



## Forming, storming, norming, and performing: Using a semester-long problem-based learning project to apply small-group communication principles

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In a small-group communication course, students participate in a semester-long project to observe an organization while applying many group communication principles, including conflict resolution, group dynamics, teambuilding, leadership, and diversity. In groups of five, the students select any organization, agency, or department on campus or in the community to observe. After observing the organization, the students explore the greatest challenges facing the organization and determine a problem they will examine and analyze. Once they have defined the parameters of the problem, the students will select a potential solution and project that can have an immediate short-term impact. In their final paper and presentation, the students elaborate on long-term solutions and ways to improve the organization's process, policies, procedures, and plans. The project is very effective in teaching small-group communication principles and group development because of the immersive impact on the learning process.

**Course:** Small-group communication.

**Learning Objectives:** Students will be able to: apply relevant theories, principles, and terms to evaluate and analyze the process of group meetings; express an understanding of the necessary commitments and ethical responsibilities essential to successful collaboration in task-oriented small groups; demonstrate the ability to fulfill the necessary leadership and participant responsibilities appropriate to group settings; and implement problem-solving tools to create an initiative to improve organizational dynamics.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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## Introduction and rationale

### Description

In a small-group communication course, students will participate in a semester-long project to observe an organization while applying many group communication principles, including conflict resolution, group dynamics, teambuilding, leadership, and diversity. With faculty approval, the groups of students select any organization, agency, or department on campus or in the community to observe. After observing

the organization, the students will examine the greatest challenges facing the organization and determine a problem they will explore. Once they have defined the problem, the students will select a potential solution and small project that can have an immediate impact. In their final paper and presentation, they will elaborate on long-term solutions and ways to improve the organization's process, policies, procedures, and plans.

For the instructor, the first step is to create groups of about five students who will work together for various components of the course, including interactive activities, presentations, and group exams, while selecting an organization to observe and analyze. Students will meet with their groups during the second week of class or once enrollment is confirmed. Prior to the beginning of the course, in order to prepare for the project, the instructor may want to meet with several student services/student affairs professionals or community leaders to brainstorm potential project ideas and agencies, departments, or organizations that are willing to accept observers and volunteers. During the second week of class, the instructor could invite guests who are student service administrators or community nonprofit directors to share potential project ideas. The students could choose one of these ideas for observation or develop one on their own with the instructor's approval. Students will observe this group while working in a group, allowing for strong application of many small-group principles.

### **Small-group communication information**

There are several concepts, principles, and theories that students may observe during the project. The instructor should explore Tuckman's Group Development Model, as well as several small-group communication concepts and frameworks that will be applied through this experiential learning process.

#### ***Group development***

Tuckman created a model explaining four stages of the life cycle of groups: forming, storming, norming, and performing (Beebe & Masterson, 2012; Engleberg & Wynn, 2017). These stages represent the work that takes place through the process of group development. In the forming stage, groups are polite while the members are getting to know one another. During the storming phases, members compete for roles, leadership, and power. In this stage, groups address conflict. In the norming phase, members establish norms and cohesion develops. Groups attempt to find balance between productivity and conflict. In the performing stage, members work productively. Members are focused on collaborating to achieve the group goals.

#### ***Small-group communication concepts***

This project applies many concepts related to small-group communication content and theoretical frameworks, including: problem-solving agenda, Dewey's reflective thinking, brainstorming, conflict management, leadership, group discussion, commitment to the group, accountability, and trust.

## Rationale for the teaching methods

From the instructor's perspective, there are several pedagogical frameworks that guide the decision for developing and implementing this type of semester-long activity. First, it is important to examine the teaching methods of problem-based learning (PBL) and project-based learning in order to understand how they may be applied through this project in this course.

### **PBL**

PBL projects present students with open-ended real-world challenges that may have multiple solutions. Because outside research and a larger workload is expected, Nilson (2016) recommends that PBL occur in groups or teams of four or more. Within PBL processes, team members define the problem, identify the knowledge needed to solve the problem, divide the work, conduct research, meet and share findings, and write up and present their solutions (Nilson, 2016). PBL teams create their own organizational structure and decision-making rules to evaluate the problem and potential solutions throughout the project involved. Members connect course material with observation from the field.

PBL can be applied as a group teaching method for this project because it allows for the application of real-life scenarios where students address problems they will encounter in personal and professional settings. Nilson (2016) states previous research shows PBL to be effective. She adds that PBL activates prior knowledge and imparts new knowledge that can be used when facing problems and challenges in the future. Some benefits of PBL include teamwork, project management, deep learning, application of content knowledge, and problem solving (Nilson, 2016). Lang (2016) asserts that engaging students in real-life challenges and allowing them to think creatively about solutions creates meaningful learning experiences.

There are several challenges associated with implementing PBL. First, these projects can be very time-consuming. Nilson adds that when instructors do not provide enough support and organization, students may struggle and need additional instruction. More detailed information specific to this challenge will be addressed in the Discussion.

### **Project-based learning**

This teaching method uses an assignment in which several students or a group of students create or develop something tangible to be submitted to the instructor. According to Nilson (2016), project-based learning contributes to problem-solving skills, conceptual understanding, and attitudes about learning. Lang (2016) adds that students need to practice the skills needed to learn the course content and have the opportunity to try, make mistakes, and receive feedback to grow in their understanding. This semester-long learning project adapts components from both PBL and project-based learning. The following list explains the materials needed to implement this project:

- Information about the campus departments' needs
- Opportunities for observation on campus and in the community
- Sample agendas

- Monthly meeting expectations
- SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis template.

## Implementation

There were many components and assignments associated with the project. This section describes each component and the subsequent assignment associated with it. First, [Table 1](#) provides a suggested timeline for assignments and who is responsible for completing the tasks.

## Assignments

### *In-class group work (60 points)*

Beginning the second week of class, each group will participate in activities or presentations related to their group dynamics and observations. Students will create a group name, slogan, and logo. The instructor should implement daily group activities based on the content, topic, and course material. All group members must be present to receive credit for activities. Students should be encouraged to attend all classes to be accountable to their group and its expectations. Points for participation in group activities should be distributed throughout the semester.

**Table 1.** Suggested Timeline.

Activity	Time of completion	Responsible party
Meet with community and campus leaders to brainstorm potential organizations to be observed	Prior to start of semester	Instructor
Assign students to groups of five	2nd week	Instructor
Students create a team name and slogan	3rd week	Student groups
During first monthly meeting, students select a community or campus group to observe and create and submit the group rules and guidelines document	4th week	Student groups
Organization liaison signs letter of intent for the student group to observe their organization	No later than 6th week	Student groups with organization liaison
Students begin observation at organization	After letter of intent is signed; no later than 6th week	Individual students
Students submit assessment rubrics to be used for group members and self-assessment at the end of the semester	No later than 8th week	Student groups
Students hold second monthly meeting	8th week	Student groups
Students complete SWOT analysis of organization	8th week	Student groups
Students submit progress report	8th week	Student groups
Students select problem to examine and confirm project to create short-term solution for organization	No later than 9th week	Student groups
Students hold third monthly meeting	11th week	Student groups
Students complete observation hours and submits documentation signed by organization liaison	No later than 14th week	Individual student with organization liaison
Students submit group paper and present project to class	15th week	Student groups
Students complete group member and self-assessments based on previously developed assessment rubrics	15th week	Individual students
Recognize and appreciate campus and community liaisons with a thank you note	15th week	Instructor

SWOT: Strengths, Weaknesses, Threats, and Opportunities.

### **Monthly group meetings (120 points)**

Each month, students will select a leader, create an agenda, and assign each student a role to work on the project. The monthly leader will submit an agenda. Sample agendas should be provided in the course management system. One agenda document and one progress report must be submitted for all group members.

Individually, students will receive points for attending the meeting (30 points per meeting/10 attendance, 10 agenda, 10 report). The instructor should provide the list of expectations to be met for each meeting, which are detailed in the monthly meeting bulleted lists below. During their group work, members should be asked to reflect on what stage of development their group is achieving.

#### **First monthly meeting (4th week of class)**

The instructor's expectations for the first monthly meeting:

- Select a leader and assign other roles.
- Develop an agenda for the next monthly meeting.
- Select a leader for next month.
- Create the group rules and guidelines document and submit it.
- Brainstorm an agency or organization to support and observe.
- Create the self and group member assessment rubrics.

#### **Second monthly meeting (8th week of class)**

The instructor's expectations for the second monthly meeting:

- Select a leader and assign the other roles.
- Select a member to submit progress report.
- Select a leader for the next group meeting.
- Review the agenda developed from the first monthly meeting.
- Confirm the organization to observe. Submit letter of intent.
- Develop the agenda for the third monthly meeting. The leader will need to submit the agenda before next meeting.
  - What should be accomplished?
  - What questions will be answered?
  - What decisions need to be made?
- Create a plan for accomplishing each student's observation hours (5 hours/student).
- Complete a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Threats, and Opportunities) analysis to begin problem-solving. For more information, read the article, SWOT Analysis from MindTools about how to conduct a SWOT analysis.
- Answer the following questions:
  - What organizational need will the group meet?
  - How will the group solve the problem?
  - What will the group create, plan, or prepare to support the organization?
  - What are the goal(s) of the project?

### ***Third monthly meeting (11th week of class)***

The instructor's expectations for the third monthly meeting:

- Select a leader and assign the other roles for remaining weeks.
- Select a member to submit the progress report.
- Review all the assignment components.
- Discuss the project and the group's progress on the goal, plan, and problem that the group plans to address.
- Assign the responsibilities for completing the project, including the final paper and the presentation.

### **Group rules and guidelines agreement (20 points)**

Each group will create their own list of rules and guidelines as a one-page document signed by all the group members to manage the project. This document outlines the expected group behaviors and norms, and will be submitted in class and uploaded to a Dropbox called "Group Rules & Guidelines" during the fourth week of class. One document is acceptable for all members. This assignment helps groups participate in the norming phase of group development. Some examples of rules include "group members must attend all group meetings" or "group members will resolve conflict by addressing the issue up front."

### **Group member and self-assessment (50 points)**

Each group of students will make a list of items that create a good team experience. Then, they will create a group member assessment that will be used to evaluate each student's participation in the semester-long group experience. This assessment should include a Likert scale and a qualitative questionnaire. One example of an assessment question is "the group member was engaged in observation" and rated 5 = always, 4 = most of the time, 3 = sometimes, 2 = rarely, and 1 = never.

This assignment should be submitted no later than the eighth week of the semester. Before the conclusion of the project, but no later than the last week of class, students will individually evaluate each group member and themselves using the assessment created for their group during the second monthly meeting. This is not an assessment of the organization but rather an assessment of their fellow students and other group members. Each student should submit the completed assessment documents in class (30 points for group member assessments; 20 points for self-assessment).

### **On-campus or community participation (5 hours/student; 100 points)**

The purpose of these hours is not simply to volunteer. It is to observe, to solve, and to communicate within a small group in an organization. Each group works toward solving an organizational problem and providing the organization with a tangible product, process, or service that will assist in their work.

The group will select the agency, office, or organization to support. Students will work with a professional staff member of the organization to create a letter of intent (15 points). The letter must be signed by community agency director or their representative on letterhead outlining their approval of the group's project, due the sixth week of class. This letter of intent for the group should list all group members' names.

Individually, students will document the hours from the community agency or campus department. The organization representative will sign off on each student's five hours of observation/service at the completion the project, due during the final week of class. Documentation of time must be individually submitted and signed by the representative from the agency, office, or organization to confirm observation hours (observation hours/85 points).

### **Two reflective writing essays (50 points)**

Through the essays, the students will reflect on the group communication processes they observed. Each student individually completes two written reflective assignments related to their observation within the selected agency or organization. Each reflection should be about 500 words (one page). Each member must reflect individually. Students should express what they have learned during observations. Students should critically think about how the observation connects to the course content and their personal experience (25 points each). The prompts below help the students to reflect during the storming, norming, and performing stages of group development of their own group, but also to reflect on the group development of the organization they selected to examine and support.

#### ***Prompts for reflection***

##### ***Communication***

Explain the organization, group, team, job, or committee selected. Then, attend a meeting or an event of that group. Observe the characteristics of the group. Comment on the norms of the group. How do they communicate? How are decisions made within the group? Does each member communicate their intentions clearly? Why or why not? Use three concepts from the text to support your view.

##### ***Leadership***

Explain the activity, organization, committee, team, or group selected. What types of leadership does this organization have? In what ways are individuals able to contribute to this organization? What does this organization value in its members? What roles do the leaders/officers play? How does the leader interact with the members? What roles do the members play? Use three concepts from the text to support your view.

##### ***Diversity***

Explain the activity, organization, committee, team, or group that the group selected. How does this organization create a welcoming environment for those involved? In what ways does the organization celebrate diversity or inclusivity of the people involved? How would you improve what is currently happening? Support your opinion with

concepts from the text. Explain the interpersonal relationships with other members in terms of affection, inclusion, and control? What relationship-building behaviors occurred in the group?

### **Conflict**

Explain the activity, organization, committee, or team that the group selected. Attend a meeting or an event, or interview a member or leader. How does the organization resolve conflict? How do the members respond to conflict? What do they do well in relation to conflict resolution? What is the conflict resolution style? What would you do to improve the conflict resolution in the organization? How can the group avoid groupthink? How can you tell the group is not engaging in faulty decision making?

### **Ethical decision making**

Explain the activity, organization, committee, or team that the group selected. Attend a meeting or an event, or interview the leader. How does the organization make decisions? Describe how ethics is involved in decision making? Explain an ethical dilemma you have witnessed through your involvement. Analyze the actions taken by the organization. Use concepts from the text to explain your analysis. In what ways does the organization involve members in planning programs, making decisions, and solving problems? How would you improve these processes?

## **Problem-solving paper and presentation (200 points)**

Within their groups, students will write a two-page case-study narrative about a problem or challenge facing the organization in which they are working. They should include who, what, where, when, and why. Then, they will write a three-page analysis of the problem or the need of the agency, department, or organization. Finally, the groups must include a three-page solution for the problem using a model or theory of small-group communication. The solution should include a product, process, or service that the group will implement or provide by the end of the semester. During the last week of class, each group will present a multimedia presentation program using PowerPoint or Google Slides to the class. Each member must have some demonstrated involvement. The instructor should encourage students to make their presentations engaging and interesting. Although the student groups submit the same paper and presentation, the documents are submitted individually in the course management system. The group will be given one grade for the paper and the presentation.

During the last week of class, the students will present their projects. The presentations begin with the students defining the problem facing the organization, and then they present potential solutions based on their observation and group discussions. Finally, the groups will share their tangible project to support the organization. The groups will answer questions from the instructor and the other students in the audience. Students will reflect on what they would do differently, what they learned, and how they changed.



## Discussion

Throughout the project, the students reflected on the theory guiding the communication principles and how they can be applied in this experiential learning project. The reflection essays and progress reports provided several formal ways of assessing student learning.

Each project was different based on the needs of the organization. Students chose to work with several community nonprofit organizations, campus departments, or student organizations. Some examples of the organizations included a food bank, meals on wheels, relay for life, community safety, student life, a multicultural center, and a social work student club.

The organizations were all approved by the instructor before the students could begin their work. A professional staff member from the organization verified participation by providing the letter of intent on the organization's letterhead. This letter outlined that the students had obtained permission to observe the organization and would be completing a small project based on the needs of the organization.

## Student learning

This feedback demonstrates the student's learning and critical reflection that occurred throughout the project. Teamwork, a potential benefit of PBL, was demonstrated throughout the project's stages. Students felt the project helped them build their team-building skills. They commented that they had to work as one, while respecting each other. Students felt they pulled together to help their organizations.

The benefits of PBL also include learning project management skills, a deeper level of learning, and enhanced problem-solving skills. Students commented on the importance of effective communication in managing the project components and solving the problems they observed. Other students reflected that projects like these closely resemble situations in the real world. Students felt this project helped them recognize problems and find solutions. This project allowed students to go beyond the basic understanding of concepts and to experience deeper learning. Because students are engaged in the learning process, there are many opportunities for them to provide their own insight and problem solving. Students wanted to apply the material they were learning to the organizations. This project provided critical opportunities for students to apply the content knowledge to practical experiences. This project promoted their ability to communicate, delegate, and find solutions. Students commented that the project put the course material into context. Students found countless opportunities to recognize problems and discover solutions.

## Considerations

### Timing

To complete a project during a 15-week semester, students need to begin developing their groups by the second week of class. In addition, I utilized three class periods for group meetings. It is possible to ask students to meet outside of class, but I used the class periods for times of reflection and debriefing where I could check on their progress and concerns.

Because time is limited to the semester, students should meet task expectations each month and begin working rather quickly. Prior to the semester beginning, the instructor should consider exploring some opportunities for organizational observation on campus and in the community. By the end of the first month, students must determine the organization they are supporting and begin their observation. The instructor should help to manage the size and scope of the projects so that students can complete them in the time frame of a semester.

### **Challenges**

Students may become frustrated with the challenges associated with working in an organizational context. The instructor should use the challenges to relate to solutions in small-group communication theory and practice. It is also important for the instructor and student groups to be flexible in their projects. The implementation of the project is a secondary learning outcome. Because the project focuses on the application of small-group communication theory and concepts, the primary intended outcome is the critical thinking that occurs from the connection between the observation and the course content and the theoretical frameworks.

In relation to the group member and self-assessments, students design their assessments during a group meeting. The instructor needs to inform the students about the importance of group dynamics and group communication principles as they are designing their assessments. During this project, students realized that what they were thinking about early in the project was not always what mattered in the end. It was a learning opportunity for the student groups to consider how important determining evaluation criteria would be for their involvement in groups in the future.

I mentioned earlier that research shows PBL can be time-consuming. The project can be time-consuming because there are a lot of assignments and many components for students to manage. If students are not managing the components or deadlines well, it is important to assist them with additional guidance. This project requires strong organizational skills and preparation so that the instructor is ready for each student group's processes, steps, and challenges.

### **Variations**

Students could be assigned a predetermined problem from an agency or organization that is set up by the instructor. This may take more work for the instructor prior to the start of the course, but would provide for more communication between the instructor and the organization hosting the students.

Developing relationships with local nonprofit leaders and campus administrators is key to implementing and executing this project. Organization leaders were willing to commit to the project because it only involved five students for five hours each. I reiterated the small size of the project and the guidelines for student involvement. The organization liaison needed to allow the students to observe and then to verify that each student completed their five hours. In addition, the organization liaison needed to communicate with the students so they could create a small project that would assist in solving an organizational problem.

To find project ideas, the instructor could contact the local Chamber of Commerce. Many chambers have nonprofit committees that could provide a starting place for idea

generation. Instructors could also explore partnering with a campus department such as campus safety, marketing, conferences and events, or recreation to examine and discover organizational needs.

## Conclusion

Because of the real-world application in the project, students will connect many small-group principles while participating in active learning. The out-of-class expectations for this project will allow for great discussion of course content during class time. The students will apply the concepts of group communication and then reflect on their observations. In implementing this project, the students often commented about their own aha moments when they realized they were observing theoretical concepts in action.

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## References and suggested readings

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