



onTrain

Online Training, the treasure within

C. Online Training
6. Forming a group online/group
dynamics in virtual space

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Let's start



The internet is used to communicate and interact with others in online groups. Groups represent the framework of affirmation and security, as well as the associative need of the human being.

Groups are an integral component of online learning. Learner engagement is a relevant aspect of successful learning, but online learners are less engaged in active learning. They feel that they are competing with each other and need encouragement to work collaboratively. Group activities in the online environment are one way for learners to establish communication with others in the course and provide learners an active role within the group.

What am I learning here and why?

In this chapter, we start by taking a closer look at forming group process in general. You will learn about ways of developing groups and the steps in creating an online group.

What content will I find here?

You will be able to analyse and evaluate the methods and techniques of group development. Also, you will be able to recognize different aspects of forming a group and to explain the 5 stages of group development. You will find how to identify the type of groups and to describe the group roles.

Methods and aspects of group development



A group is a sum of individuals who are linked to each other through a common goal, they are interdependent and they are perceived as a group.

A group is made from three or more people, who interact to achieve a common objective. It is not enough to have only several people gathered in the same place. The increase in the number of members of the group is directly proportional to the ideas and the diversity of communication. According to Gilles Amando “the search for a logical solution is better coordinated in small groups (3-4 people), while the level of final efficiency will probably not exceed that of the logical competence of the best participant”¹.

The groups are different by the motivation and the people who compose them. The group's dynamic means all the adaptive changes that occur in the overall structure of the group as a result of some changes occurring in part of it.

¹ Gilles, A. & Andre, G. (2007): Psihologia comunicării în grupuri (2007)

Characteristics of a group

- two or more persons.
- combines common feelings, habits, targets.
- objective is better appropriate to group work than to individual work.
- Interdependence.
- work for collective goal, not for personal interest.
- acceptance

Types of groups:

1. By size:

- **Small** groups (2-9 members).
- **Medium** groups (10-20/25 members).
- **Large** groups (>25 members).

2. By formation

- **Spontaneous** groups (set up for a short period).
- **Institutional** (set up permanently, for long term objectives).

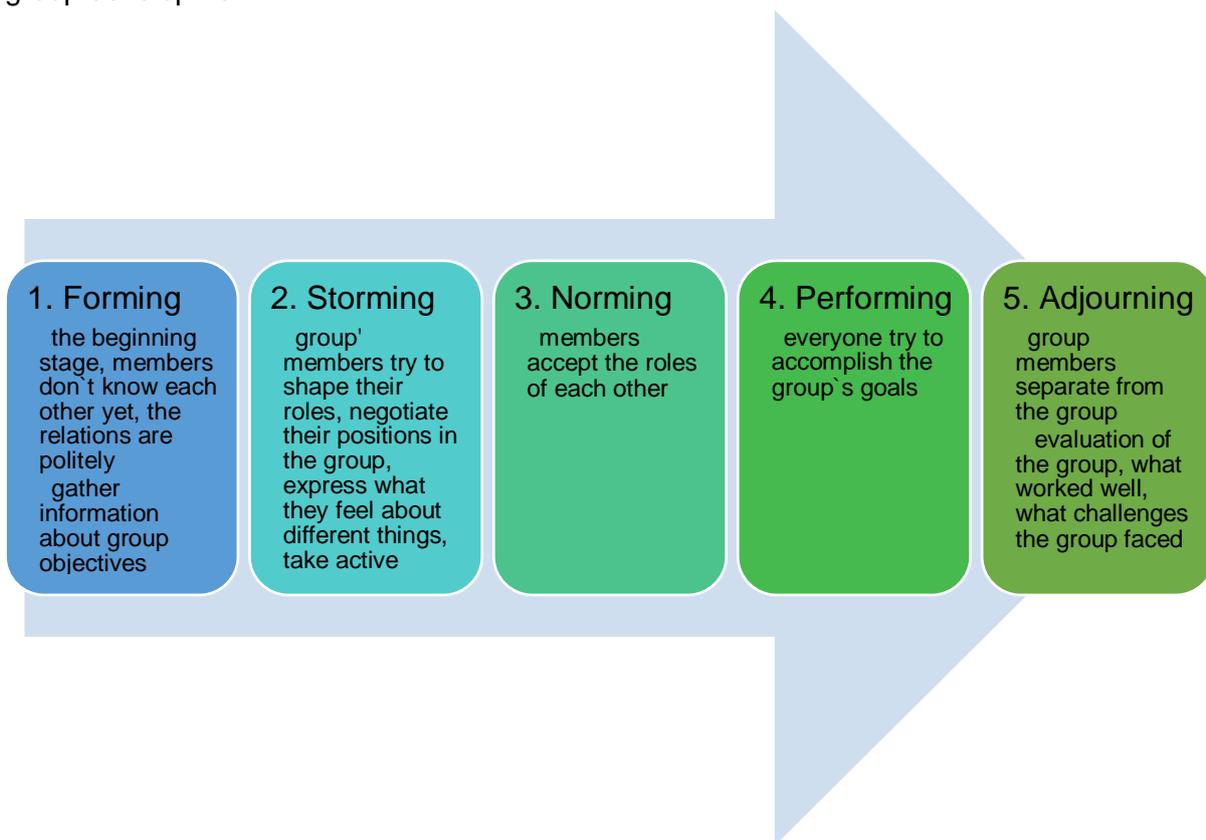
3. By the type of relationships between the members of the group:

- **Formal** groups are formed by the organization for the completion of specific tasks/objectives: command groups, task groups, committees, functional groups.
- **Informal** groups develop themselves within the organization: interest groups, friendship groups.

4. By the type of relationship:

- **Primary** groups, within which individuals establish personal relationships, the possibility of each member interacting directly with the other members, for example: family, friends.
- **Secondary** groups that are defined by impersonal and formal relationships maintained by the cooperation resulted from the distribution of the roles and tasks (indirect relationships), for example: professional associations, political organizations.

In 1965 psychologist Bruce Tuckman researched and published a theory of five stages of group development²:



It is not necessary for every group to go automatically through these stages.

In each team there are well defined roles and difficult personalities, each having a significant contribution to group development and goal's achievement. Roles are "sets of behaviors that are characteristic of persons in a particular social context"³ and "form part of our self-definition within the group, our sense of who we are"⁴. Benne and Sheats⁵ (in *Journal of Social Issues*) established three categories of roles within the group:

- Roles regarding obligations: the coordinator, the investigator, the critic;
- Roles related to maintaining the unity of the group: the mediator, the stimulator;
- Individuals' roles regarding personal needs: the dominator, the dependent.

The description of the roles that individuals can play in different groups:

1. Leader – a self-confident individual who can coordinate and control other team members, correlates ideas.
2. Investigator – curious and communicative, seeks facts, data, opinions.
3. The trainer or the energizer – very involved, open and dynamic.

² Bruce, T. (1965): *Team-Development Model* (1965)

³ Forsyth, D. R. (1999): *Group dynamics*, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing p. 124 (1999)

⁴ Brown, R. (2000): *Group processes: Dynamics within and between groups*, Oxford, UK. In Blackwell Publishers, p. 72 (2000)

⁵ Benne K.D. & Sheats P. (1948): *Functional Roles of Group Members*. In *Journal of Social Issues* 4(2), p. 41-49 (1948)

4. Innovator – brings creative thinking, less sensitive to the needs of other people.
5. The evaluator – prudent and emotionless, discreet.
6. The worker – conservative, with a practical sense and ability in the organization, hard working.
7. Team worker – is responsive to people`s needs, promotes team spirit.
8. The performer – scrupulous, impatient and perfectionist, try his best to perform the task on time.

Groups generate power relations. There are three main styles of leading a group, each style acting on the individual and group behaviour:

- Democratic – the leader leads only when it is needed.
- Authoritarian – the leader is focusing on the outputs than on the satisfaction of members.
- Permissive – the personal goals are above the general ones, thus the objective may not be fulfilled.

Online groups interact with the help of computer systems, they are dependent on technical networks. Without the existence of such an infrastructure online groups cannot work.

Forming groups in online environment can be difficult, because learners know little about each other, about common interests, but there are also benefits to groups working together in an online learning: learners develop essential soft skills (critical thinking, problem solving, collaborative skills); they learn from and through peers, when they connect and communicate with each other.

Steps in creating an online group:

- Create a page in the virtual space, online discussion boards, where learners can publish their interests, their strengths and weakness. This way also the trainer knows his online students and their preferences or how students relate to others, so he can create a group. Example: Write a list of ten things they would take with them if they have to move to another country. Look for others who have similar items on their lists and create a group.
- The group should be small to succeed to set up a schedule to meet because in online courses students learn at times convenient for them. The suitable group size will differ according to the nature of the task.
- The selections of the learners can be made based on a digit in the student number, or the month of birth, or using an alphabetical list.
- Create a private discussion board for every group and show them how to access it.
- Establish clear expectations for each group member, identify individual contributions.
- Agree on a common objective. The objective can have the following characteristics within the group: It must have outputs, not activities; It must be formulated directly

and simply; It must be achievable; It should be agreed upon by each member. A successful group is dependent on achieving its goal.

- Establish roles for every group member. Having two leaders may cause stress, but if there is no leader it may be difficult for the group to form a strategy to start the project.
- Systematically give directions and feedback. Encourage learners to contact you for concerns.

The group's support in online environments and virtual spaces

In the online environment, the learner is not under the permanent and immediate supervision of a trainer, but benefit from the trainer's actions of planning, orientation, guidance.

Trainers need to recognize that learners in online learning environments require the use of different strategies for encouraging them to participate in learning. An online trainer needs to show the learners that they are part of a group with real people. Besides teaching theoretical knowledge, trainers have to develop learners' abilities with the use of technologies and maximizing the potential benefits of interaction between virtual groups' members.

Most people had bad experiences with group work, but working in groups is unavoidable in life.

Common problems in online groups and how do overcome them:

1. Learners aversion to the group. To overcome the learners' aversion to group trainer should explain to them the advantages and the benefits from learning in groups, the fact that they are developing new skills, including the abilities to cooperate, to communicate effectively.
2. Dealing with different personalities. A group is made from different people, with different personalities. Trainers should look for the strengths of every member of the team.
3. One person does all the work, different levels of contribution to the group task. To ensure that all members contribute equally to the group project, the trainer should establish why a member is not participating and ensure that everyone gets their turn to contribute.
4. Poor communication. For an effective communication trainer has to identify the issues which affect communication and to try to resolve them.

There are some suggestions about how to support groups in online environments:

1. Make your learners comfortable with you: upload a photo, upload a video about your personal interests, reply to forum discussions, reintroduce yourself before and after assessment, assure everybody that you are available.
2. Post weekly announcements, reminders, tips for assignments.
3. Provide additional resources, add links.
4. Provide templates.
5. Give specific feedback (first add a positive comment, introduce two or three specific ways to improve and end with a positive comment).

Exercises



Exercise 1: Rotate questions



Ask members of groups to develop a list with 3 questions they have about a topic from the course. Hand out the lists between the groups and give them time to find the answers. Answer the questions for which groups found no answer.

Exercise 2: Convince me!



Ask learners a question about your topic. Pair up two learners who selected two different answers and ask them to persuade each other that their answer is correct.

Summary



Groups are influenced by internal or contextual factors, which influence their efficiency and performance.

The group experience can either be constructive and enjoyable or a disaster. There are essential strategies to set up groups for successful learning. In online environment creating groups may be difficult, and problems could appear, but they are easy to overcome.

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