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“You Are Fired:” Keeping Group Work Real in the Classroom

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Recent literature on the educational profile of the iGeneration emphasizes their love for collaboration.^[1] One could further argue that group projects make great assignments beyond the well-documented learning proclivities of current students. There are many benefits a student can gain from participating in a group project. A student gets to develop communication skills, gets a sense of belonging to a community and gets to experience a basic fact of life: great outcomes are usually the fruit of a group effort. All good teachers use group projects and I wanted to be equally good. Thus, I created an inspiring group assignment for my class that made up 40% of the total grade. It was then that I got to experience a basic fact of life: frictionless team-work is the stuff of legend. Thus, during my first year of teaching, I got to confer with students who were upset, worried, angry, tense, and desperate because of the difficulties they were experiencing working with the group. Every once in a while I would catch a lucky break and said students were experiencing just one of the above emotional states.

Having spent a year refining my counseling skills in order to help my students overcome their disagreements and complete their work, I realized that I was missing the point. My task was not to eliminate friction; my task was to figure out a way to help them manage it in a



productive manner. Of course this is the type of wisdom that while it seems commonsensical, it comes only in hindsight. In the thick of things, my immediate instinct was to attempt to defuse the crisis situation and help them achieve their objective. I am not surprised by my reaction since I could claim that this is a basic instinct for anyone that has completed a Ph.D. program. We are trained to look at problems and respond. So I did. Repeatedly. Meeting with varying degrees of success, since I would not go as far as take control over their projects, which -admittedly- looked very appealing at times. However, once the first year of teaching was over, I got the chance to reflect back on this problem and true-to-type my thoughts followed a philosophical path. I had to decide if I was I going to give them the proverbial fish and “feed them for a day” or opt for the long-term solution. A perennial human dilemma but I believe the teaching guild has claimed the long-term option as our vocation. So now that I knew I had to anticipate the conflicts, how was I going to help them mediate them constructively?

I took my cue from the corporate world. Since part of our job is to prepare students for the real world I decided to go as real as it gets. I turned class group-work into a very structured undertaking. Each team would now have a “project manager,” who was internally appointed/elected. The task of the project manager would be to see the group project to fruition and deliver it on time and complete. Failure to meet the target would mean a failing grade for the project manager. Success would mean an A. The project manager would have to submit to me weekly reports, over the five week period of that the group was working on the project, detailing their progress (or lack thereof) and explaining the handling of difficulties. Upon completion the project manager would have to submit a division of labor that would detail the delegation of duties amongst team members. This document would have to be approved and signed by all members. The project manager would also submit a separate grade form in which s/he evaluates the commitment and quality of work carried out by each group member. Last but not least, each member would turn in a confidential report form in which they evaluate their group members and describe the quality of their collaboration. This confidential report was meant to democratize the group structure and to let me receive feedback on the leadership skills of the project manager.

The following year group-work took place a lot more smoothly for my students. The hierarchical organization of the teams along with the detailed reporting of the work-flow established a clear accountability system. This system made detection of liability easier to track down and in turn mediation of conflict less complicated. It also formalized group work noticeably and prompted students approach their tasks in a more professional manner. Looking back, I can attest that this was a good lesson for the students yet a better lesson for the professor.

[1] "Net Geners are natural collaborators. This is the relationship generation." 89. He presents collaboration as one of the eight "Net Gen Norms." Don Tapscott, *Grown Up Digital* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2009), 89-91. See also, Larry D. Rosen, *Rewired* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 110-111.

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