Identifying Rhetorical Visions and Group Roles Through Role-play

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ABSTRACT

This classroom activity allows students to experience small group communication components firsthand. Students will be divided into groups of five, with each member receiving a character background that the member will role-play. The character backgrounds are to be kept hidden from other members, and each member has an ulterior goal that the member will try to achieve, unbeknownst to the other members. The character backgrounds are designed to force conflict among the group members. At the conclusion of the activity, students will discuss how the different character roles affected the group, and what unifying message might have worked in uniting the group members.

Objectives

This activity has three objectives. First, students will experience group division firsthand in order to realize the need for a common unifying purpose. Two, students will craft a hypothetical rhetorical vision as a means of unifying group members. This rhetorical vision will be a motivating theme or idea to which all members can feel connected despite the conflicts between members. Third, students will witness, firsthand, the impacts of task, maintenance, and deviant roles on the group decision making process.

Courses

This activity is suited for a small group communication course or an introduction communication course that covers small group communication.

Rationale

When a small group focuses on a specific task, it is imperative that the group function together successfully in order to avoid lackluster results or groupthink. Bormann (1982) provided a theoretical perspective regarding how a small group functions successfully through the framework of symbolic convergence theory by outlining how individuals form unique groups through shared fantasies. These shared fantasies are identified by the communal communicative
messages, or rhetorical visions, that group members use to construct reality. A rhetorical vision reflects a community’s inclusive fantasy with which all members of a community identify. Group members will reinforce the fantasy, and, in turn, the uniqueness of the group, by reiterating the rhetorical vision when communicating with each other. In addition, Sharf (1978) integrated Bormann (1972) and Burke (1969) to explain how a successful group leader overcomes divisions within a group by crafting a rhetorical vision that unites group members together. The following class activity plays off of Sharf’s application of rhetorical analysis to discover the strategies utilized by leaders in small groups. Sharf concluded that a successful leader emerges from a list of potential candidates after the leader crafts a rhetorical vision that transcends group differences.

Aside from rhetorical visions, when working in small task groups, members take on task, maintenance, and deviant roles (Benne & Sheats, 1948). Students take on task roles when directing their behavior toward solving the task at hand. On the other hand, students take on maintenance roles when they attempt to establish a positive group climate by developing the personal relationships of the group members. Lastly, group members take on deviant roles when they act in a selfish manner that has a detrimental impact on the group. This class activity will also force students to engage in task, maintenance, and deviant roles firsthand. In this manner, students will witness the positive and negative effects of the different group roles. Communication textbooks (Myers & Anderson, 2008; Adler & Rodman, 2008) provide students with specific examples of each of the three types of group roles, and this activity will help students learn the impacts of the roles through active role-play.

Activity

Assign students into groups of five for the assignment. Prepare one Rhetorical Vision Assignment Worksheet for each group before the start of class. Begin by cutting along the dotted lines to separate the different components of the assignment: group role-play goal, backgrounds for each role-play character, post role-play discussion. Then, during class, pass out the group role-play goal to each group. Next, distribute one background for each role-play character to each member of the groups while informing the students that they are not to reveal their character backgrounds to anyone. After the initial 25 minute time period, distribute the post role-play discussion to each group, and have the students develop group answers to the four questions.

Rhetorical Vision Assignment Worksheet:

Group Role-play Goal

Directions: Use 25 minutes to engage in group role-pay. Each group member will be assigned a character background that is to be kept private from the rest of the group. Some characters will have character elements that they must conceal from the group, as well as
character elements that they are allowed to reveal to the group. The group is to develop a marketing slogan and promotional poster design to entice campus students to major in communication. In addition, each group member is expected to fulfill the individual ulterior goal specified on the assigned character background before the end of the 25 minutes.

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Kari: The other members of your group take too long to get anything done. You despise people that spend too much time deliberating, and less time acting.

_Reveal:_ Reveal that you think the group should finish as quickly as possible, as well as any conflicting opinions you might have with another group member.

_Conceal:_ Conceal your ulterior goal of wanting to be the first group to finish.

_Ulterior goal:_ Be the first group to finish the task at hand. If this fails, then have the group finish the task at hand as quickly as possible. For example, try to get the group to spend one minute deliberating ideas, as well as only a few minutes sketching the promotional poster design.

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Tim: You feel that Kari is always trying to rush the entire group into making decisions. This gives you the impression that Kari does not care about the group. So, you feel it is necessary to teach her a lesson by dragging out all group discussions as long as possible.

_Conceal:_ Conceal your ulterior goal and the fact that you are trying to make the group take as long as possible. If Kari accuses you of attempting to slow down the group process, deny that that is the case. In addition, do not reveal the conflicting opinions that you have with Kari or that you are trying to infuriate her.

_Ulterior goal:_ Make sure the group reaches the 25 minute deadline without finishing the task at hand. Drag the discussion out as long as possible to infuriate Kari. For example, suggest that each group member should contribute at least ten ideas, and ask each group member to elaborate on every idea.

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Chantelle: You see yourself as a leader, and you feel it is your responsibility to make sure everyone in the group gets along. You sense tension between Kari and Tim, so you feel it is necessary to bring it to the attention of the entire group in order to resolve the problem. You are a very relationship-oriented person, and enjoy exchanging emotional intimacy with your fellow group members. You feel the group cannot focus on the task at hand until the conflict between Kari and Tim is resolved.

_Reveal:_ Reveal to the group that you would like to settle the conflict between Kari and Tim, once the conflict is apparent.

_Ulterior goal:_ Find out what is causing the conflict between Kari and Tim, and help them resolve the issue. For example, once the conflict between Kari and Tim is apparent, have the group stop what it is doing to hear the points of view of Kari and Tim and explicitly telling the group that the task at hand cannot be solved successfully until the conflict between Kari and Tim is resolved.
Mannie: You are very competitive. You want your group to be the best. So, you will appoint yourself leader of the group. You feel threatened by Chantelle, and will attempt to discredit her in order to make yourself appear as a better leadership candidate.

*Reveal*: Reveal that you think you should be the leader, as well as reasons why other members should not be the leader, when opportunities present themselves.

*Conceal*: Conceal that you are threatened by Chantelle, and deny any accusations of sabotaging her because of this.

*Ulterior goal*: Get all group members to acknowledge that you are the leader. For example, make explicit statements to the entire group about Chantelle not being dedicated to solving the task at hand, as well as making explicit statements to the entire group that you are a natural group leader.

Sarah: You find the tension between Kari and Tim entertaining. On the other hand, you do not respect Chantelle’ desire to fix everybody’s problems.

*Reveal*: Reveal that you do not agree with Chantelle’s efforts to fix the conflict between Kari and Tim.

*Conceal*: Conceal that you find the conflict between Kari and Tim entertaining.

*Ulterior goal*: Disrupt Chantelle’s attempts to solve Kari and Tim’s conflict. For example, make explicit statements to Chantelle to stay out of everyone’s personal life and to focus on the task instead.

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**Post Role-play Discussion**

Directions: Provide answers to the following statements that pertain to your group role-play experience.

1. Identify the divisions that existed within the group.
2. Identify the recurring verbal/nonverbal messages used by group members in efforts to achieve compliance by other group members.
3. Identify the rhetorical vision that had the greatest chance of uniting all group members. If one did not exist, create a rhetorical vision that would unite all group members.
4. Identify the impacts that task, maintenance, and deviant roles had on the group experience.

**References**


