Semi-autonomous study groups

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Introduction

In 1989 Professor Geoff Soutar asked me to undertake the role of co-ordinator of organisational behaviour at undergraduate level in the School of Management. The task appeared daunting as the unit is undertaken by over 1,000 students annually.

Background of the unit

Organisational behaviour (Management Processes 152) has been offered for many years by the School of Management at Curtin University and the Australian Institute of University Studies at J oondalup. As it is part of the common core for the Bachelor of Business degree, it is studied by a broad range of students from many schools in the university. There are a large number of students from Malaysia and Singapore and some from Indonesia, Hong Kong and the USA.

The subject of organisational behaviour (OB) involves the “study of individuals and groups within organisational settings” (Gibson et al. (1991, p. 7). The majority of students undertake the unit in second semester following the first semester unit “Management Processes 151” (MP 151). MP 151 is a basic introduction to management history and theory comprising two hours of mass lectures and a one-hour tutorial per week. The mass lectures are given by a variety of lecturers from the School of Management and Perth business community.

In semester two, organisational behaviour is also taught in five country centres in Western Australia and in Sunway College in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. It was decided not to introduce the new structures in these centres until they had been tried, evaluated and revised by Curtin staff.

The impetus for change to organisational behaviour

The impetus for change was financial. There was a feeling in the department that first-year units were costly and economies were needed to be made in order to have smaller classes at graduate level. There were pressures to convert organisational behaviour classes to a mass lecturing format.

Rationale for experiential learning

Friedrich Nietzsche, German philosopher (1844-1900) once said:

What you have experienced, no power on earth can take from you (Quoted in Frankl, 1959, p. 83).

Most of the students who study MP 152 are first-year undergraduates who have entered university direct from school and as a result have little or no work experience. The changes therefore that were made to the unit were aimed at making learning meaningful and applicable to their student life as well as the home and part-time work life of the participants. For these reasons, experiential learning methods have become a central feature of the course rationale. In the past two years our philosophy has been to combine a variety of teaching-learning strategies in an attempt to maximise learning of organisational behaviour (Hogan, 1990).

As stated earlier, the subject of organisational behaviour involves the study of individuals and groups in organisational setting. It was because of this content that O.B. staff members were opposed to changing to a mass lecturing and “banking” approach as described by Freire (1972), not because we opposed mass lecturing per se, but because we believed it did not involve appropriate teaching-learning methods to enable students to learn about themselves and how they interacted in groups (this will be elaborated on further in the section on deep and surface learning).

The search for alternative teaching-learning structures

Full- and part-time staff discussed alternatives at length during 1990, but could not generate any alternatives that were appropriate for such large numbers and in so many diverse locations.

I wrote to every university in Australia, the USA, Canada, Malaysia, Singapore and the...
UK that taught organisational behaviour. I described our problems and philosophy and asked about their teaching/learning structures. The replies were varied. Many lecturers sent their condolences regarding our large student numbers, others had already changed to a mass lecture format. Two universities sent information about their teaching structures which appealed to our teaching-learning philosophy.

Professor Larry Michaelson, of the University of Oklahoma, sent his ideas for "team learning" in a mass lecture format which involved "informative testing". In this model students:

• attended a number of mass lectures (in groups of about 280);
• completed readings each week;
• sat formative as well as summative multiple-choice tests. The tests were completed individually and then in set teams of seven students. In the latter mode students had to discuss and fight for their ideas. Marking was completed on the spot with the help of an electronic scanner.

Associate Professor Boris Kabanoff of the University of New South Wales sent his ideas on "syndicate groups" used with MBA students. In his model, graduate students were divided into groups of 7-10 participants. Each week one member from each group attended a "train the trainer" workshop and was shown how to run an exercise by a course instructor. This student then facilitated his/her group for one meeting without the lecturer present.

Planning the change

After long conversations with colleagues and discussions with staff at Curtin, we decided to modify the New South Wales model to suit the needs of our undergraduate students. I negotiated with my head of department, Professor Geoff Soutar, to allow us semester one, 1991, for in-depth planning and preparation. He gave us his full support. With the learning of so many students at stake, we knew we had to be fully prepared and needed to foresee, where possible, everything that could possibly go wrong and have contingency plans.

Our goal was to introduce the innovation in Semester 2, 1991 (unfortunately the semester which involved the largest student numbers). I broke the news to staff at our final Christmas meeting in 1990. There were the usual reactions of "why change a good thing?". I had to agree with them. The results of interviews conducted by Professor Geoff Soutar and Steve Myers indicated that students rated MP 152 as the most stimulating and enjoyable unit in first year. Each semester we were receiving very positive student evaluations regarding the "Interactive Workshops" and the "Manager Case Study" assignments. I could understand the reluctance of staff to change as these worthwhile and practical assignments would have to be eliminated.

In January 1991, a small group of us (Pamela Hedges, Kerry Pedigo, Renu Burr, Tas Bedford and myself!) gathered on a weekly basis. The description here does not do justice to the creative thinking and chest-beating that our meetings involved. I remember numerous cups of coffee, Indian snacks and Eccles cakes, guffaws of laughter and at times quiet desperation. We even had complaints for making too much noise as new ideas were generated and built upon! Creativity is not a quiet process! We met on twelve different occasions with varying amounts of energy, optimism and self-questioning. Eventually the idea of "Semi-autonomous Study Groups" (SAS) evolved.

We defined SAS groups as:

a group of no more than eight students who agree to meet for one hour per week in order to complete given learning objectives together without the presence of a lecturer.

Staff aims

Our aims were to:

• save money;
• increase the ability of students to learn from their own experiences not just from books;
• enable students to relate organisational behaviour theories to their world;
• create a learning environment for students where they could have some fun and make friends;
• maintain standards of final marks (i.e. assignments and exam);
• increase student autonomy over the learning process so that they could learn from each other without the presence of the lecturer;
• increase the range of skills students can use in group interaction.

Staff development

In the inter-semester break (June 1991) all staff met for two evenings and participated in a number of activities including methods for conflict resolution. Five people had been actively involved in the planning process and we knew we had to communicate our ideas to the others. If they did not believe in and understand the new "vision", students would react possibly negatively immediately.
Staff meetings also included segments where individuals demonstrated innovative teaching strategies, voiced problems and discussed possible solutions with the group. There was always plenty of debate and support. The meetings were peer learning sessions and in many ways they mirrored the students’ SAS group meetings.

At the end of the staff meeting I asked everyone to note down their thoughts, feelings and intended actions. It was interesting to see that even staff who had taught this subject many times before were stimulated by the changes:

I'm grateful that after years of part-time lecturing students are getting practical concepts and support … I'm going to keep a lecturer’s log.

Another staff member was concerned about students:

How will the students react? Will they be as enthusiastic as we are and will they carry it through to the end?

Another commented:

Chris and her wild ideas, she always has something new, exciting and terrifying up her sleeve; mixed admiration, awe, exasperation, envy, pride in her courage and resourcefulness.

Yet another wrote:

I am delighted at the way we developed the ideas and structures of SAS groups … which was interactive and creative. … I'm nervous like stage fright before going on. Sure it'll be alright on the day.

I wrote:

I feel responsible for bringing in the ideas and promoting it therefore “yikes” will it work? So I must not link up my ego with its success or failure. We have the strongest staff ever and if it doesn’t work with such committed people well then it just isn’t to be … we’ve certainly tried our best so far.

New part-time staff reacted in different ways:

I worked as a student in TAFE in an experimental course so I feel comfortable about the conceptual framework.

I feel overloaded, preparation time!!! heavy and anxious about the newness for me and the students … but I’ll prepare well.

In the first week, lecturers who had classes on Wednesday rang up to find out how students had reacted in the classes on the previous Monday. There was a sense of excitement mixed with apprehension.

### Meeting one

In week three, students had their first SAS meeting. This was a planning meeting for one hour. The meeting for mat was described in “ORGSBE” (the student guide) and it was conducted in class time. The lecturer only intervened if asked. The goals of this meeting were:

- agree on where and when to meet for one hour per week;

### Class structure

We decided to keep to class sizes of 32 students. This was because students had commented in the past that it had been very helpful to interact with the same lecturer and students each week. They developed a sense of belonging and some strong friendships were formed in these classes. We also knew from previous evaluations that students found three hours too long, no matter how much we tried to vary class activities. Hence the class contact time was modified and students met with their lecturer for three hours for the first and last two weeks of the 13-week semester. In weeks three to eleven, students met their lecturer for a two hour lecture/workshop and their SAS group for one hour (see Figure 1 and Table 1).

We divided each class into four SAS groups of eight students. In weeks one and two, among more formal work, a variety of icebreaker activities were used to enable students to get to know one another. Students were asked to choose a “study buddy” to support and work with during the semester. They were informed that they:

- would have to choose their own SAS group members in week three (comprising four sets of buddies);
- were responsible for finding people who were motivated and who they thought they could work with.

We wanted to make sure that students made these choices for themselves so that the responsibility for the decision was their own.

### Figure 1

Teaching-learning structures

Each class contains 32 students and will be divided into 4 Semi-Autonomous Study Groups (SAS)

- 8 Students
- 8 Students
- 8 Students
- 8 Students
Interactive meeting structure

SAS groups were organised using the roles and responsibilities adapted from the work on interactive meetings by Doyle and Straus (1976). We had decided that students should not be expected to work on their own without some structures and guidelines to support their efforts. We wanted to give them a worthwhile and successful learning experience if possible, without over protecting them from the realities of having to fend for themselves.

In the past, the responsibility for the success of a group or a meeting has frequently rested solely with one leader or chairperson. (see Figure 2). With this hierarchical structure the role of leader can be very daunting.

It is also easy for participants to be non-cooperative and later blame the leader. Also in a sports game we do not ask one person to umpire, score, defend, attack, yet in meetings we expect the leader to do all of these things. Doyle and Straus (1976) argue that the roles should be shared and should support one another. This creates a more stable, interactive model (see Figure 3).

The roles of the facilitator were to:
- prepare and facilitate one exercise described in “ORGSBE”;
- keep participants on task;
- ensure that everyone had the chance to speak if they wished;
- keep the group to the norms set in meeting 1;
- help the group to renegotiate these norms if necessary;
- ask questions in order to probe, reflect, confront and clarify;
- listen to positive and constructive feedback from the rest of the group;
- summarise key learning points and hand in meeting minutes and peer evaluation forms to the lecturer at the next class (see “ORGSBE” for format).

The meeting minutes provided the lecturer with a means of monitoring:
- what was happening in the group;
- absences and reasons;
- difficulties and how they were overcome.

The peer evaluation forms enabled the lecturer to monitor:
- the type of positive feedback given to the facilitator;
- the way in which students expressed constructive change feedback to the facilitator.

The roles and responsibilities of the facilitator’s buddy were to:
- support the facilitator during the preparation of the workshop;
- step in and run the workshop if the facilitator was ill;
- support the facilitator during the workshop if there were problems;
- actively participate.

The role and the responsibility of the timekeeper was to:
- remind everyone how much time was left for a given section of work.

The roles and responsibilities of the scribe are to:
- listen actively;
- note down on butcher paper the main points;
- clarify spelling or meaning if necessary.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weekly topics</th>
<th>Lecture (hours)</th>
<th>Semi-autonomous study groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Purpose &amp; requirements of MP152</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1 hour planning meeting at end of 2 hour lecture Facilitator no 1 - 1 hour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Organisations</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Facilitator no 2 - 1 hour</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Effectiveness</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Facilitator no 3 - 1 hour</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Individuals</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Facilitator no 4 - 1 hour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Groups</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Facilitator no 5 - 1 hour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Stress management</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Facilitator no 6 - 1 hour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Communication</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Facilitator no 7 - 1 hour</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Motivation</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Facilitator no 8 - 1 hour</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Conflict</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Revision session 2½ hours</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. Leadership</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>11. Job/organisational design</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>12. Organisational development and change</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Revision &amp; evaluation of SAS groups</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The role and responsibilities of the participants were to:
• read the topic chapter beforehand;
• join in;
• question other participants’ ideas and assumptions;
• listen carefully;
• openly discuss ideas and express opinions;
• make feelings known, e.g. “Hey, I’m feeling left out, let me finish”;
• give positive and constructive/change feedback to the facilitator;

The last point is important because each individual knew his/her turn would come.

The roles and responsibilities of the lecturer were to:
• facilitate a variety of learning activities (including lecturing) in the two-hour sessions;
• encourage exchange of learning between SAS groups about problems and how they overcame them;

Figure 2
Hierarchical meeting structure

Figure 3
Interactive meeting structure
Christine Hogan
Semi-autonomous study groups

• listen and provide personal support for students on an individual basis out of class time where necessary;
• counsel students who had difficulty adjusting to SAS group learning;
• give feedback to the facilitators on their SAS minutes and feedback sheets;
• intervene in the SAS group process if necessary but only as a last resort.

Group skills

Frequently group work breaks down not because of lack of motivation but because of lack of skills and experience. Group work is one of the most complex forms of human interaction. In “ORGSBE”, students were introduced to:
• the stages of group development (Tuckman and Jensen, 1977);
• learning styles (Honey and Mumford, 1983);
• five conflict-handling styles (Johnson, 1978);
• team roles (Belbin, 1981);
• strategies for giving and receiving feedback (Hopson and Scally, 1982).

They were required to relate these theories and models to the experiences they had in their SAS meetings.

Introducing a common goal

All students (unless they are really perverse) want to pass. The assignments were structured so that they could only attain marks if they attended and contributed in all the SAS meetings and there was a joint effort from everyone. Our findings supported the research of Aronson and Osherow (1980), i.e. that students from different backgrounds can work together when they have a common or superordinate goal.

One student commented:
I have been at Curtin for two years and this is the first time I have really talked to the Asian students.

Conflict resolution

This topic is not dealt with until week nine of the course. We anticipated that “storming” would occur before then and therefore we would have to teach conflict resolution skills on a “need to know” basis (storming is a stage of group development described by Tuckman and Jensen (1977) where there is conflict and struggle for power, status and authority).

Indeed in one of my groups “storming” occurred at their second meeting. I immediately told other staff members as I did not want them to think that problems would be attributed to them. At the second SAS group meeting two male students had not co-operated with a quiet female facilitator. Then at the end of her workshop they gave her feedback that she had not been assertive enough. The SAS representative came to my office. We discussed the problem at length and after a couple of discussions he worked out a mediation process with which he felt comfortable to confront the behaviour at the next meeting. He asked the group to discuss three main questions and they generated the following data:
• What are our needs? Good marks, motivation, stay on task, constructive criticism, enthusiastic participation, communication, have fun, learn, concentrate.
• What are our fears? Conflict, bickering, rejection, frustration, criticism, differences, exams, failure.
• What are our resolutions? Enthusiastic participation, no groupthink, more effort, be positive, open mind, enjoy, personal hostilities outside group, communication, compromise, new time/venue, stop complaining, positive atmosphere.

They plotted on a scale of 1-10 individual perceptions of the following dimensions and agreed to monitor changes:

- being prepared: 1 . . . . . . . . . 5 . . . . . . . . . 10
- participation: 1 . . . . . . . . . . 5 . . . . . . . . . 10
- co-operation: 1 . . . . . . . . . . 5 . . . . . . . . . 10
- organisation: 1 . . . . . . . . . . 5 . . . . . . . . . 10
- communication: 1 . . . . . . . . . . 5 . . . . . . . . . 10
- attitude: 1 . . . . . . . . . . 5 . . . . . . . . . 10

As a result of their meeting they decided to:
• change their meeting time;
• change their meeting venue;
• adopt the name “Get Smart”;
• all make an effort.

Their journals indicated improvements, though as in real life the journey was not always smooth.

The female student spoke to me and stated that she had been very hurt by the experience. We discussed issues on a few occasions. I was concerned about her but was delighted to note her response at the end:
I am proud that I was able to finish the course and I think I grew as a result … I have seen improvements in my assertiveness, confidence and I use a louder voice.

This seems to support the statement by Friedrich Nietzsche as quoted in Frankl (1999, p. 82):
That which does not kill me, makes me stronger
The two male students had motivational problems from the beginning of the semester. They really were not sure why they were studying; and they appeared somewhat immature and therefore seemed to want to be told what to do. It was exactly these sorts of students that we wanted to get through to so that they would take more responsibility for their own learning.

We informed students that if they ran into difficulties in their SAS groups it would be better to confront them early on and that if they could not solve them then they could ask their lecturer for guidance. In some groups, however, students were inclined to ignore dysfunctional behaviour and hope it would go away.

Dealing with absenteeism

Students who were committed to inter-state team sporting engagements soon realised that they would not be able to maintain the level of commitment necessary to their SAS group. They transferred to an external mode of study and the SAS groups concerned reorganised their roles. Some students welcomed the chance of a second chance to facilitate their group.

One of my students was involved in a Curtin promotion excursion to the USA. She discussed this with me and her peers and then decided to see if her absence would have any impact on the group climate. She left her colleagues with a questionnaire which contained the following questions:

• What did you notice about my absence?
• What were the advantages and disadvantages of my absence?
• Any comment? Snippets of interest? Gossip?

The extra information she gained was written up in her journal.

Dealing with latecomers

Punctuality tends not to be a student forte. At their first SAS meeting, most groups cited punctuality as a desirable group norm. They soon became very impatient when their peers let them down. I was rather interested by one of my students who wrote in his report:

Fred, who was the facilitator this week, was late. “How could he let us down we murmured?” His buddy was upset, but asked to wait ten minutes. We started to get worried, he had never done this before. Eventually he rushed in panting and really upset, his car had broken down. We listened and commiserated and then fined him $5 (our agreed penalty of 50 cents a minute). After all it was his job to maintain his car to get to here on time.

Dealing with outcasts

In case a student was expelled from a group for intolerable or repeated “poor” behaviour we had planned an alternative essay assignment. This involved an analysis of a variety of methods to deal with difficult employees in case a student was expelled from a group. We agreed at a staff meeting that this exercise was only to be used as a last resort. We did not tell students about this as we thought that it might encourage poor behaviour by students who could not be bothered to work in a team. In one class, two students who had repeatedly caused trouble in their SAS group were expelled in week five and completed this assignment.

Transference of learning

Transference of learning can be a “hit and miss” affair. Some students claim to be able to learn from experience, yet often the reflection is superficial and the learning transitory. Transference will not take place unless students become autonomous in using a strategy to enable them to reflect deeply and make their learning real. A central theme of our teaching has been the experiential learning model developed by Kolb (1984) (Figure 4). By constantly taking students through the four stages of the model after classroom exercises, we hoped that they would continue to learn from and value their own life experiences during the rest of their university life and their careers. Students quickly memorised the mnemonic “ERGA” which stands for the first letters of: Experience, Reflect, Generalise, Apply. A model is more likely to be applied if it can be recalled at will. Students were required each week to apply the

Figure 4
Experiential learning model

Source: Kolb (1984)
model to their SAS meeting and complete a modified mind map of the Kolb learning model (Figure 5).

Some students found the journal tedious. It appeared that they were not used to assignments that required continuous attention.

Learning log/creative journal assignment
Following the Kolb experiential learning model, students were required to reflect on their experiences and keep a learning log/journal using a number of creative strategies.

The log enabled them to reflect and record:
• what they learnt about themselves in the various roles;
• what they learnt about others;
• how they dealt with noisy and quiet group members;
• how they dealt with conflict;
• how they managed time and stress;
• the stages of group development;
• their feelings: anger, frustrations, joys and fears.

Students were very open in their journal writing considering they knew that lecturers would be reading them. Lecturers had to take care to respect students’ privacy and if journals were being marked they were returned only to the owner in person.

At the end of the semester, students were required to write a formal report describing the advantages and disadvantage of SAS groups and relate this to their research findings on semi-autonomous work groups in the library.

Figure 5
Learning from experience
At the end of each SAS workshop, use Kolb’s model as a basis for a mind map. At a later date you may wish to come back to the “Apply” box and add your experiences. You could use this to reflect on incidents at home/work/college:

- Experience
- Apply
- How?
- What can I apply?
- What did I learn?
- Reflect
- Intended Actions
- Think
- Feel
- Generalise
- When?
- Where?
- Aim
- Topic
this was all about. Do not think that our staff meetings were calm, complacent affairs. Indeed there was certainly no evidence of “group think” (Janis, 1971) as staff raised their concerns, shared problems and how they had solved them and questioned where we were going.

Last SAS meeting

A tenth meeting was planned to enable the SAS group to celebrate and disband. (It also gave some flexibility in the system in case an extra workshop was needed). Questions were given on the film Dead Poets Society. This enabled students to revise many of the topics in the course and reinforced the message of autonomy with sayings like “Carpe diem: seize the day”. Many students reported that even though they had seen the film before, it had great impact on their thinking. Many groups celebrated with numerous refreshments paid for by the accumulations in their “fine boxes” (penalties for breaking group norms for punctuality and preparedness).

Strategies used to encourage deep learning

Biggs and Telfer (1987) and Marton and Slajo (1976) have made distinctions between various types of learning. “Deep” learning is intrinsically motivated, where students try to understand the meaning of their work. “Surface” learning tends to be externally motivated and students tend to assume a memorising or reproductive learning strategy. “Achievement” learning is based on high aspirations and students adopt either or both of the above strategies and try to make the best use of their time and study skills.

Watkins and Hattie (1985) indicate that surface approaches were most frequently used successfully at primary and secondary level and that few students found it necessary to modify their strategies at university level. Biggs (1982) reported that university students were more likely to use a deep and/or achieving approach than students from colleges of advanced education. Many of our MP 152 students were facing the need to change to “deep” learning for the first time, so it is to be expected that some will find it difficult or not understand the rationale behind the change.

As one student commented:
I thought SAS groups were introduced so lecturers didn’t have to do so much work.

Strategies which were used to encourage deep rather than surface learning included:
• The learning log/creative journal. Students were asked to reflect on their own learning/learning processes and metacognition on an ongoing basis.
• Mind mapping strategies. Students were taught to mind map in order to encourage them to see the whole picture and make connections between concepts and their own ideas.
• SAS groups. Students were encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning: generation and maintenance of group norms.
• Peer group facilitation. Students soon realised that they had to be completely au fait with a topic before they could facilitate an activity on it.
• Peer evaluation and feedback. Students were taught how to give the facilitator positive and constructive change feedback after the SAS workshop.
• Definitions. Students were encouraged to write definitions of concepts in their own words.
• Experiences. Students were encouraged to take pride in and use their own experiences in their journal and report. These experiences were then compared to models and theories.
• Problem solving. Students were taught to expect some problems in groups as “normal” and encouraged to plan to prevent them occurring or if they did to take action to solve them.
• Film analysis. Observation learning of the Dead Poet’s Society involved students in seeing the difference between deep and surface learning examples in the school and in a teacher who encouraged students to think for themselves and take pride in their own writing, dreams and goals.

Attitude change

There was a change in the attitude of some students as the semester progressed. In my class I observed a distinct noise of “pennies dropping” later in week eleven when we related semi-autonomous study groups to semi-autonomous work groups and organisational change. One student commented in a mid-semester evaluation questionnaire:
I would like to say I had a very negative attitude towards the terms “SAS group” and “study buddy” prior to attending the classes. This has changed tremendously as I find that they are a good forum for support, social interaction and study.
One student wrote in her report:
Oh! It's dawning on me as I write the report – we were living the theory, living as SAS-SAW groups.
A result of the SAS groups I have made some significant personal changes; I gave up drinking; try not to be so outspoken; share my deeper feelings.

An evening student commented:
Initially I was very sceptical of the SAS group situation. I thought the situation was too contrived to accurately simulate a realistic office/work situation. At this stage of the course, week 8, I find the SAS group of increasing benefit and look forward to them. The reasons for this are:
• night/PT students do not usually have as much communication with their fellow students;
• group situation helps us identify other people’s problems and discuss our own;
• common goal – to achieve a high mark;
• the mix of personalities and attitudes help us appreciate our individualities within the group; and apply the theory we are learning.

End of semester student evaluation findings
At the end of semester two, an evaluation questionnaire was distributed. Staff were asked to administer the questionnaire at the last class. In all, 716 students were enrolled internally at Curtin at the end of semester, 679 sat the exam. A total of 476 questionnaires were completed and answers to question one and five were collated on the whole sample. The summary of answers to question one are summarised in Table II. Regarding the open-ended questions, a random sample of 42 percent were collated.

Key learning from SAS groups
The following statistics relate to the sample. Please note that some students gave more than one reason, others did not give any reason.
• 72 percent: being a member of an SAS group enabled us to learn about group dynamics.
• 27 percent: met wide cross-section of people; learnt to appreciate other people’s points of view.
• 10 percent: learnt about autonomous learning and taking responsibility for self-motivation.
• 6 percent: did not give reasons.

Comments included:
I found out how hard it is to run and prepare a meeting as facilitator.
The things I learnt in 152 will stay with me for the rest of my life.

I learnt a lot. It gave me a new insight into management that I haven’t seen before. This unit is geared for life outside university.
It put the students in charge of our learning and it feels great! I learnt more in the SAS group than in class.
The best way to study OB is to actually be part of a mini-organisation. SAS groups gave us this opportunity.

Disadvantage of SAS groups
• 29 percent: too time consuming.
• 18 percent: too disorganised and/or informal.
• 38 percent: let down at times by individuals because of absenteeism, insufficient input and feedback and/or groupthink and avoidance of confronting group problems.
• 5 percent: made the work load too heavy.
• 8 percent: did not give a reason.

Comments included:
Probably some groupthink with some members who don’t want to rock the boat.
Sometimes when the SAS group is out to have fun more than a learning process – no one takes things seriously at times.

Main learning goals from lecturers’ perspective
Students were asked what they thought were the goals of SAS groups from their lecturers’ perspective.
• 36 percent: lecturers wanted us to participate in experiential learning so that they could relate management and group theory to the real world.
• 27 percent: group skills, i.e. participation, facilitation etc.
• 10 percent: help them learn self-motivation, autonomy and responsibility.
• 4 percent: apply a new teaching technique.
• 14 percent: achieve course goals.
• 3 percent: other.
• 7 percent: no answer.

Reactions if asked to participate in group work in future
The staff were interested to find out if the SAS group experience would influence students’ reactions when confronted with group work in the future. Of the total 476 responses:
1 69 percent replied that they would be prepared to participate in group work like this in the future. Reasons given were:
• 25 percent: it was a positive, motivating way to learn.
• 21 percent: it was interesting, fun, stimulating and rewarding.
• 6 percent: they could share ideas, the workload, mutual help and responsibility.
• 6 percent: met new people and made long-term friends.
• 4 percent: learnt assertiveness, built confidence and learnt communications skills.

2 22 percent replied negatively. The two major reasons given were:
• 20 percent: prefer to work alone.
• 10 percent: did not enjoy the experience; prefer more orthodox approach.

20 percent: SAS groups are too time consuming.
• 3 percent: not appropriate to all units.

Reasons given included:
• easier going to lectures and taking notes;
• the group wasted time chatting;
• too demanding.

The majority of students who replied negatively explained that they preferred to work alone. Some students perceived they were more “autonomous” when they studied alone whereas lecturing staff had a broader meaning of this concept. One student clearly saw the peer commitment as a problem:

I prefer to know beforehand what each lecture/meeting involves so if I decide to skip it or I’m sick, I can catch up myself. In an SAS group, if you’re not there you are unable to learn the activities and you also let down the other group members by not being present by reducing group input and participation.

Another commented:

I have been conditioned to study normally and that’s what works for me. After twenty years why do you want me to change now?

Table II
SAS groups – summary statistics. Total sample: 476 surveys

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Unsure/DK</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learnt more about old friends</td>
<td>190 [40]</td>
<td>174 [36]</td>
<td>112 [24]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felt at risk at first</td>
<td>289 [61]</td>
<td>138 [29]</td>
<td>49 [10]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learnt to speak up in a group</td>
<td>356 [75]</td>
<td>80 [17]</td>
<td>40 [8]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learnt to further develop trust in other students</td>
<td>294 [62]</td>
<td>76 [16]</td>
<td>106 [22]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learnt to facilitate a group</td>
<td>392 [83]</td>
<td>40 [8]</td>
<td>44 [9]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relate organisational behaviour theories to real world</td>
<td>292 [61]</td>
<td>80 [17]</td>
<td>104 [22]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Group behaviour/other

| Learnt about people I wouldn’t normally be exposed to | 377 [79] | 63 [13] | 36 [8] |
| Mixed with students from different cultures | 350 [74] | 106 [22] | 20 [4] |
| Showed up immature students | 164 [34] | 209 [44] | 103 [22] |
| Watched power struggles | 150 [32] | 248 [52] | 78 [16] |
| Saw how my behaviour affects others | 306 [64] | 67 [14] | 103 [22] |
| Mixed with students of different age groups | 475 [99.8] | 0 [0] | 1 [0.2] |
| Confront people exhibiting dysfunctional behaviour | 192 [40] | 122 [26] |
| Fun | 162 [34] | 0 [0] | 1 [0.2] |
| Chance to observe different personalities | 475 [99.8] | 7 [1] | 7 [1] |
| Gave me experience in dealing with contact | 150 [32] | 67 [14] |
| Deal with people with dominating personalities | 162 [34] | 0 [0] | 1 [0.2] |
| Learnt to include quiet people | 475 [99.8] | 0 [0] | 1 [0.2] |
| 306 [64] | 475 [99.8] |

Task/organisation

| Learnt to be task oriented | 359 [75] | 60 [13] | 57 [12] |
| Learnt to manage ourselves | 341 [72] | 58 [12] | 77 [16] |

• 6 percent: they could share ideas, the workload, mutual help and responsibility.
• 6 percent: met new people and made long-term friends.
• 4 percent: learnt assertiveness, built confidence and learnt communications skills.

2 22 percent replied negatively. The two major reasons given were:
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20 percent: SAS groups are too time consuming.
• 3 percent: not appropriate to all units.

Reasons given included:
• easier going to lectures and taking notes;
• the group wasted time chatting;
• too demanding.
Yet another replied:
I prefer “formal” learning, although it may be boring.
One’s learning should only be dependent on oneself, not on others.
SA groups took up a great amount of my time; I’ve got other units to take care of.
Not substantive; too unreal!!
Found it boring.
3 9 percent replied that they were not sure.
Reasons given were:
• it would depend on how well the unit was organised;
• it would depend on the people I was with.
Comments included:
It depends on the organisation of the unit.
This unit was properly organised, but I can see major problems where organisation is not standard.
It depends on what the unit was and who was in the group. I found it difficult to enjoy it with people much older than me.
I’m unsure but due to MP 152 I have become more likely to enjoy it. In other words I have enjoyed SA groups more here than in other environments.

Student choice as SAS members
Student responses were contradictory here. Where a student worked with friends and they stayed on task, they recommended staying with friends. Where they worked with friends but frequently went into “flight” mode, i.e. by chatting or socialising they recommended teaming up with strangers. Staying on task, however, was everybody’s responsibility.
1 49 percent commented that lecturers should allocate groups since:
• in the real world you do not choose your coworkers;
• it gives the opportunity to meet new people;
• friends tend to stick together and are not productive.
2 42 percent replied that students should choose their own groups since:
• it would function better;
• freedom of choice as adults and more responsibility;
• could lead to resentment.
3 8 percent were undecided or did not comment.
One year ago some OB lecturers tried allocating students into teams for group work; however, overall, we decided against it as if and/or when “things” went wrong students were quick to blame the lecturer for putting them with a “bad” group.

Words of advice to the next SAS group
There were many words of advice:
1 36 percent: get fully involved; the more you put into it the more you get out of it.
2 18 percent: keep the learning log up to date, do not fall behind.
3 16 percent: select groups carefully.
4 12 percent: sort out conflicts early; check group norms; make your group work.
5 10 percent: preparation was the key, always read the chapter before the SAS meeting.

Standards of overall results
In comparing the overall results between Semester 2, 1990, and Semester 2, 1991, there were interesting findings. No exam questions focused solely on SA groups as this would have been unfair to country, Sunway and AIUS students. Many students, however, used examples from their SA experience to answer essay questions and the case study. The results were as follows:
• 1990: 86 percent passed; none deferred.
• 1991: 84 percent passed; 2 percent took and passed deferred exams.
There appears to be a growing trend in student study management to get a medical certificate and ask for a deferred exam. Three percent were put on hold or withdrew in both years.
Of those that passed there was an improvement in marks:
• 1990: 41 percent of those who passed obtained grade 7 or over.
• 1991: 49 percent of those who passed obtained grade 7 or over.

Financial gains
The part-time lecturing budget for Semester 2 would normally be $26,215. The SA innovation brought a saving of $6,140. There was also a saving in full-time lecturers’ class contact time, though I think this innovation clearly took up that initial “saved” time.

Unexpected outcomes
When the findings were submitted to our colleagues in the School of Management, we were gratified by the enthusiasm of our colleagues who teach students in years two and three as they stated that their role would be easier if students had obtained some group skills and felt positively inclined towards group work.
End of semester staff meeting

Professor Geoff Soutar, the head of department, made an opening address and congratulated staff on their initiative and enterprise. After he left we discussed the pluses, minuses and interesting points about the SAS innovation. We debated the sequence of topics and concepts and many suggestions were made for next semester. Most of these suggestions have been carried forward and, in 1992, staff and students decide on a new text.

Personal observations

In addition to these findings I would like to add my personal observations:

- Semi-autonomous work groups do not mean less work for staff. Indirectly, at least at the beginning, they require a great deal more effort, skills, co-operation and mutual questioning and support.
- Students who time tabled their SAS meetings for mid evening reported significant loss of concentration the next day.
- Part-time evening students frequently opted to have their SAS meeting on the same night as their two-hour workshop with their lecturer. This was their decision; however, it frequently meant a very tiring evening.
- Students who had many team sporting commitments during the semester quickly transferred to external study mode when they realised that they could not keep up with their SAS group commitments.

Developments in Semester 1, 1992

Modifications based on observations and evaluations are already in place for the coming semester:

- Tas Bedford will be implementing some of these strategies with external organisational behaviour students who will be involved with interactive telephone conferencing in Semester 1, 1992.
- Students will be introduced to the concepts of “deep”, “surface” and “achievement” learning.
- Students will be asked to set goals and estimate their end of semester mark they are aiming to achieve. Lecturers will compare this to the final results.
- A new text will be chosen for Semester 2, 1992.
- Improvements have been made to the layout and content of “ORGSBE” including clearer journal guidelines. The report component has been shortened. Further journal writing strategies will be developed in 1992 (Holly, 1984; Mumford, 1987; Proffog, 1975; Rainer, 1980). The feedback sheet that students give the facilitator each week has been improved to enable students to give more detailed and constructive feedback.
- A video showing last semester’s students facilitating an SAS group will be shown at the beginning of the semester. It is hoped that this will speed up the understanding of concepts that are new to students.
- A video showing track gangs working as semi-autonomous work groups at Westrail will be shown in week 11 when the topic of job/organisational design is covered.
- Staff in country centres and Sunway will be notified of the changes in course structure. Where possible induction will take place during Semester 1, when country staff members come to Perth or through “PictureTel” interactive video. In some country centres, class sizes may be too small to allow the formation of more than one SAS group.

Conclusion

SAS groups have now been successfully used every semester up until the present, i.e. 1996. Since the time of writing this article documenting the initiation of the project some changes have been made to the overall unit design by Pedigo and Hedges (1994, 1996), namely:

- The introduction of portfolios in mid-1992 to unite SAS group members in a superordinate goal and to reward a group project at the end of the unit. It was observed that each SAS group was unique and the idea of a portfolio was to give a group mark to unite the members right up until the end of semester with a common purpose. The portfolio includes any documents that represent the SAS group. Each group presents their data to the rest of the class at the last lecture. Portfolios include personal stories, pictures, cartoons mind maps, video clips. This innovation has been very successful and great fun!
- The reduction in size of SAS groups to six instead of eight participants in 1996 to simplify the group dynamics.

The results of this innovation and the overall reactions of students and staff are encouraging. A significant number of students indicated that the SAS experience was worthwhile, contributed to their learning about management and practical group skills development and helped them make friends.

Student comment: Top marks!!! Why don’t you tell other lecturers about it?

So we did!!!
Christine Hogan
Semi-autonomous study groups


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Freire (1972), Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Penguin, Harmondsworth.


Holly, M.L. (1984), Keeping a Personal Professional Journal, Deakin University, Melbourne.


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Videos

SAS Groups (1991), produced by Clive J ones and Christine Hogan with thanks to SAS students who volunteered their services, Curtin Business School, Curtin University of Technology, Perth.


Over the past two years the author has been helped tremendously with the administrative load by Kerry Pedigo and Pam Hedges. In the context of innovation, ideas have been generated and risks have been taken by full- and part-time staff, many of whom have given freely of their leisure/family time to attend meetings. The author would like to acknowledge the contributions of the following colleagues: Pamela Hedges, Kerry Pedigo, Malcolm Innes-Brown, Richard Nowak, Brenda McLennan, Tas Bedford, Peter Sevastos, Renu Burr, Ray Bennett, Laurie Dickie, Roberta Mead, Vanessa Herbert, Dianna Vitasonic and Juris Varpins