HIGHER EDUCATION: DISTANT WORK AT TIMES OF PANDEMIC

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Abstract. The article looks into the conditions under which it is possible to create group cohesion and fruitful distant educational process at times of Covid-19 pandemic. The authors analyze the issue of group work activities and efficient techniques for group decision-making. The method of comparative study is used to define the ways of organizing distant group work and its successful procedure and completion. The authors provide examples of distant work activities: case studies and proper decision making techniques for their solution based on their own practice. It is defined that eliminating of sociocultural barrier and establishing comfortable atmosphere is of great importance as during distant studies it leads to cooperative mutual assistance, making it possible to coordinate work of great complexity.

Keywords: distant work, group cohesion, communicative activities, decision –making techniques.

Introduction

During COVID-19 pandemic when authorities make people stay home or even forcibly lock down some countries, the situation creates unique challenges not only for business but higher educational establishments as well. How can teachers motivate students to do their best and feel like a full member of educational environment if they work distantly? What exactly is distant working?

For the majority of students, it means working remotely, from home or campus, having virtual "face-to-face" communication thanks to computer. Due to the development of IT this kind of communication is not something new for the majority of young people but when there

are no other ways of communication it may become tiresome and even irritating especially for those who prefer active working in group to passive sitting before the computer.

But what we've learned along the way is that distant work can turn out to be effective alternative to classroom work if participants are completely involved in communicative activities like discussions, role and business games, case studies and problem-solving tasks. And of course students have to be involved in decision – making process as the content and completion of any communicative activity.

So, two interconnected issues are of great importance for teachers in higher educational establishments: 1) to form a coherent student group; 2) to organize productive group work that motivates. Taking into account that students can't meet face to face often and the main part of the studies are held on-line both issues are a rather difficult question.

Research Methodology

To answer these questions we apply to the idea of group cohesion and the method of comparative study of group decision –making techniques as a tool of our research. Our long pedagogical practice may also be considered as the platform for the research in this sphere. So, how to organize group discussion and find ways to come to agreement if you are a member of a virtual team? Which techniques for group decision making should be chosen?

Traditionally all kinds of classroom communicative activities and students' self-study are held by small multinational groups of students from different countries who study international business and management in RANEPA. We greatly support the communicative approach to learning [5] and prefer offering lots of practical tasks to do instead of telling about them to students. All variety of case studies, discussions, role plays, business simulation games, problem-solving tasks and other kinds of activities are in usage.

Also we have had the experience of teaching the strategies and tactics of intercultural professional communication in the English language to the students of International Business Studies faculty as a special integrative course that comprises the courses of Business English with the course of lectures on the Basis of professional cross-cultural communication [2]. This course is presented to students not only using Power point presentation but also comprises lots of different forms of communicative practice and practical tasks for group work.

The problem of forming group coherence, creating the atmosphere of fruitful cooperation appeared to be extremely important: it is known that the essence of group activities is in the establishment of such cooperation, when the behavior of each varies and to some extent is regulated by the fact of participation of others [1].

Real communication is an exchange of information and ideas that provide cooperative mutual assistance, making it possible to solve and coordinate the tasks of great complexity. The

integral characteristic of the system of intra-group relations is a degree of cohesion, the index of which can be the frequency or degree of coincidence of opinions, assessments, attitudes and positions of the group's members in relation to the objects most significant for the group as a whole.

It is known that cohesion is a key concept of the theory of group dynamics developed by K. Levin [4]. It is defined by him as a total force field that forces members of the group to stay in it. The more united the group, the more it meets the needs of people in emotionally saturated interpersonal relationships.

Nowadays may be more than usual the atmosphere of attentive attitude to each other and mutual support, a sense of group identity is needed and it is possible to create it among students if this aim is highlighted as one of the aims of contemporary education. Cohesion also generates emotional attachment, the adoption of common tasks, ensures the stability of the group even in the most frustrating circumstances. It takes time and efforts to form group cohesion but it bears fruit.

Group cohesion from the point of view of communication processes in a small group was also investigated by Leon Festinger. Cohesion was analyzed by him on the basis of data on the frequency and strength of the communicative connections found in the group. The central concept through which analysis was performed was the concept of cognitive dissonance - the individual's awareness of the opposite to his beliefs opinion of another person or group [3]. According to the researcher, the processes of social communication and social influence are intertwined with the processes of the emergence and elimination of cognitive dissonance. If dissonance exists, there is also a desire to reduce it, and the more dissonance, the stronger the desire to eliminate it.

Students should be aware that disagreements exist in all kinds of group as a reality and boosting force of their development. And there are some ways to eliminate disagreements and come to agreement: it may be independent change of the opinion on the problem by a person for more prevalent; it may be a change of person's opinion under the influence of other members of the group; it may be person's assertion of the superiority of own opinion when a person uses his social influence and communication to reduce dissonance [3].

The main techniques for group decision-making in distant education

In any case any disagreement can be transformed with the help of discussion into agreement and cooperation if a group is able to come to mutual understanding and knows techniques of group decision making.

We may recommend starting the work with a new group of students with Didactic group decision-making method. It may be named both: a kind of training and a role play.

This kind of decision-making training is also effective in cases when the group is not flexible enough and it needs additional practice in understanding advantages and disadvantages of a situation or action. This is a kind of training that brings great benefit to participants because initially they are sure that only one - their opinion is correct and may be taken into account.

The case should be rather concise and have two options, e.g. "The staff of a company should decide whether to relocate their company during the crisis or not". The background information about the company is given to students.

The recommended procedure during Didactic method is as following:

1) The group is divided into two parts. A problematic situation is presented orally or in a form of a text. It is underlined that there are only two ways out of this situation. The first part of the group has to support and find advantages for the first solution – "Yes", the second group – for the second one – "No". Both groups take time and present their arguments for their solution as best.

2) Without making final decision the groups are asked by the teacher to change their roles. Now the students have to support and find advantages in the solution that they were against a few minutes ago. The discussion procedure repeats.

Talking about the company under discussion - the result may be different, but talking about students - it is fruitful. The interchange of the ideas and acceptance of different points of view leads to mutual understanding of facts and people's positions. It may lead to widening the situation, finding additional arguments and possessing practical skills of discussion. [2]

There are some other ways to come to group solution under the conditions of distant working. Among them: Nominal technique, Delphi technique, and Brainstorming.

For the majority of teachers and students Brainstorming is the only technique that is known and regularly implemented in the classroom. This fact is confirmed by our teaching practice, too, as our students didn't know other methods before entering our program. Admitting all the advantages of such method we have defined that it loses a lot of efficiency, excitement and speed when applied distantly. The Brainstorming technique may be used if IT Platform allows the group to be shared into subgroups for discussion. But again it has its disadvantages: it is practically impossible for a teacher to monitor the discussion and assist students if needed. As we mentioned before Brainstorming was known by all the students but we had to point out some important rules that a student have to follow:

- No initial idea is criticized or rejected.
- The team is interested in developing a high number of ideas and not concerned with quality or feasibility yet.

It is necessary for different opinions to be heard and taken into account. Formal and informal leaders play an important role in decision-making process. A certain role is played by

the size of a group: the larger the group, the more difficult it is to manage the communicative process. That is why we prefer our students to work in groups of five - six people.

The next algorithm of Brainstorming technique we recommend to our students:

1. Establishment of facts: after the problem is posed it is a kind of data collection. During this period, we should refrain from evaluations, and focus on the maximum objectivity of information.

2. Assessment of facts: it is of evaluation nature. Members of a group at this stage should be able to express everything they think about the collected data. The main thing here is to fix the assessments and not individual positions of people.

3. Search for solution: it aims at developing various solutions. The group needs to demonstrate their ability to imagine. One of the criteria for the effectiveness of passing this phase is: absence or minimum number of cases of ignoring the opinions expressed and refusals to defend one's opinion.

4. Making decisions: irrelevant is the decision-making phase, when the proposed solutions are compared with the diagnosis made in the second stage. The final decision is made on the basis of the analogy of advantages and disadvantages of the proposed options, their elimination, the combination of several into one, the development of "third" ways [6].

Nominal group technique works out very effectively if the task is defined in a concise and clear way. In the Nominal group technique, members do not discuss the issue and potential solutions orally. Instead, the group uses a written process to develop their creative ideas on a given task or problem.

The great advantage to this type of group decision-making is that no one member of the group can dominate and this point eliminates the interpersonal aspect, which can sometimes distract people from the goal of research. Students show their creativity in full without any fear of being misunderstood or even laughed at.

The steps of the Nominal group technique consist of:

- Team members write down their ideas to solve the problem.
- Each idea is cataloged by a teacher, and systemized to avoid repetition. No idea is discussed between members at this time!
- All ideas are demonstrated in the screen. But nobody knows who suggested which idea.
- An open forum is held to discuss and assess each idea presented.
- Members then vote secretively for the final solution.

This technique demands more time than Brainstorming but it gives students the possibility not only to present their ideas but to be honestly assessed by other people without any interpersonal clashes.

The example of the Case Study using Nominal group technique:

You work at an Oil Refinery Plant that hasn't been modified for a long time. Each year you prefer to be economical and refuse to buy new expensive equipment that can help reduce pollution in the area.

At the moment there is a crisis situation because local community and authorities think Oil Refinery is guilty of river pollution that led to serious ecological problems last week.

What urgent measure should be undertaken by CEO to improve the image of the company and find the way out of the crisis situation.

One more technique relevant to be used during on-line communicative activities is Delphi technique. The Delphi technique consists of the use of surveys to develop a final solution. A team of experts create a survey that is administered to the team. This team may consist of students who are delegated this role or teachers who prepare the list of solutions on their own. If it is needed there may be not one round surveys presented. After each round of surveys, new questionnaires are created and administered until a final solution is able to be rectified.

The next algorithm of Delphi technique can be recommended:

- Team members are given questionnaires with a list of possible solutions.
- Each idea is thought out individually without oral discussion.
- Members of the group mark the idea they think is the best to be implemented in the situation under analysis.
- All questionnaires are collected, analyzed and the solution supported by the majority of people is sounded out. It will be implemented.
- If no solutions are supported by the majority of participants, anew round is held, using some of the old and possible new ideas.

The example of Case Study using Delphi technique:

You are a new director of a famous company that produces sports equipment. The company was rather successful not long ago but now it has serious financial problems due to mismanagement at times of economic crisis.

Your competitors use your difficulties to attract your employees to their companies. They offer bigger salary and better working conditions that is why you have staff turnover in all departments.

What urgent measure should be undertaken in your company?

1. *Introduce flextime system of work for managers; organize corporate transport for employees to / from work.*

2. *Provide free lunches for everybody; redecorate your office and install sports facilities for employees to use them during the break.*

3. *Make 1/3 of the staff redundant and increase salary to those employees who will remain in the company.*

4. *Announce changes in the terms of Labor Contract, increase the sum of medical insurance and perfect pension scheme.*

This technique provides the practice of analysis of other people's ideas, understanding pros and cons of the situation under discussion, making a choice out of several options. The group work organized in a form of Delphi technique is traditionally vivid and efficient.

In our opinion another bit of information on the topic of group work should be presented to students as future professionals in business. It is the fact that group decision-making is not a universal way of solving a problem. It may be unacceptable in different situations, i.e. in the the case when an immediate solution is required and a group solution needs time.

One more drawback of group decision-making is that a group can work out the solution that suits the majority of group members, but it may be not the best optimal solution to the problem under analysis. This is because of group thinking - or the effect of equalization when the majority of people vote for something that is already known, stable and understandable but not for innovative and unusual suggestions.

Thus, consensus that is understood as a unanimous decision is not always a prerequisite for the effectiveness of group work. That is why there exist preventive measures that help to avoid rejecting of new ideas. It may be introduction of "devil's advocate" into the group, whose responsibilities would include constructive criticism of all proposed activities and ideas. Some other methods may be implemented: involvement of a new member to a group; invitation of "spectators" during discussion; a delay of making a final decision, etc. Finally, in modern conditions, it may be the use of IT and computer programs.

Result

As a result we would like to mention that all presented here techniques of decision-making were trained in the classroom and successfully used by the students during practical tasks and self-study. Simultaneously our efforts to create a comfortable atmosphere during distant classes bore fruit as students' feedback was positive and full of excitement.

We may name as the most efficient for distant work in group Nominal decision-making technique. Besides the advantages mentioned before it gives possibilities to create numerous alternatives while looking for additional information, developing new ideas and gathering many opinions in real situations that need solution. Students like it as they have complete freedom in creativity and expression their ideas.

So, thanks to solving two interconnected problems: how to form a coherent student group and organize productive group work that motivates students, we can definitely answer that under

the conditions when students can't meet face to face often in class and the main part of the studies are held on-line it is possible to make educational process useful and interesting.

Our research shows that distant work "works out" in comfortable atmosphere if students are involved in communicative activities that contain their professional and personal interests. Students have great possibilities to realize their feeling of an equal member of a team, develop empathy, readiness to offer information to others, assess achievements of others, and propose a plan of joint activity.

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