

# In spite of technology: a failure in student project ownership

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Students often complain about doing group work, which may lead them to be less engaged as a group and to seek shortcuts in developing their presentations. The purpose of his essay is identify and preferentially rectify student behavioral errors arising from placing too much trust in technology that can lead to too little personal interaction and engagement. The authors present their viewpoint on the classroom presentation outcome of a student group that used Google Docs to “prepare” for their presentation.

**Design/methodology/approach** – In a recent organizational behavior course, the authors had one such group arrive for their in-class presentation, only to discover that one group member was absent. The group had used Google Docs to share their research, yet no member read what the others had submitted. As a result, none of the group members could present the missing student’s material, with the obvious negative grading and finger-pointing outcomes.

**Findings** – The authors recognized that students needed more management direction than simply being proficient with technology. They lacked engagement behaviors leading to project responsibility. Engagement behaviors would include voice/face-to-face communication and content-related discussions questioning assumptions while strategically planning and operationalizing their topic of presentation.

**Originality/value** – The educational implications suggest an expanded role for the instructor to emphasize the role of student engagement behavior and the over-reliance on technology. Practical implications suggest making stronger connections to workplace expectations, making the student experience more transferable to their incipient workplaces and promoting the concept of team over group in terms of responsibility and conscientiousness and ultimately justifying their participation in providing value for their employer.

**Keywords** Collaboration, Teamwork, Groups, Face-to-face, Google docs

**Paper type** Research paper



## Introduction

Groups, work groups, teams and their associated face-to-face communication are central tenets of organizational behavior pedagogy (and andragogy) and are created to enhance student learning (Burke, 2011; Davidson, Major, & Michaelsen, 2014; Fink, 2004; McShane & Von Glinow, 2015; Robbins & Judge, 2016). Group/team projects in academe are designed to afford management students the opportunity to integrate theoretical and research-derived content with experiential application in preparation for future work settings that put a premium on a person's ability to function as a member of a high-performing group/team. Roughly 90 per cent of organizations have reported that they use team-based structures in some way (Aggarwal & O'Brien, 2008; Cohen & Bailey, 1997; Hansen, 2006; Kagan, 2011). Indeed, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (2015) highlighted communication and teamwork/collaboration as the second and third necessary competencies, respectively, most desired by employers, following critical thinking as their number one competency. The authors believe that teamwork and collaboration cultivate ownership behavior.

Yet, when describing a required group project at the beginning of a course, who among us has not witnessed aggrieved looks (with accompanying sounds of dismay) from many of the enrolled students? Despite extensive use of group projects in business classes, many students foster an attitude of *group-hate* emanating from "a sincere dislike for any group activity in the academic setting" (Sorensen, 1981). Nearly 40 years later, the literature continues to support the concept that college students "hate" group projects, with articles entitled "I hate group work!": addressing students' concerns about small-group learning (Allan, 2016, p. 81), "A psychologist finally explains why you hate teamwork so much" (Chamorro-Premuzic, 2017) and "7 reasons why every college student hates group assignments" (Senthilathiban, 2018). (Authors' note: other, more "colorful," titles were reviewed in [www.reddit.com](http://www.reddit.com).) Clearly, the inarticulate concept of group-hate continues to reflect a pervasive attitude among many students that group work is more trouble than it is worth.

Therefore, although much of management education anticipates the benefits of group activities, students often seek to minimize their group involvement by contributing the bare minimum to their groups, even when using technology, e.g. Google Docs, that was developed and intended to support group collaboration (Mansor, 2012). Students who rely on the new document-sharing technology may consciously or inadvertently develop less, not more, overall ownership in their group projects. The result is that students struggle with taking ownership of their (intended) collaborative group projects.

In Google Docs' favor, however, it is important to note that Google Docs enhances interpersonal collaboration by removing the barriers of distance and time, which facilitates concurrent online editing that has been shown to work well in academia (Dekeyser & Watson, 2006). The intent of Google Docs is to enhance existing technology for collaboration, not to replace the in-person, face-to-face communication that occurs in a team meeting. Such meetings facilitate overall student engagement and project ownership. Pierce, Kostova, and Dirks (2001, p. 299) explained that "the core of psychological ownership is the feeling of possessiveness and of being psychologically tied to an object." Thus, digital collaboration is a means of document communication, but it is not the same as ownership. This technology makes it easy for students to collaborate without really connecting, which leaves students neither taking ownership of their project nor understanding the learning objectives of the project as a whole.

### Student collaboration vs ownership in group projects

As part of a semester-long group project in an organizational behavior course, sophomore business students were assigned a final project that included a final presentation that accounted for 30 per cent of each student's course grade. At the appointed hour for the presentation, one group stepped up to discuss their presentation slides and written documentation, only to realize that one of the group members was absent. Group conflict ensued. The conversation escalated: "I wasn't responsible for that part," "I don't know those slides, they're not mine" and "I did my piece".

Even after retrieving the missing group member's materials from the software, the remaining team members struggled to compensate for the missing student. The team's classroom presentation lacked flow, as it became evident that each individual was conversant only with the material directly related to his or her contribution to the project. Digital collaboration had, in fact, undermined the students' *collective* ownership and understanding of the project.

This group did not improve their poor communication skills; instead, they created a false sense of security (and learning) by using Google Docs technology *exclusively* as a means to facilitate communication when, in fact, both communication and ownership were lost. The students had relied solely on Google Docs to create the individual parts of their presentation but never met in person. Despite being proficient with multiple applications (e.g. e-mail, Instagram, Skype, texting and Twitter), this group of students had avoided face-to-face collaboration in preparing for their presentation. In such circumstances, electronic media proficiency can interfere with the interpersonal collaboration, team ownership and learning objectives that organizational behavior instructors typically design as important learning outcomes. Inadvertently, however, this technology-enabled electronic collaboration software influenced the students to minimize their exercise of project responsibility and ownership. They relied on technology as a surrogate for communication – communication that necessitated active involvement leading to project ownership. They chose not to hold face-to-face meetings, which cost them the forum where they could have gained a strategic understanding of the interrelationships of the individual aspects of the project. As a consequence of their lack of ownership, the four individuals failed to coalesce as a team, much less an effective team, to understand the project's overarching scope and purpose.

### Discussion

Google Docs *cannot* simply replace interpersonal engagement. Instead, its power resides in its capability to offer users a means to further and deepen their person-to-person communication through the collaboration of document sharing (Mansor, 2012). These online tools provide an asynchronous collaborative context that can also allow millennials to multi-task to meet the competing responsibilities that they face in their over-committed and over-scheduled lives.

It is important to note that, in certain contexts, groups can collaborate without communicating in person with their collaborators. For example, Wikipedia allows many individuals to contribute to and edit millions of articles without ever needing to communicate directly with each other (Samuel, 2015). The collaborative effort to create and expand Wikipedia, however, does not involve communication to outline vision, objectives and guidelines to unify the efforts of all the collaborators involved in a Wikipedia article. On the contrary, having a shared vision of the objectives and guidelines governing the creation of a student presentation is essential for developing student's ownership of the project *as a whole*. The absence of these elements compromises student learning.

The literature leads one to believe that students' aversion to direct communication with other group members is because of their often-stated dislike of working in a group or team environment. Such dislike has its roots in the prevailing attitude of group-hate, the term given to students' negative attitudes toward group work (Allan, 2016; Chamorro-Premuzic, 2017; Senthilathiban, 2018; Sorensen, 1981). However, the concept of group-hate may be overblown and may not accurately capture students' perceptions and behaviors. Students may not actively resist group activity as would seem to be implied by the term *group-hate* because, when pushed, they will contribute to the group but only by mildly engaging in the group.

Instead of characterizing students' attitude as one of group-hate, it should be considered that students' negative attitudes toward group projects may originate from other factors. Specifically, some articulation of "group wariness" may be based on students' previous negative experiences, in which group work was characterized by minimal peer engagement and a subsequent lack of group ownership that left individual students having to worry about group grades, interpersonal considerations, poor outcomes and other group organization factors (Sorensen, 1981). Such experiences would potentially provoke a more accurately described sense of "group-wariness" instead of "group-hate".

Left unchecked, the lack of engagement, ownership and group participation that defines many group projects will persist and reinforce group-wariness. Furthermore, while technology such as Google Docs may provide a cover for individuals in the group to claim that they are part of a group (although clearly *not* a team), the absence of real collaboration, communication and ownership narrows the margin for success. Any factor or event that introduces unanticipated pressure (e.g. audio-visual or other technical problems and especially a missing presenter) disrupts their collective approach but not their individual responsibility and ability to effectively present their individual piece of a coherent group product.

To alleviate some of these issues, faculty need to reinforce the importance of students taking ownership of their group projects and explain the difference between *completion* of a project and *ownership* of it. Clearly, student learning outcomes and their ability to effectively function in future organizations will come up short if they rely on technology in lieu of face-to-face meetings. E-mail and texting as substitutes for face-to-face communication are the least valuable forms of communication (Pentland, 2012). The most valuable form of communication is face-to-face, and the communication impact increases with the number of face-to-face meetings. Face-to-face interactions build stronger, more meaningful social and professional relationships. They create "the sense of presence" (Nardi & Whittaker, 2020) which helps students "read" each other and provide greater social interaction (Pentland, 2012). Other research indicates that eight out of ten executives prefer in-person contact to virtual contact (Koyen, 2009). Koyen (2009) shared that many respondents expressed concern that attendees did not give their full attention to virtual meetings, as 58 per cent admitted they frequently surfed the Web, checked their e-mail, read unrelated materials and handled other ancillary work during virtual meetings. These surprisingly honest answers certainly mirror behaviors that the authors have observed when students are not focused on the task at hand and even more so when students are not working face-to-face.

In addition to discouraging student engagement, remote meetings also fail to meet other expectations related to morale, recognition and trust (Koyen, 2009). To address these issues, Marissa Mayer, former Chief Executive Officer of Yahoo, ended the company's extensive work-from-home policies and required employees to show up at the office to promote communication and collaboration (Pepitone, 2013). Clearly, Mayer and other executives perceived drawbacks of using technology as a substitute for direct human interaction when seeking ownership of important business decisions.

## Conclusion and suggestions for future research

Thus, it would appear that there is a reason to be concerned that students who use Google Docs in lieu of team meetings and interactions may be setting themselves up for failure, both in the classroom and in life. Instructors need to directly address student attitudes when group projects are first introduced. They should lay out guidelines (or ground rules) about their expectations for what constitutes effective group behavior, including the benefits of document-sharing technology and the benefits of combining the technology with face-to-face group meetings. One method of promoting these meetings is to require students to submit minutes from their meetings. These minutes will provide a quick reference for the instructor to assess how the group is proceeding and how they are addressing their collaborative communication. The minutes can then be graded as one component of their overall group project grade.

Students are also responsible for understanding the learning objectives of the project and their expected behaviors to successfully accomplish these objectives. These behaviors include face-to-face interactions among group members, regardless of their use of technology. In addition, “group-wariness” needs to be directly addressed to emphasize the positive outcomes stemming from project collaboration and each student assuming ownership of the group project.

There is reason to believe that students’ feelings of group-wariness may diminish if group members receive proper instruction about working in groups and, as a result, form realistic expectations of group work (Burke, 2011). But how will students make the behavioral changes required to assume ownership of their projects? Can having students articulate their project process and product expectations improve student ownership? Are grades and perceived satisfaction enough incentive to induce students to invest in – and own – their projects?

To answer these questions and to better understand the barriers to student ownership, further research is needed. Moreover, research is needed to help educators to understand the diminished attention, morale, recognition and trust (Koyen, 2009) that may be associated with technology, regardless of intent. Furthermore, research is needed to explore students’ definitions and perceptions of ownership to effectively teach students how to use technology and face-to-face meetings responsibly as they prepare presentations for group projects, so that their learning is enhanced through engaged ownership.

Additional investigations can lead to an increased faculty focus on student awareness of the pitfalls and barriers that must be overcome if authentic project ownership and learning are to be developed. Student ownership is the key.

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Andrew Gorycki truly enjoys leading teams and getting others to share his passion toward a common goal. Writing this paper has allowed him a chance to self-reflect and understand that every member of a team is unique. His biggest takeaway from this experience is that every single person is motivated in different ways and why that can be a strength for a collaborative project. Andrew would like to thank his parents and Jillian for their support and guidance.