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Challenges of collaborative projects

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As language teaching professionals, we encounter collaboration in two basic contexts. One applies to our students. We design and implement group activities that allow students to actively engage with each other and build knowledge and skills. Although sometimes we may have some reservations about such an approach, we see its benefits and encourage students to work collaboratively. The other type of context applies to our teamwork with fellow professionals. There we build, exchange, and share our professional expertise and cooperate on projects of various kinds. Although yet again we understand the value of cooperation, we may not always feel so supportive of it as we are in our classes. Being active members rather than observers in this context, we are much more aware of the challenges associated with collaborative projects. Among our many positive experiences of teamwork, we also have the experiences of feeling annoyed, misunderstood, hurt, unsatisfied, disconnected, disliked, frustrated, and discouraged.

In both instances of collaboration and, in fact, on any occasion when people work together on a shared goal, common challenges occur. Consequently, if these are not prevented or handled well, collaboration becomes counterproductive and its beauty gets overshadowed by difficulties faced by members of the group. To prevent these failures, we need to plan the collaboration through. Effective group work in a language class or collaboration simply needs to be well planned/designed and structured.

I have taken part in multiple types of local or international collaborative projects. Those more successful and enjoyable projects have shared common characteristics as have less successful and frustrating ones. The following is a brief overview of what I have identified as basic areas that defined the quality of a collaborative project.

Make a Commitment

People taking a part in a collaborative project need to be committed to the project. They need to understand the goals of the project and how these goals align with and feed into other activities they are involved in. They need to find the work meaningful to them and believe in it as well as feel a certain level of ownership of it. If the commitment is present, the foundation of effective collaboration is laid as Zoglio (2002) writes: "Commitment is the foundation for synergy in groups."

Identify Strengths

It is also important to identify and recognize the strengths and potential of each group member in the project and be sure that everyone can take an active part in the group processes with confidence to contribute. Unbalanced competences in relation to the project needs result in overload for some and frustration for other project partners. Both feelings then lead to demotivation and troublesome collaboration.

Define Roles

Clearly defined and understood roles and responsibilities of members of a group are another foundation of effective group practices. Everybody involved needs to know what is expected of them and what their role in the collaboration encompasses. Consequently, knowing how and what to do

increases people's motivation and results in better collaboration outcomes. The time invested into the description of the roles and responsibilities pays back through people's better engagement in the processes.

Choose an Effective Leader

For the tasks or projects to be completed successfully, effective leadership is required. There needs to be a team leader who understands his or her role and responsibilities and manifests relevant leadership skills and behaviors. It is important to understand that leadership styles vary and each context may require a slightly different one.

Communicate

Last, like in any other social relationship, communication is imperative to the success of collaboration. A work environment that allows participants to inform, share, and clarify ideas; say what one thinks; express feelings and opinions; and ask questions needs to be present from the very beginning of any project. Processes and strategies of communication need to be established and promoted among group members. In cases of intercultural collaborations, the role of culture in communication needs to be recognized and possible miscommunications addressed.

We bring different expectations, experiences, commitments, personal and professional skills, strengths, contexts, cultures, technology skills, and so forth to any project. They can hinder or enhance the group efforts to accomplish a task. If we embrace the principles of effective team work and implement them effectively in collaborative projects we get involved in (or involve our students in), we may find group work effective, motivating, or, simply said, running like clockwork.

You can learn more about the topic in the resources provided below.

References

Zoglio, S. W. (2002). 7 keys to building great workteams. Retrieved from <http://teambuildersplus.com/articles/7-keys-to-building-great-workteams>

Resources

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