Big Worksheets for Small Groups: Making Small-Group Discussion More Hands-On and Goal-Directed

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Summary…

Instructors frequently have students get into small groups for discussion during class. This can be a beneficial way to engage students & break-up the rhythm of a class, but there are also inherent drawbacks to small-group discussion. Groups get off-topic, underprepared & reticent student withhold participation, & contributions are difficult to assess. This activity was revised based on empirical findings from small groups research to improve small group, in-class discussions to maximize engagement & learning while minimizing problematic group behaviors. Students in a Psychology of Religion course worked collaboratively on large-format (24" x 36") worksheets to analyze the empirical support & conceptual overlap of four theories intended to explain helping behavior. Each student was assigned a perspective to represent, given time to review prior to discussion, & worked in four-person groups to complete a worksheet during class. The larger size of the worksheet facilitated collaborative group work.

Learning Objectives…

- **Assignment:** To critically evaluate alternate theories of prosocial behavior.
- **Course:** To develop skills necessary to engage in respectful, intellectual discussion & debate that demonstrates dignity of the individual regarding others' faith traditions.

Theoretical & Empirical Basis…

Idioms such as "two heads are better than one" & "many hands make light work" suggest that groups projects should yield superior results to individual assignments. However, teachers & students alike can attest that group work is fraught with challenges. In-class discussions are a form of group work prone to all of the same issues as group projects. Much behavioral research has investigated how small groups of individuals work together & share information. This literature has revealed a number of obstacles, both structural & motivational, that prevent groups from operating optimally & served as the basis for re-designing this small-group activity.

- **Social loafing** is a phenomenon wherein individuals exert less effort when working on a task as a part of a group, particularly when that task is additive & individual efforts are not easily recognized nor rewarded (Latané, Williams, & Harkins, 1979). Because these are features common to small-group discussions (e.g., the instructor cannot easily tell who is contributing more, there are no individual incentives) students contribute less.
- **Psychological power** refers to how much status or control a person *feels* they have in a given situation & is determined by asymmetric control over valuable resources (Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003). In small-group discussions resources include information about the topic & access to handouts. Students are more participative when they perceive themselves as having more power via access to such resources.
- **Information sharing** among small groups tends to focus on information that all or many members possess rather than unique information that one or a minority of members posses. In part, this is because sharing unique information requires more effort & explanation while sharing common information is met with social approval & promotes group cohesion. However, this can lead to those holding minority viewpoint to self-censor & groups may make suboptimal decisions as a result of **groupthink** (Larson & Egan, 2020).

Activity Features & Procedure…

Large-Format Worksheet	Pre-Discussion Review	Assigned Roles
▪ Reduces social loafing & increases psychological power by granting all members equal access to needed resources (e.g., worksheet, instructions). Reduces social loafing by making individual contributions more apparent to other members & the instructor. ▪ Facilitates whole-class discussion when worksheets are displayed following small-group discussions.	▪ Increases psychological power by increasing access to task-relevant information (i.e., a valuable resource). ▪ Increases quality of information shared by ensuring diversity of pre-discussion knowledge to promote sharing of minority viewpoints & unique information not possessed by all group members.	▪ Reduces social loafing by making the task divisible & conjunctive (vs. additive) so members cannot compensate for others' lack of effort. ▪ Increases information sharing by forestalling early consensus & ensuring equal representation of minority viewpoints. ▪ Increases psychological power by making members aware that their contributions are unique & important to task completion.

Table 1. Design features of the activity & their associated advantages.

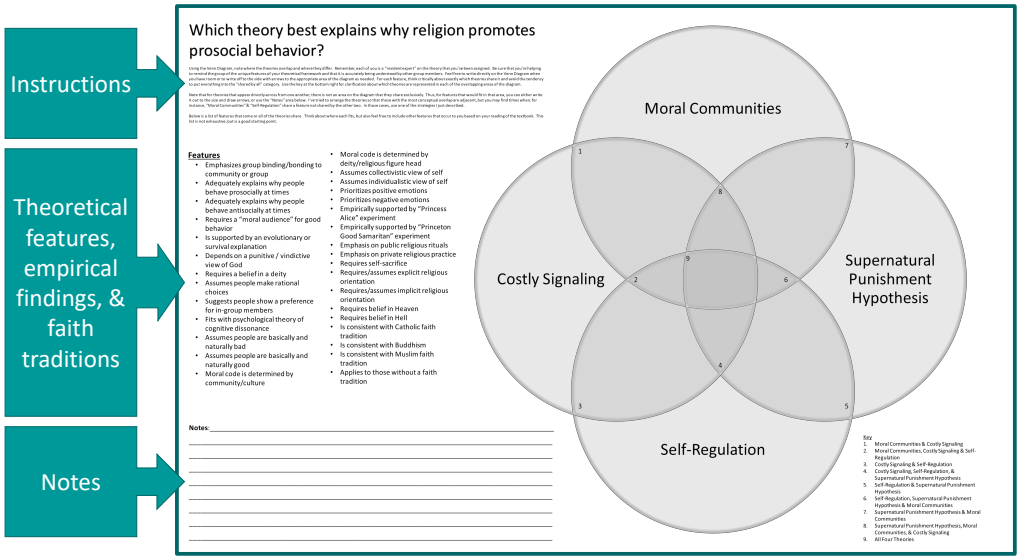

Figure 1. Annotated worksheet used during class activity. Original worksheet inside border, annotations are in callout boxes to the left.

Figure 2. Step-by-step procedure used during class activity.

References…

Galinsky, A. D., Gruenfeld, D. H., & Magee, J. C. (2003). From power to action. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *85*(3), 453-466.

Latané, B., Williams, K., & Harkins, S. (1979). Many hands make light the work: The causes and consequences of social loafing. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 37*(6), 822 – 832.

Larson, J. R., & Egan, A. C. (2020). Information sharing within groups in organizations. In L. Argote & J. M. Levine (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Group and Organizational Learning* (127-153). New York: Oxford University Press.