lack of communication due to a group member's repeated absences that led to a situation where “they were, like, both kind of pissed off.” The need for group members to be more forthcoming with their feelings was explained as students should “agree to disagree on certain things; everybody knows what those things are. You know, it’s not like it’s, uh, hidden, [what] people feel...[when] you [have] been stabbed in the back.” Complete group dysfunction was described in a participant’s report of how “an overpowering or an overburdening individual can really...stop group work right in its tracks.” For the purpose of this proposed policy, it was of interest to note that the interpersonal cognitive conflicts that led to the improved learning outcomes in small group activities typically arose in Tuckman’s third and forth stage, identified as the “norming and performing stage” (Tuckman, 1977 p. 396).

Salida (1990) emphasizes the necessity for high levels of structure in the initial meetings of small groups to avoid the confusion that can arise in small group activities. She added that groups commonly adjust the amount of time spent in each stage gauged on the time available for completing the task; however, it is important to recognize that relational conflict will erupt prior to cognitive conflict. Further she warns that conflicts left unresolved can result in a group’s inability to communicate rendering them dysfunctional. Anticipation to complete the project can lead to anxiety within groups before they even begin their process. A participant recalled how absorbed students can become in achieving results when

Does the relatively short amount of time UWB students have to prepare their group projects explain their propensity to bypass the initial stages of group formation and forgo important interactions that give a group its basic working foundation? Research has shows that the urgency to produce a project often leads students to impose external pressures to “meet deadlines” (Arrow, et al., 2004). How each group member experiences this pressure is also different and can also create tension within a group.

The frustration and anticipation of problems commonly attributed to group work that are voiced in the quotations in this paper were apparent throughout a majority of the interview transcripts. Participants made passing references to effective cognitive/affective intellectual exchanges between students and attributed positive learning outcomes to “the chemistry of the group” or “the luck of the draw.” Clearly, that is not the purpose of small group pedagogies; nor is it the intent of the IAS program for students to feel as if their education is a gamble.

Recommendations

The Why of Groups

Bacon et.al. stressed the importance of students understanding the purpose of small group activities. To avoid students forming misconceptions about the educative purpose of small groups, the IAS Student Handbook could provide a brief written explanation of the social and cognitive process of small group learning pedagogies. At present, all students’ receive this handbook in an orientation prior to attending courses. The 2005-2006 IAS Student Handbook has no direct statement addressing the use of small group learning methods or expectations. However, in the introduction the handbook states that it “is designed to disseminate general and program-specific information” (IAS Handbook, p. 2). In the entire body of the twenty-page handbook, the word collaboratively appears three times, each as part of In a two-page description of mandatory courses, BIS 300 and Senior Seminar, required for graduation the word collaboratively appears...
three times in the body of a twenty page handbook. There is no clear or direct statement about the use of small group activities or their purpose (p. 10-11). The absence of any mention of small group pedagogies in the *IAS Student Handbook* seems to be an oversight; inclusion of information about the rationale for small group work along with a presentation of the material during student orientation is a first step toward improving their effectiveness.

**The How of Groups**

Students also recognized that the structure of group tasks differ, resulting in an uncertainty that leaves students to question *how* to do groups. Currently, IAS students encounter a variety of small group learning tasks in a required first quarter course: BIS 300. The design of this course, with modifications to the pre-task instructions, could inform students of the different learning methods utilized along with the purpose for each type of inquiry. Bacon et al. cited the necessity of providing “clear team vision...or at least a clear understanding of team objectives” if student teams are to be successful (p. 473). Furthermore, to provide consistency across the courses, a policy could establish some uniformity in the instructional handout given to students. This would allow instructors the academic freedom to use a variety of small group methodologies, befitting the task; yet, the student would have an understanding of the task requirements.

In addition to understanding *how* to go about completing the task it important to provide students with a deeper understanding of *how* interpersonal conflicts are an inherent part of the small group process (Bowen & Jackson 1985; De Lisi; Johnson & Johnson, 2002; Lizzio & Wilson, 2005; Wells, 2000). Additionally, students should not confuse the educative value of exploring differing perspectives and ideas as a mere opportunity for social engagement. Furthermore, students need to recognize conflict that can occur in the various stages of group formation. The inclusion of a description of Tuckman’s stages of group formation—that distinguishes between conflicts in the various stages of formation—in the *IAS Handbook*’s description section on small group pedagogies that distinguished between conflicts in the various stages of formation would serve as a guide to which IAS professors could refer students to when questions arise regarding conflict’s present in small learning groups.

**The When of Groups**

Arrow et al. (2004) spoke of time as a “resource” that is a “valuable commodity” (p. 77). The statements of our participants echoed his philosophy. Lizzo and Wilson cited unequal participation as one of the primary contributors of conflict within small groups of learners. Interestingly, UWB participants often attributed unequal participation with issues that centered on shortages of time. How to address this issue is as a matter of policy that will require a great deal of consideration. What is important for the purpose of this paper is that any policy discussion takes into consideration that UWB students (whether in the traditional or non-traditional demographic category) are non-residential commuter students with multiple responsibilities. Students that who pursue their educational goals while attending to the responsibilities of day-to-day living face a real considerable dilemma. Equally important are the academic concerns regarding the value of classroom time spent on group projects. Time is a “valuable commodity” and how to quantify what is in the best interest of the students at UWB is a question that I feel the educational professionals at UWB will have to debate. It is my intent to share the quandary that students face when asked to participate in multiple groups outside of routine classroom hours.

**Conclusion**

In creating a policy for small group learning in the IAS program, it would be a mistake to create a policy based upon one method as a framework to structure all group activities. In the spirit of the IAS program’s interdisciplinary exploration of building knowledge across disciplines there should also be flexibility within a policy allowing for task appropriate tools and/or methods to guide the
exploration. A policy should be a guide to provide consistency within the various methods, but also allow flexibility of design with the expressed purpose of educating the students.

Many of the conflicts the students reported were born from misunderstandings of the purpose and structure of small group activities. Our participants also reported a key consideration in the creation of any policy is how that policy will benefit the community that it is to serve (Rist, 1994). A policy that honors UWB’s mission to provide a “transformational education” must also take into consideration that a direct result of the mission’s goal ultimately transforms the role of the student (University of Washington Bothell, 2002). How obtainable is the type of learning the IAS program promotes when students are required to meet outside of class hours. The time demands placed on UWB students may leave them unable to progress through Tuckman’s stages of group formation. In the interest of a community of students, with multiple responsibilities in addition to their educational goals, a policy for small group learning activities at UWB must address the unique needs of our commuter students when considering recommendation for a policy on small group pedagogies.

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