U.S. AND NON-U.S. STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF GROUP PROJECT EXPERIENCES IN MARKETING CLASSES

INTRODUCTION

Many marketing classes use small groups to accomplish various class projects. Student groups are used to solve marketing management problems, prepare marketing plans, create advertising campaigns, and design marketing research projects. These groups, however, vary in size, length of time for the project, instructor supervision and interaction, grading, the amount of class time devoted to group meetings, and the total amount of work required. Further, the membership of student groups may include diversity based on age, gender, or nationality. Each of these differences may affect student reactions to their group experiences. Student reactions to groups vary as well, running the full range from enjoying to loathing their group work assignments. In spite of the significant number of students who dislike group assignments (Pfaff and Huddleston 2003), there are several good reasons for using this teaching pedagogy.

Students benefit from small group work in the following ways:
1. Students tend to learn more of the subject matter in small groups than they would if they had worked on individual projects (Freeman 1996; Johnson and Johnson 1984-85; Pfaff and Huddleston 2003).
2. Students are exposed to the differing learning, working, and writing styles of other members of their groups (Boyer, Weiner, and Diamond 1985; Pfaff and Huddleston 2003).
3. Students may learn to work with people who are unlike them in gender, age, nationality, or race, if their groups are diverse in these areas (Feichtner and Davis 1984; Pfaff and Huddleston 2003).
4. When students graduate and enter the business world, group work is increasingly important to on-the-job success. Thus, the added experience of working in groups may be important per se (Chapman and Van Auken 2001).

In addition, instructors may see other benefits from requiring their students to participate in group work. These benefits might include:
1. The average project created by students in groups tends to be of higher quality than those created by individual students (Pfaff and Huddleston 2003), making them quicker and easier to evaluate.
2. Having fewer projects to evaluate conserves the instructor’s time commitment to evaluation (Pfaff and Huddleston 2003).
3. If some class time is used for group meetings, the added pedagogical variety can lead to greater student interest, satisfaction, and involvement with the course. This may increase the students’ satisfaction and, consequently, their evaluations of the course and its instructor.

Although class-related small group work has benefits for both the students and the instructor, several variables can become problematic. Each individual student may learn only that subset of project skills for which s/he is responsible within the group instead of the whole set of skills that could be learned through individual projects (Pfaff and Huddleston 2003). Further, a problem may exist with “free riders”—students who shirk their group assignments and let other group members carry a disproportionate share of the workload (Chapman and Van Auken 2001; Huff, Cooper, and Jones 2002). The students may view the group work assignments and weight for grading as either too demanding or too inconsequential (Pfaff and Huddleston 2003). In addition, students may view the grading system as unfair if all group members receive the same grade regardless of their contribution to the work effort (Chapman and Van Auken 2001; Feichtner and Davis 1984), and the very make-up of group membership may be thought to be unfair if assigned by the instructor (Pfaff and Huddleston 2003). Students may also have trouble scheduling group meetings during non-class hours. The most desirable use of small groups for marketing classes would attempt to maximize the benefits listed above while minimizing the occurrence of problems.
Anecdotal evidence from both students and professors indicates that international students may differ from students who are citizens of the U.S.A. in their reactions to performing group work for their classes. These differences may be due to cultural differences, differences in English language skills, or other differences. This research study tested the proposition that the student’s citizenship (U.S.A. v non-U.S.A.) is related to their reactions to academic group work. The following hypothesis (stated in the null form) was tested.

Hypothesis 1: Reactions to instructor-mandated group work will not differ between students who are citizens of the U.S.A. and students who are not citizens of the U.S.A.

METHOD

Subjects

Two hundred eighty-one students in upper-level undergraduate and master’s level classes from a mid-sized public southern university that used small groups completed the instrument at the end of their courses. The mean age of the respondents was 23.06 (range = 20 – 40), with 135 males, 144 females, and 2 respondents who gave no gender identification. 207 respondents were citizens of the United States, 72 were non-citizens of the United States (mostly from China and Turkey), and 2 respondents didn’t list their citizenship. Further, 200 respondents were upper level undergraduate students, 77 were MBA students, and 4 were not classified. Data were collected from 7 sections of 5 different classes (Advanced Marketing, Advertising, International Marketing, Marketing Management, and Marketing Research), over a 2-year period.

Instrumentation and Measurement

Based on anecdotal student and instructor comments, a 23-item survey instrument was developed. After a factor-analytic study (Mosley and Ampensah 2005) five factors were identified. The five factors are named self-improvement, group process, group scheduling, individual performance, and communication difficulty. Self-improvement reflected the degree to which students recognized that the group experience benefited them—improving their relationships, skills, and motivation. Self-improvement was renamed perceived benefits as a better indicator of its items.

The other four factors indicate the dynamics within the group itself. Group process measured how well the group functioned as a team and shared responsibilities and tasks. Group scheduling reflected the degree of difficulty in arranging group meetings. [In a four-factor solution to this data set, group scheduling and group process loaded on the same factor.] Individual performance measured the students’ opinion of the quality of their own contribution to the group. Communication difficulty reflected the students’ perceptions regarding the ease of communication within the group. All items were measured on a five-point Likert-type scale anchored by “strongly disagree” and “strongly agree.” The mean of the items was used to compute the factor scores reported in Table 2.

RESULTS

The alpha coefficients achieved for several of the variables used in this study required minor modifications of the original research design to test this study’s hypothesis. The alpha coefficients for both perceived benefits and group process (.877 and .774 respectively) are well above Nunnally’s (1967) recommended .600 for exploratory research. While a coefficient alpha of 0.50 – 0.60 might suffice in the early stages of research (Harmon, Brown, Widing, and Hammond 2002; Nunnally 1967), the group scheduling (alpha = .509) and individual performance (alpha = .494) measures are only marginally acceptable. The communication difficulty factor (alpha = .393) had unacceptable reliability.

Because of the reliability problems, group process and group scheduling were combined into one factor—group functioning—and this factor achieved a coefficient alpha of .821. Communication difficulty was dropped from the study because of its low reliability. A measure of communication difficulty was achieved by using the following single item, “My English language skills limited my communication ability.” Sample items included in these factors are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Sample Items of the Group Measures

| Perceived Benefits (8 items) | 1. The group project format helped me to develop better relationships with my classmates. |
|  | 2. The group problem-solving format motivated me to perform at a high level. |
|  | 3. The group interaction improved my human relations skills. |
|  | 4. Group project activities in a business course are helpful to my learning experience. |
| Coefficient α = .877 |  |

| Group Functioning (5 items) | 1. Most group members did their share of work fairly. |
|  | 2. It was easy to schedule group meetings. |
|  | 3. There was a lack of cohesiveness among group members. (Reversed) |
| Coefficient α = .821 |  |

| Individual Performance (2 items) | 1. The quality of my contribution to the project was high. |
|  | 2. I had a problem meeting my assignment schedules. (Reversed) |
| Coefficient α = .494 |  |

The hypothesis was tested using t-tests. Table 2 reports the results for both Bachelor’s and Master’s level student respondents and for the combination of all respondents.
Table 2: Factor Differences Based on Citizenship—Means and p-values.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students Who are Citizens of the U.S.A. v non-U.S.A. Citizens</th>
<th>Perceived Benefits</th>
<th>Group Functioning</th>
<th>Individual Performance</th>
<th>Difficulty with English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor's Level Students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US Mean</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>1.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-US Mean</td>
<td>3.69</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>3.66</td>
<td>3.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance</td>
<td>(.950)</td>
<td>(.213)</td>
<td>(.000)</td>
<td>(.000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master's Level Students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US Mean</td>
<td>3.79</td>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>4.14</td>
<td>1.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-US Mean</td>
<td>3.95</td>
<td>3.52</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>2.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance</td>
<td>(.270)</td>
<td>(.246)</td>
<td>(.158)</td>
<td>(.098)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US Mean</td>
<td>3.70</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>4.30</td>
<td>1.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-US Mean</td>
<td>3.86</td>
<td>3.53</td>
<td>3.84</td>
<td>2.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance</td>
<td>(.117)</td>
<td>(.077)</td>
<td>(.000)</td>
<td>(.000)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Factors with significant differences at the p < .05 level are displayed in bold type.

Bachelor-level, USA citizen n = 174; Bachelor-level, non-citizen n = 25
Masters-level, USA citizen n = 32; Masters-level, non-citizen n = 45

Non-citizens of the U.S.A. were more likely than citizens of the U.S.A. to perceive their own performance as weak. It is uncertain whether this was because of the large number of students for whom English was a second language, because of cultural differences, or for some other reason. Interestingly, only undergraduate students reported greater communication difficulties based on their command of the English language. Although there were no significant differences based on citizenship for the other two factors—perceived benefits and group functioning—group functioning approached a significant difference. Non-citizens of the United States tended to assess their groups as more functional than did respondents who were citizens of the United States. If the number of respondents in each of the differentiated groups mentioned in Table 2 were to be increased, significant differences on the perceived benefits and group functioning variables might appear. Because of the differences found between non-U.S.A. citizens and citizens in two of the four measured variables, the null hypothesis stated above must be rejected. Indeed, differences were found between students who are citizens of the United States and those who are non-citizens.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The major conclusion of this study is that international students experience class-related group work differently than do students who are citizens of the U.S.A. The major difference is in the students’ perception of their own performance in contributing to group’s work. Further, at least at the undergraduate level, communication within the group appears to be more of a problem for international students than for students from the U.S.A. because of their English language skills. To enhance the benefits of group involvement for the international students, professors should take steps to assure that students receive feedback about their expected and actual performance within the groups (including their communication within their groups). Although these differential perceptions may never be entirely eliminated, the instructor can take steps to minimize them.

First, instructors should emphasize that part of the goal for individuals within the groups will be to improve their skills in building and functioning in teams (Pfaff and Huddleston 2003), since this is an important skill to acquire for their future in the world of work (Antonioni 1996; Chapman and Van Auken 2001). Second, allowing at least a portion of the individual student’s grade for group work to be dependent on his/her contribution to the group’s performance may increase perceptions of grading fairness (Chapman and Van Auken 2001; Pfaff and Huddleston 2003), and assure the student that his/her individual performance will be monitored and evaluated. Third, allowing students to engage in peer evaluation provides students with feedback regarding their contribution from the students who know that contribution best. This opportunity for voice and feedback may also increase the students’ perceptions of fairness (Konovsky 2000) and control of their group’s activities. Further, the instructor should be an active monitor of group activities and supervision.

Because of the crucial importance of group functioning to student learning, instructors should be knowledgeable about group activities and should intervene when necessary to assure adequate group performance. Instructors should also assure themselves that no group member is marginalized within his/her group because of communication difficulties or cultural differences.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This is a report of a study in its preliminary stages and must be considered with its limitations in mind. First, the 23 items originally used in this survey are certainly not exhaustive of student reactions to their group experiences. A more comprehensive list of items should be developed and refined to eliminate the double-loading items and to improve the alpha coefficients of group scheduling, individual performance, and communication difficulties factors. Second, all of the student respondents were from one, small, publicly-supported southern university. Hence, the generalizability of these findings to other settings cannot be assumed. Future studies could refine these factors and, perhaps, establish others (e.g., affective reaction to group work). In addition, future studies could work toward the establishment of criteria for determining what the appropriate methods for group organization, grading weights and standards, and instructor monitoring and supervising methods might be.
REFERENCES


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