Using Community-Based Research Principles to Guide the Collaborative Process in Health Sciences Undergraduate Education

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Group work is frequently used in undergraduate health sciences education to help students become accustomed to working with others because the healthcare industry increasingly values and requires interprofessional collaboration to accomplish its aims. However, many students have reservations about group work, which inhibits a positive educational experience before the group members meet for the first time. In order to achieve academic excellence, most students would agree that group work detracts from having complete control over one's grades. Thus, group work becomes a significant source of anxiety because one must rely on the work of others and relinquish total control over the process used to complete assignments.

Learning and applying the principles of community-based research (CBR), as presented by Hall (2014), in a group work context can offer sound guidance to high-achieving students to help ease their anxieties of having to depend upon others to put in the same effort and perform at the same academic level. This reflective essay explains how the principles of CBR can be used to help guide one's actions and the collaborative processes required in an online group work assignment. It is anticipated that these reflections offer new ways of looking at group work in an academic context, that they help other students be more comfortable engaging in collaborative assignments, and that they support instructors in providing high-quality education.

It can be difficult and challenging to know how to effectively reach out to new classmates. This can become even more challenging in the virtual learning environment because students may lack opportunities to interact with each other in real time and establish common ground with others. Therefore, instructors may consider it a good practice to do introductions, such as posting a picture of one's self with a brief statement of academic and personal interests, at the beginning of the course. Otherwise, the only distinguishing factor between people is their names. As societies and communities continue to develop and evolve into highly diverse and multicultural environments, it is important that students and instructors be aware of the unique experiences that each person brings to the course.

In this course, group members were randomly assigned. All members were able to review the profiles of their assigned group members and fellow classmates to determine commonalities, which made connecting with them individually and collectively easier. During our initial email exchanges, we agreed to use Skype to hold conference calls, as this would be a good strategy for us to meet virtually and to accomplish our work. Additionally, to ensure that everyone knew when meetings were scheduled, we used the calendar invite function within our email accounts. We encountered some obstacles using these tools, such as coordinating time zones, but once we established their functionality and how they would be used, we became proficient at integrating them to connect as a group. Outlining expectations regarding how work and meetings will be performed is an effective strategy that resonates similarities to the creation of a memorandum of understanding between a university and a community group (Ball 2014). One beneficial outcome of using this strategy is that all group members understand and accept the mutually agreed upon methodology for engaging with each other. This understanding facilitated greater transparency in our individual actions and reduced the likelihood of miscommunication. Moreover, all members knew how and when they were required to come together to discuss the progress of our group

work. This was a crucial step for laying a foundation to facilitate a productive and streamlined approach to group work.

The notion of community capacity building demonstrates that sharing knowledge and learning with, and from, others to master new technologies permits groups to flourish (Minkler 2005). Furthermore, members should be more capable of producing high-quality contributions to accomplish the group's tasks. In this particular work, learning how to use new tools with group members to increase the efficiency of our work processes facilitated an easier working relationship, and it benefited everyone because we learned new skills that we could employ during this new collaborative process and in future ones. Helping others learn and succeed can produce profound intrinsic rewards, which is one of the well-established benefits of a CBR approach because of its heavy focus on interpersonal interactions (Wallerstein and Duran 2006).

It cannot be assumed that every working group member will share the same opinions and convictions regarding how and when tasks are to be completed. Therefore, it was imperative that we decided how decisions impacting our work were made. We agreed to be inclusive in our approach during group meetings by offering everyone present the opportunity to share his or her thoughts prior to the decision going into effect. Our decision to use an inclusive approach echoes aspects of cultural humility because of our diversity in individual beliefs and backgrounds (Minkler 2005; Ross 2010). It forced us to be aware of, and to look deeper at, reasons why others may be in favor of one idea over another because of current academic workload or other personal circumstances (e.g. religion, family, job, etc.). Being sensitive and aware of these aspects can help to formulate ideas as to how one could be more supportive to his/her group members. As such, it assists in managing workloads and alleviating unnecessary stress attributed to working with others.

When we compared our assignment requirements to our individual workloads, we determined that we needed to break the assignment into smaller and more manageable pieces. This task required us to plan out our entire proposal and divide the workload as evenly as possible. From there, we decided to use a progressive approach, where each person's contribution built upon the work of others. This is quite similar to the cyclical process used in CBR because the assignment requirements were addressed through the regular review and revision of the contributions of others (Ball 2014). By building off of each other's work, we ensured that our work was progressing in a satisfactory manner and would meet our goals for academic achievement. Moreover, this approach ensured that we remained in regular contact and held each other accountable to submitting each individual's work for group review by the established deadlines in our project plan.

We did encounter a situation where we had to significantly revise the work of one group member because it was very poorly written, did not build on the content from previous sections of the proposal, and contained irrelevant information. Group work assignments have an inherent expectation that all members will perform at an acceptable academic level. When this does not occur, it can be extremely frustrating and disappointing to other hard-working and high-achieving students. These actions could be interpreted as a lack of respect of others' time and efforts brought to the group assignment, which could have a negative impact on group dynamics and future productivity. Upon further introspection, knowing how to tactfully address areas of concern with peers during a group assignment is a critically important skill. Ball (2014) writes about the tensions that can occur between a university and community group, which confirms the need and importance of using effective interpersonal conflict resolution skills. If students finds themselves in a similar situation, it is important to confirm that their fellow classmates

understood the required academic expectations, explain where there were deficiencies, and create a plan with the colleague and other group members to ensure that the work was corrected as quickly as possible to mitigate the possibility of negative consequences, such as receiving a poor grade on the assignment.

One of the key components in CBR is the drive to produce social change (Reid and Brief 2005; Wallerstein and Duran 2006). In our assignment, we decided to create a proposal for a revised sexual health promotion strategy to reduce the rates of sexually transmitted infections among youth in our geographic region. While the project inherently captured the essence of CBR, having group members engaged and willing to work as part of that social change mechanism was an excellent motivator to keep everyone focused and on task. Although we do not have the opportunity to implement our work into our community, we were able to complete the task, which can play a role in educating our peers to practice safe sexual behaviors.

Overall, group work can be a very worthwhile and rewarding experience. But, if everyone involved contributes equally and shares the same academic goals, the intrinsic and extrinsic rewards can be even greater. This group assignment provided a good opportunity to connect with a few other students who also expressed interest in pursuing graduate studies. In closing, it is essential that all students be aware of how to form expectations of their group work outputs with their peers, look for ways of improving the group experience for everyone involved, and be committed to keeping one's peers engaged and motivated to perform the group tasks. Moreover, course instructors should support students in making meaningful connections with their peers, provide them with opportunities to refine the soft skills of collaboration in a non-threatening environment, and be an academic resource to enhance student learning. These strategies rooted in CBR principles should help other students achieve a more fulfilling collaborative experience within an academic context and in their professional lives.

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