Enhancing psychological literacy through a group selection exercise.

Eva Hammar Chiriac, Michael Rosander and Sally Wiggins

Book Chapter

N.B.: When citing this work, cite the original article.

Copyright: Poole

Available at: Linköping University Institutional Repository (DiVA)
http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:liu:diva-150948
International Edition of the Psychological Literacy Compendium

Edited by Associate Professor Jacqui Taylor & Dr Julie Hulme

During 2014/15, the HEA funded the production of a Psychological Literacy Compendium of Case Studies providing examples of psychological literacy gathered from academics in the UK. Following this, we invited psychology academics to submit case studies for a second version of the Compendium and we opened invites to the International community at various conferences. We also invited previous contributors to submit revised version of their case studies showing how they had adapted them as a result of feedback and reflection.

This International Compendium will be published online at the www.psychliteracy.com/ website and within our University repositories. The Compendium was presented at a Psychological Literacy Symposium at the EuroPLAT Conference held in Salzburg in September 2017 and it will be discussed within a workshop at the EFPTA Conference to be held in Reykjavik in April 2018.

The case studies are presented in alphabetical order and while they are not fully representative of the work being carried out internationally, they provide a snapshot of good practice and hopefully will provide ideas for academics wishing to introduce psychological literacy into their curricula.

We would like to thank all our contributors and if you are reading this and would like to contribute to the next edition please email one of us!

Jacqui and Julie (February 2018)
jtaylor@bournemouth.ac.uk
j.a.hulme@keele.ac.uk
Enhancing Psychological Literacy through A Group Selection Exercise
Eva Hammar Chiriac, Michael Rosander & Sally Wiggins

Department of Behavioural Sciences and Learning, Linköping University, Sweden eva.hammar.chiriac@liu.se

Key words
Group psychology
Problem-based learning (PBL)
Group work
Reflection

Synopsis of the case study

The psychologist programme at Linköping University - a five-year educational programme that results in students becoming licensed psychologists - uses problem-based learning (PBL) throughout its entirety. PBL is a pedagogical approach that is based on problem-solving, self-directed learning and group interaction. Each term, the students (around 50 in each cohort) are divided into new tutorial groups by a course administrator, with each group normally consisting of 6-8 students. As part of a group psychology course in the beginning of the fourth year, however, the students take part in a group selection exercise to form the tutorial groups on their own. This is the first and only time that the students are able to choose their own groups. It is an exercise in large group and intergroup dynamics, as well as negotiation, since the students must discuss together and make decisions about who will be in each group. The aim of the exercise is to help the students to understand large group intergroup processes, and one’s own role in this, as well as the significance and consequences of group formation. This corresponds to the overall aim of the group psychology courses throughout the entire programme where the students use the group as both an objective and as a mean. That is, they both examine and reflect on their own group processes as well as using the group to work throughout the psychologist programme. In its entirety, the exercise involves a short lecture on group formation, the selection exercise, and whole class and small group reflections. It therefore includes practice, theory and reflection. The exercise has been a recurring and appreciated module for more than ten years at the psychologist programme at Linköping University. It has recently been tried on a much smaller scale at Strathclyde University.

What did you/ the participants do?

The exercise comprises four parts:

1) A brief lecture on group composition, highlighting important aspects to be considered when forming a group.

2) The selection exercise immediately follows the lecture. The students are given a few short but detailed rules for the task, such as number of students in each group, that the new groups shouldn’t be similar to the previous groups they were in, and that the selection cannot be based on chance or any form of automatic division. It is made clear that the task is a
collective one and that it is not complete until all (even absent) students have a new group. They are then instructed to start working without any further involvement of the teacher. The teacher remains in the classroom, but only as an observer, taking notes on significant events and processes. If the students ask any questions the teacher only responds by referring to the rules. The students get a definite deadline (approximately 2 hours) when they need to present the newly formed groups to the teacher.

3) Once the new groups are formed, there is a whole-class reflection and discussion guided by the teacher. The discussion can be based on observations from the teacher, but also the students’ experiences of 'what happened'. The dual purpose is to involve the whole group to make sure that the students get a chance to defuse the situation before leaving the room, and to prepare for the coming small-group reflection, which happens the next day. In their newly-formed groups, guided by a tutor, they reflect further on the selection exercise.

4) A few days later, for their first PBL tutorial, the group’s task is to identify theoretical knowledge on group psychology and group formation to understand what happened during the exercise.

**What happened/is happening as a result?**

During the selection exercise (2, above), the students typically do not start with discussing strategies for how best to conduct the selection, even though they have just had a lecture on group formation. Instead, often one student takes or is informally assigned by their classmates the role of “leader”, standing in front of the whole group. The class suggests criteria to use when forming the groups and the “leader” writes them on the whiteboard. Normally very few of these criteria have anything to do with a well-functioning group or can be traced to the lecture they just had. The mandate of the “leader” is often never discussed. There may be discussions between people sitting close together, about the criteria and which are most important; usually some form of practical aspects are viewed as important, such as preference of time of day to work or the need to commute. Once the criteria are set the selection process normally goes rather quickly, possibly due to a wish to belong and to not be left out, though the class is often focused on the time-constraints of the session and there is less reflection at this stage.

**What are your critical reflections?**

The exercise helps the students to start thinking about what can happen in a large group and how one is affected by the processes occurring. When the groups start to take shape, issues of intergroup processes also become apparent. During the exercise the students often become aware of the importance of ending up in the “right” group. Some criteria are recurrent almost every time such as working conditions (e.g. preference for working together or alone, working mornings or afternoons, working a lot or just enough). If there is a criteria that stands out as more important to the students it can override all other criteria (e.g. preference for language spoken in the group or a wish to form all male/female groups). This usually speeds up the selection process, but may result in a too-quick consensus where many aspects are left untouched. Some aspects are normally taboo, such as a selection in which individuals are excluded based personal characteristics, etc.
The whole time available for the task is almost always needed and there are often moments of stress at the end. The students could probably go on with the selection task for a long time and still having trouble reaching a unanimous decision. It is therefore necessary to set a definite deadline.

One’s own role in the selection process often only becomes apparent after the selection task is over and the group starts to reflect on what happened. It can involve a student realising he or she ended up as a leader even though the student had no intention to take on that role. Another common realisation concerns talking space (or ‘taking the floor’), where some realize they had talked more than usual and others became quiet.

**What worked/ what didn’t?**

This exercise usually works very well and new groups are formed by the deadline. The opportunities for reflection help the students to see the significance of group processes and their consequences for the new groups and student cohort as a whole. Student evaluations clearly show that it is an appreciated module and that it can contribute to gaining a deeper understanding and knowledge and thereby enhancing students’ psychological literacy through a group selection exercise.

The purpose is not to get the best possible groups to work in, but to get a real group experience that can help the students to understand important aspects of group psychology. The students often opt-out of the opportunity to create groups based on the best possible criteria in favour of more simple structural criteria. This is not a problem, as the allocation of group members during all other terms in the psychologist programme are based purely on chance.

**What do you recommend to others as a result of this?**

Always make sure that the students get a real chance for guided reflection both in the large group and in the newly formed groups in order to avoid possible future negative intergroup consequences.