The Thorn in Our Flesh: A Comparison of Academic Group Projects Across Cultures

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Research Question:
How do university students in collectivistic and individualistic cultures perceive academic group projects?

Abstract:
The mention of group projects often elicits groans from students, followed by chatter as they attempt to grab the best team members they can find among the flock of distressed classmates. In an attempt to discover whether or not the dislike toward group projects is exclusive to students in American universities, the current study explored the following question:
How do students across cultures perceive group projects in the classroom?

Previous research was explored to determine possible factors that influence group performance and how one’s perception of the group affects the outcome of the project. Data was collected from university students involved in semester-long group projects in Boise, Idaho and and Salatiga, Indonesia.

The data was gathered via an online survey to measure the perception and attitude toward the group. The research found that individualistic and collectivistic cultures perceive group projects differently, and the findings provided insights into the influence of cultural norms in the effectiveness of educational methods.

Method:
A survey was distributed to one section of an upper-division research methodology course at Boise State University (BSU) and Satya Wacana Christian University (SWCU), Indonesia. A total of 39 and 68 responses were gathered at each university, respectively. The survey was used to gather raw statistical data on students’ opinions on their ability to work in a group as well as their feelings toward group members and projects.

Conclusions:
The study found significant differences in students’ perceptions of group work. Students from a largely collectivistic culture are more likely to perceive group projects positively, while students from an individualistic culture have more negative perceptions toward group projects.

While a majority of students from both universities enjoy working with others, students from BSU reported practical reasons, such as “lightens the workload” and “the workload is shared” as reasons why they enjoy group work, while students from SWCU in Indonesia reported emotional reasons, such as “I like working with friends” and “I can look back and smile at the memories,” as to why they like group projects.

The findings of this study indicated that students from a collectivistic culture are more likely to approach group work with positivity and emotions, while students from an individualistic culture have more negative feelings towards group project and view the work as a practical mean to complete a task.