

Roles in problem oriented project group work

PBL groups may be created by a programme's convener or lecturer to meet a set of criteria or as the result of an open group formation process. Groups can represent a completely new constellation of members or be a continuation of previous group work relations. Whatever is involved, the group will often establish itself in terms of the roles that different group members assume more or less automatically in relation to the group's social and work related processes.

Some students are quick to claim a more dominant position in the group, while others may find a more withdrawn and silent role more comfortable. During their years in school and high school many Danish students have gained extensive experience in a variety of collaborative learning scenarios, including short-term project work, whereas students less familiar with such teaching and learning approaches may feel – and be perceived as – inexperienced in the dynamics of group work. If the lack of experience leads to a situation where the inexperienced student fails to meet the expectations of the group, for instance because his/her contribution to a joint assignment is deemed insufficient, he/she may become marginalised or stamped as a free rider. To prevent such a scenario it is advisable for group members to make themselves aware of key roles and functions in group work and to engage actively with these.

In general, you might be inclined to take the roles in the PBL project work that you feel most comfortable with, most experienced in, or just consider yourself best at. You may for example be good at writing up the minutes from the meetings with the supervisor, at securing that all group members understand and agree on the tasks distributed, or at gathering the input from the group's discussion and synthesise it into a coherent text. In consequence, you automatically seek to take on that role in the group. However, doing that will not broaden your competences, but only enable you to refine that specific competence. No matter what you consider your strength, it is important that you see the group work as an opportunity to develop proficiency in other roles and functions. In the group it is therefore a good idea to define the most important roles in your work process and make a plan for taking turns at performing the different roles. In that way all group members are given the opportunity to try out the responsibility attached to each role and thereby gain an understanding and respect for all aspects of the group. As a result, the voices and resources of all members of the group can be acknowledged and brought into play.

A professional approach to group roles and responsibilities increases the transparency of work processes and creates a framework for talking about the mutual expectations in the group. In addition, this may contribute to the building and strengthening of joint commitment to the project and its progression.

Different management approaches

PBL project work is often characterised as a balance between chaos and direction/control. This means that in order to make ideas, creativity and innovation flourish there must be room

for reflection and exploration. In contrast, a lack of management and direction of the process can lead to interminable discussions and difficulties making the decisions necessary to ensure a progression in the project work. If the question of how the group will manage the many aspects of collaboration is not dealt with explicitly there is a risk of either a lack of direction or that the dominant group member(s) may assume control of the process, decisions may not be challenged, tasks may be distributed in a top-down manner and the more silent members may resign and just accept being told what they are supposed to do. It is therefore helpful for a good working process to find a reasonable and transparent way to deal with the issues of managing the group processes.

Joint group management

In small groups or groups where members feel comfortable with a joint group management model, the role as chair at the group's meetings becomes very important. Acting as chair means that you ensure that the agenda for the meeting is followed. The agenda may be drawn up beforehand or made jointly at the start of the meeting and will clarify what is the intended focus of the meeting. The chair makes sure that all input are considered and discussed, and that conclusions are drawn for each point on the agenda. During discussions it is the chair's task to ensure that all members are given the same opportunities in terms of time so that all voices are heard. In this way, decisions on what further tasks should be performed and their fair distribution among the group members become the result of a collective decision making process.

The role of the chair is to keep the meeting on track, manage turn-taking, and summarise any conclusions on the items discussed. Chairing group meetings is a role that all group members should take turns at performing. In addition to this, group members take turns at writing down the minutes of the meetings to document any decisions made and compile a list of assignments to complete and of persons responsible for these tasks.

Assigning leadership roles

In larger groups it may be helpful to work with two types of leadership roles, Red Leader and Green Leader. The two leaders work together, but with different objectives attached to their roles:

- Red Leader is task oriented. The objective is to focus on maintaining the strategy decided upon, distribute assignments by tapping into the members' resources and ensure that all tasks are carried out. Red Leader is responsible for securing the foundation for the group's work including the fulfilment of assignments important for moving the project forward.
- Green Leader is relationship oriented and responsible for the process, the group climate, and social interaction within the group. Green Leader ensures that every member of the group participates, that everyone understands what his/her task or assignment is about, and that the social dimension of the group processes is attended to.

All members of the group will at some point become Red and Green Leader, enabling them to understand the responsibility of both roles and to practice performing these roles. Ideally they will thereby gain an understanding of the necessity of being or becoming 'leadable', that is, acting as constructive group members who accept the decisions made by the group and leader and contribute actively to the joint work.

Taking turns

The idea of intentionally taking turns at the roles in PBL group work builds on an understanding that different roles, e.g. in relation to leadership, are not seen as expression of naturally occurring abilities that you may or may not have, but are to be taken seriously as a set of skills and competences to be trained and thereby learned.

The two models mentioned above can be visualised (and planned) in a very simple way, e.g.:

Joint management model

| | Week A | Week B | Week C | Week D | Week E |
|----------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| Peter | Chair | | | Minutes | Chair |
| Anna | Minutes | Chair | | | Minutes |
| Michael | | Minutes | Chair | | |
| Jane | | | Minutes | Chair | |

Division of leadership model

| | Week A | Week B | Week C | Week D | Week E | Week F |
|-----------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| Joanne | Red Leader | | | | Green Leader | Red Leader |
| Pernille | Green Leader | Red Leader | | | | Green Leader |
| Joe | | Green Leader | Red Leader | | | |
| Jamshid | | | Green Leader | Red Leader | | |
| Hanna | | | | Green Leader | Red Leader | |

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