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THE SYMBOL EXERCISE: AN INITIAL GROUP ACTIVITY

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ABSTRACT

The Symbol Exercise represents an initial group task intended to foster group cohesiveness. Groups are to construct a symbol for their group within a class period, incorporating the group number, using materials they have "purchased" from the instructor. The finished products are judged by other class members on the basis of planned comparisons between group projects on the criteria of originality of idea and quality of construction.

INTRODUCTION

The Symbol Exercise was designed for use in a course in which a substantial proportion of the students' work (and grade) is based on participation in small work groups (based on Cohen, Fink, Gadon, & Willits, 1980). Students are often initially quite skeptical about and resistant to dependence upon others for their grade (particularly the better students). The exercise was designed for use early in the life of the groups to provide an opportunity for group interaction in a "fun" setting with relatively few course points at stake. Groups are assigned the task of constructing a "group symbol" to represent their group incorporating the group number which will be judged against the symbols constructed by other groups on the basis of creativity of idea, quality of construction, and "efficiency."

Groups are provided a time deadline for completion, a predetermined amount of "money", and access to various construction materials and tools supplied by the instructor. Groups are thus faced with a limited amount of time in which to agree upon a design, anticipate their need for materials and tools as compared to their "cash supply", and construct their symbol. Built into the exercise are a number of mechanisms to promote group cohesion. "Winning" the contest represents a superordinate goal (Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood, & Sherif, 1961), and the other groups, a time limit, limited resources, and perhaps even the instructor represent potential common enemies (Blake & Mouton, 1961)

Judging on the criteria of creativity and quality of construction is performed by the students themselves based upon a system of planned comparisons described below. The criterion of efficiency compares the amount of "money" spent as compared to the final ranking of the project thereby introducing the concept of cost-effectiveness.

The exercise is designed for use in small groups of approximately five to seven students and requires one time period of approximately two and one half hours for completion plus time during the subsequent class session for processing.

DESCRIPTION OF EXERCISE

Immediately after division of the class into their ongoing groups, groups are provided with a specified amount of "money", a price list of materials brought in to class by the instructor, and two requisition sheets. (The amount of money, prices for goods, and even the actual goods for use in the exercise are left to the individual instructor's discretion. Table 1 represents the sample price list used with \$4 worth of "cash" by the authors.) Students are told they have two hours to construct a "group symbol" incorporating their group number. Groups are further informed they may purchase supplies from the instructor using their "cash" and requisition sheets and are informed of the judging criteria and procedures. They are told they may secure materials elsewhere as long as no real money is spent and nothing is stolen. Groups are then instructed to begin. Instructions are deliberately nonspecific to force group decisions. The instructor remains available to "keep shop" and function as a resource. (If groups ask if they may leave the premises, the authors reiterate the instructions, emphasizing the project must be back in class, ready for judging at the appropriate time.

Construction materials for the project represent a task in creativity for the instructor. Construction tools, however, are deliberately managed to represent scarce resources. Staplers, rolls of tape, scissors, and paste are available for "rental" by the groups and can be rented either for the entire project period, or for half hour periods of time. For classes with six groups, the authors provide four pairs of scissors, three rolls of tape, four staplers, and one jar of paste. It is possible for one group to corner the market on one of these resources if they are willing to spend their "cash" and charge other groups who find themselves in need of the resource. (Which occasionally leads to the role of instructor as referee.)

At the agreed-upon time, all projects are displayed to the class and each group explains the symbol to the rest of the class. Judging slips are then given to each group (see Figure 1) which makes the comparisons from Table 2 for each of the two criteria creativity and construction. Each project is thus judged 15 times for each criterion and is judged against each other project three times for each. Groups are never in the position to compare their own project against any of the others. The completed slips are turned in to the instructor who tallies them and provides the resultant rankings at the next class meeting.

At the next class meeting, ratings on the two criteria are compared with the amount of "money" spent in construction of the project. Groups describe how they approached the project and discuss such issues as intra- and intergroup interactions and reactions to the scarce resources.

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REFERENCES

Blake, R., & Mouton, J. Reactions to intergroup competition under win-lose competition. Management Science, 1961, 420-425.

Cohen, A.R., Fink, S.L., Gadon, H.L., & Willits, R.D. Effective Behavior in Organizations. 1980 (Rev. Ed.) Homewood, Ill.: Richard D. Irwin, Inc.

Sherif, M., Harvey, O.J., White, B.J., Hood, W.R., & Sherif, C.W. 1961. Intergroup conflict and cooperation: The Robbers Cave experiment. Norman, Okla.: University Book Exchange.

TABLE 2: JUDGING COMPARISONS

Each group makes the comparisons listed below for each of the judging criteria.

Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Group 5
2 vs 4	1 vs 3	1 vs 2	6 vs 2	1 vs 2
2 vs 5	1 vs 4	1 vs 5	6 vs 1	1 vs 4
2 vs 6	1 vs 5	1 vs 6	1 vs 6	1 vs 6
3 vs 4	3 vs 4	2 vs 5	2 vs 3	2 vs 3
3 vs 6	3 vs 5	2 vs 6	2 vs 6	2 vs 4
4 vs 5	4 vs 5	4 vs 6	3 vs 5	3 vs 4
4 vs 6	4 vs 6	5 vs 6	3 vs 6	3 vs 6
	5 vs 6		5 vs 6	
		Group 6		
		1 vs 3		
		1 vs 4		
		1 vs 5		
		2 vs 3		
		2 vs 4		
		2 vs 5		
		3 vs 5		
		4 vs 5		

FIGURE 1: JUDGING SLIPS

ORIGINALITY OF IDEA Your group # _____

Compare the symbol of Group _____ with the symbol of
Group _____

The more original project was constructed by
Group _____

QUALITY OF CONSTRUCTION Your group # _____

Compare the symbol of Group _____ with the symbol of
Group _____

The better constructed project was constructed by Group

TABLE 1: SAMPLE PRICE LIST

100 paper clips	10 for 5¢
50 red chips	@ 2¢
50 blue chips	@ 2¢
Rubber bands	@ 1¢
48 straws	@ 4¢
40 paper plates	10 for 31¢
8 plastic coat hangers	@ 10¢
31 sheets white construction paper	@ 5¢
64 pipe cleaners	2 for 5¢
100 craft sticks	@ 3¢
300 toothpicks	@ 1¢
3x5 cards	@ 3¢
3 shoe boxes	@ 75¢
2 egg cartons	@ 30¢
Cotton balls	2 for 5¢
50 paper cups	@ 2¢
Deck of cards	3¢ per card
Yarn & twine	10¢ per foot
IBM cards	10 for 25¢
Aluminum foil	10¢ per inch
Staplers, tape, scissors:	50¢ for entire project period; or 10¢ per half hour.
Paste:	50¢ for entire project period; or 10¢ per half hour.