

USING REPRESENTATIVE NOMINAL GROUP TECHNIQUE FOR COURSE REVIEW AND AN INTERACTIVE SOLICITATION OF WAYS TO ENHANCE ABSEL'S IMAGE

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ABSTRACT

1. *Basic Objectives, target audience, time needed, required materials:*
 - a. to demonstrate a long-standing and effective technique for conducting a course-end review.
 - b. to describe briefly how I have used nominal group technique (NGT) to involve students in identifying course topics that need clarification.
 - c. to use NGT in a group of ABSEL experts to solicit ideas for addressing a long-standing problem, ABSEL's lackluster image.
 - d. target audience – experienced ABSEL members
 - e. time needed – one hour
 - f. required materials – flip chart and magic markers or blackboard and chalk
2. *Theoretical grounding: group cohesiveness, group dynamics, normative decision theory.*
3. *Pedagogical implications and outcomes: improved course-end reviews and enhanced image for ABSEL.*

INTRODUCTION

The course-end review of topics is frequently under-emphasized, and sometimes completely omitted. Despite our flawless and skillful teaching, students still find some topics bewildering. Although students often think they understand most of the important topics, they still don't know what they don't know. Consequently, the pre-exam question, "Do you have any last minute questions?" is invariably met with blank stares and silence. To make matters worse, many students seem highly motivated to stamper for the door after the final class, so any questions they ask would simply postpone their freedom, temporary as it might be.

After living with this problem and ignoring it for 25 years, I decided to design an exercise that would help students with their reviews of course material. The objectives of this exercise focus on helping me to understand what students' needs are for a review session in the final class and, thereby, help students to optimize their

time in studying for the final exam. Thus the objectives are:

1. To involve students in choosing the topics to be reviewed in the final class.
2. To identify for the teacher the topics that need clarification in the final class.
3. To help students focus their studying on topics they do not understand.

The notion of involvement suggested using the task groups that we had formed for other exercises and case analyses. However, with course grades (not to mention real learning) at stake, decisions had to be of good quality. Normative decision theory (Vroom & Jago, 1988) suggests that involving followers in decisions generally improves decision quality, especially when the leader does not have enough information to make the decision. Therefore, a group decision-making style would be appropriate in a situation such as a course-end review when the teacher does not know what topics students find confusing. Unfortunately, real groups often fall victim to several serious problems such as creation of win-lose feelings, dilution of rewards, promotion of compromises, difficulty in reversing bad decisions, and dispersion of accountability.

In addition to these limitations, groups can dilute expert knowledge. This problem can occur when one member dominates, causing others to withhold their ideas. The worst scenario in this situation occurs when the dominant member has relatively low competence but relatively high status compared to other group members. Even the most competent expert might not want to challenge a dominant boss (or teacher). Consequently, the best ideas from the most competent members might never surface.

Another major threat with groups is groupthink, which can occur in cohesive groups, which are highly influenced by norms that govern their behaviors and outputs. Group harmony is often very important and members feel reluctant to destroy this good feeling. Sometimes this harmony is maintained by withholding good ideas and useful information that would challenge the way the group is headed. This behavior seems a bit adolescent when viewed objectively, but it has occurred in some very prestigious groups. US Government officials have provided at least three high-profile examples of ill-fated decisions attributed to groupthink: attacking Cuba at the Bay of Pigs, escalating the Vietnam War, and prematurely launching the Space

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Shuttle that was ironically named “Challenger.” In all of these situations, group members failed to challenge bad assumptions and failed to disagree with each other for fear of destroying the feeling of harmony. Thus, the groups went down their primrose paths toward disastrous fiascoes (Janis, 1972).

NOMINAL GROUP TECHNIQUE

Considering the limitations of free interacting (free-for-all) groups, I decided to use Nominal Group Technique (NGT) for achieving the three objectives (involving students in the process, identifying topics to be covered, and helping students study). NGT has received some attention in the literature on group processes (Paulus & Dzindolet, 1993; Delbeq, Van de Ven, & Gustafson, 1975; Rohrbaugh, 1983). Also, I had assisted in using NGT to help managers and engineers identify problems and optimize their processes (for example, Smith, 1995).

Nominal groups are called “nominal” because they are groups in name only. That is, group members do not communicate freely as they do in “real” (free-interacting) groups. Instead, there are certain rules that restrict communication.

Nominal groups tend to outperform real groups in terms of number of ideas, quality of ideas, and creativity of ideas. These findings can be attributed to the fact that nominal groups tend to avoid individual domination and groupthink as well as some of the other disadvantages of real groups. Nominal groups are usually better than real groups in *generating* ideas. However, real groups tend to outperform nominal groups in *evaluating* ideas (Green, 1975). Thus, it makes sense to combine the two approaches with the process of individual decision-making. This method combines the advantages of individual, nominal group, and real group decision-making. It does this by dividing the process into three phases as follows.

Individual Phase

(No communication. Private generation of ideas.)

- a. Members write down their ideas silently and in private.

Nominal Group Phase

(Restricted communication for presentation of ideas.)

- a. Members present their ideas in round-robin fashion while a facilitator records these ideas on a flip chart or blackboard.

Real Group Phase

(Open communication for discussion and decision-making.)

- a. Members discuss and clarify each idea.
- b. Members vote on one idea at a time.
 - i. each member has a specified number of votes

- ii. a member can cast more than one vote for an idea
- iii. ideas are prioritized according to votes

END-OF-COURSE REVIEW EXERCISE – MODIFIED NGT

The specific objectives and phases of the End-of-Course Review Exercise are as follows.

Objectives:

1. To optimize your time for reviewing the course by –
 - a. Identifying your needs for clarifying and reviewing topics.
 - b. Giving the teacher guidance for developing a review session for the next class.
2. To help you focus on important topics while studying for the final exam.
3. To give a practical example of NGT.

Phases:

1. **Individual Phase** (10 min.)
Individually make a list of topics that you would like to review before the final exam. These topics would include concepts, models, etc. that you feel need to be clarified or need more explanation. Use the *Course Schedule* as a guide.
2. **Real Group Phase with Student Teams** (15 min.) (Students form into their pre-assigned teams.)
 - a. Combine your individual lists into a team list.
 - b. Prioritize the topics for review according to their importance.
 - c. Choose a representative who will present one of your team topics at a time to the class.
3. **Nominal Group Phase** (20 min.) (Uses group representatives instead of individuals to present ideas, hence the designation “Representative NGT”.)
Use a modified nominal group technique (NGT) to develop a master list of topics for review for the class.
 - a. Team representatives present topics in turn, going around the room until ideas are exhausted. Teams may pass if they are out of ideas.
 - b. Teacher records topics on the board and student recorder copies list on paper.
4. **Real Group Phase with Entire Class** (15 min.) (Teacher facilitates open communication among all students for discussion and decision-making.)
 - a. Students discuss and clarify each idea.
 - b. Students vote on one topic at a time.
 - i. each student has 3 votes
 - ii. a student can cast more than one vote for any topic
 - iii. topics are prioritized according to votes
 - c. Student recorder notes priorities on his/her list.
 - d. Teacher makes copies of recorder’s list to give to students at the next class.

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5. **Discussion of Topics** in order of priorities – next class, the last of the course.

AT THE ABSEL CONFERENCE

I would like to illustrate this exercise in an interactive session at the conference in Baltimore. However, the question would be changed from, “What course topics need more clarification?” to “What can ABSEL do to improve its image among deans and department chairs?” The question of ABSEL’s lackluster image has been addressed myriad times in board meetings, conference sessions, emails, hot tubs, and bar rooms. However, it has never been addressed using NGT – at least not to my knowledge. Members, and potential members, need to know that their deans and department chairs will reward them for their participation at ABSEL conferences. Thus, ABSEL’s image seems to be vital to its health if not its survival.

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