

THE DIFFERENCE A WORD CAN MAKE:  
CHANGING THE LANGUAGE OF COLLABORATION FROM GROUP TO TEAM TO  
FOSTER COLLABORATIVE SKILLS IN HIGH SCHOOL BOYS

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**Abstract**

This action research project investigated the effect of the semantic shift from “group” to “team” and its effect on collaborative skills in high school boys. The goal of the study was to determine the link, if any, between the language used in collaborative contexts and its effect on building collaborative skills. The research found that there was an increased sense of connectedness among team members as well as an increased awareness of collaborative language and peer interaction. It also indicated that the nature of the team task was integral in providing the necessary foundations for a successful collaboration. The findings suggest an improved strategy for delivering collaborative projects and structuring team tasks.

**Introduction**

Group work is something I never enjoyed in school. I was often the student that would simply “get it done” to avoid dealing with group conflicts and risking a bad grade. As a teacher, I often hear students describe their group-work woes and I must say that after over a decade since I was a student it still sounds painfully familiar. It occurred to me that all our efforts to get students to work together were not translating into getting students to collaborate. In fact, the typical group assignment achieved the exact opposite of collaboration, task division.

I was inspired to tackle my concern by the difference in approach I observed among students when they were participating in a team (e.g., in sport or robotics). There is something about being on a team that makes students *want* to work together to achieve their goal. Furthermore, each player on a team has a specific position, a specific skill, and adds a specific value to the overall success of the team. I asked myself why was this not so in the academic realm? What if students were coached through collaboration the same way they were coached to execute a play in a sport? Do students even know which positions they are best suited for in group work?

My questions were too overarching for this particular action research endeavor, however, so I decided to focus on the language of collaboration by shifting the focus away from group and towards team. This included replacing the word “group” with “team” in our classroom interactions, using and encouraging inclusive, pluralistic language and supporting discord, discussion and risk-taking. Therefore, the research question that drove this project was: *How might changing the language of collaboration from group-focused to team-focused foster collaborative skills in High School boys?*

### **Literature Review**

Our ability to think together is a crucial skill required to successfully navigate our professional and personal lives. Employers hail collaborative intelligence as integral to their hiring practices and the prevalence of “total” team building in the corporate world relies on this skill as the essential ingredient of high performing, innovative teams. Harvey and Daniels (2015) confirm, “The non-school world increasingly values collaboration among sociable and supporting members of high-achieving work groups” (p. 48). In the world of education however, this skill is not fostered in a meaningful way, which leads to a steep a gap in knowledge that students are not made aware of until they enter the workforce.

### **Group Versus Team**

Students’ first introduction to collaboration in an educational setting comes in the form of group work. The notion of group work, however, garners mixed reviews as students associate it with unequal division of labour, unfair grading, coasting, boredom, futility and personality clashes. This unfair division of labour is mentioned in *Collaborative Overload* (Cross, Grant and Rebele) 2015), who note, “In most cases, 20% to 35% of value-added collaborations come from only 3% to 5% of employees. As people become known for being both capable and willing to help, they are drawn into projects and roles of growing importance” (para. 3). In most group work scenarios, the task at hand is divided into bite-size pieces and is completed on an individual basis, often without teacher supervision or even the presence of other group members. This action research project aimed, therefore, to determine whether shifting the language we use around collaboration from “group” to “team” affected collaborative skills in boys.

Sisson (2013) identifies the distinction between a group and a team as follows: “A group is a collection of individuals who coordinate their individual efforts. On the other hand, a team is a

group of people who share a common team purpose and a number of challenging goals. Members of the team are mutually committed to the goals and to each other” (para.1). The definition itself highlights some fundamental distinctions by implying that members of a group are focused on coordination and division of labour, whereas members of a team work together towards a common goal or purpose.

In addition to a more individuated approach to team selection, what is often lacking in traditional group work is effective communication and peer critique between team members. To compensate for their lack of skill in this department, students often forgo communication and default right to task division. This is something that defeats the collaborative process. In the article, *What Google Learned From its Quest to Build the Perfect Team*, Duhigg (2016) concludes that the difference between successful and unsuccessful teams is how well members treat one another. The findings concluded that the social norms within a team related to collective intelligence: “On good teams, members spoke in roughly the same proportion, a phenomenon the researchers referred to as ‘equality in distribution of conversational turn taking’” (para.30). The idea of team norms or culture also touches on that essential ingredient in effective creative collaboration: comfort in risk-taking.

### **Creativity and Risk-Taking**

In the creative classroom specifically, collaborative skills are linked to creativity. In order for creativity to flourish there needs to be a level of comfort in risk-taking. In my opinion, this environment of creative risk-taking can be created by fostering effective collaborative skills. Building a successful team, therefore, should be prioritized as an essential foundation for optimal collaboration. In *Collaborative Intelligence*, Markova and McArthur (2015) offer a way of measuring individual thinking talents that speaks directly to the need for a balanced and conscious grouping of individuals. The authors outline various surveys and practices which aid in firstly, identifying the type of learner each individual is, and then providing useful, concise, and applicable strategies for tapping into the *learned* act of collaboration. What I found particularly powerful is the precision with which learning styles can be pinpointed; something that will allow for the exploration of a variety of skills within a team. Markova and McArthur also provide a very concise framework of the language around collaboration. Their phrase “thinking talents” is something we reinforced during the research project.

Azzam (2009), in her interview with Sir Ken Robinson on the topic of creativity, confirms that creativity is a skill much like collaboration that can be taught and reinforced in the classroom. Furthermore, it is a way of thinking that is not exclusive to “special people,” but rather something that should be accessible and encouraged in everyone. This article was brief, but powerful, because it ties in directly with Markova and McArthur’s (2015) ideas of individual learning styles. Robinson (cited in Azzam, 2009) argues that everyone has “tremendous creative capacities” (para. 5) and it should be the job of the educational systems to promote that capacity instead of aiming for homogeneity. He also affirms that most original thinking comes from collaboration in that none of us works in a vacuum. Collaborative action therefore aids in creativity. This is exactly the area of inquiry which my research was trying to illuminate and I found this article to be a great synthesis of ideas.

In their study, *Peer Influence on Risk Taking, Risk Preference, and Risky Decision Making in Adolescence and Adulthood*, Gardner and Steinberg (2005) concluded that risk-taking and general risky decision-making decreases with age and that participants tended to take more risks when part of a group rather than alone. Based on these findings, it might be deduced that since adolescents are more likely to take risks than adults, they are also more likely to be more creative, since creativity and risk-taking tendencies are linked. Therefore, is the reason creative risk-taking is not taking place in team environments in an educational setting due to the team members’ lack of necessary *collaborative skills* to enact what they are already predisposed to doing naturally, namely, take risks? If creativity and risk taking are related and risk-taking behaviour is not only more prevalent in adolescents, but specifically in groups of adolescents, then creative risk-taking should be more pronounced in groups of adolescents versus individuals and should lead to more creative results. This, however, is not what I was finding in my classroom and my hope was that by building a collaborative, semantic infrastructure this natural tendency towards risk-taking could aid in group innovation.

The research shows that effective collaboration hinges on each team member’s comfort in contributing to the group and the identification of individuated “thinking talents.” These conscious planning parameters fall under the “team” definition of collaboration and not the “group” definition, which often defeats the whole point of collaboration. If the sum of the parts is

not greater than the whole, then true collaboration has not taken place. I aimed to determine whether the language used around collaboration effected collaborative skills on a subconscious level in my research participants.

### **Research Context**

My research participants were my current Grade 11 Visual Arts class comprising 12 boys. I taught these boys in Grades 9 and 10 and chose them because of their commitment to the arts program and their already established skill set in the Visual Arts. I divided the cohort into 4 teams for the purposes of the action research project. Each team represented an architectural firm tasked with redesigning our school campus plan for the future and were required to put together a bid for the project. The boys were involved in the design process and also took part in various stakeholder consultations with our school architect, our Director of Facilities, Leadership Team and Board of Directors. Permission from parents was obtained through permission forms at the very outset of the project. All surveys, field notes and journals were submitted anonymously by the participants to ensure anonymity.

### **The Action**

The change I implemented into my practice was of a relatively subtle, semantic nature. I shifted the language I used to refer to the project, the team members, inter-team interactions, feedback, and conflict. The focus changed from completing a task to solving a problem. I also integrated consultations from relevant stakeholders throughout the process in order to elevate the task itself in the eyes of the participants and allow them to benefit from different perspectives. As a result of the shift from task to goal, I also experienced a natural shift from product to process.

### **Data Collection**

Prior to embarking on the action of the research project, a baseline survey was given to the research participants. This survey was intended to provide a starting point for the action by testing the premise of the action research project. The survey data were mostly qualitative in the form of extended reflections. Stringer (2014) confirms the importance of a qualitative first cycle in which researchers “gather information about participants’ experiences and perspectives and to define the problem or issue in terms that ‘make sense’ in their own terms” (p. 101). The survey

yielded a very rich pool of data which provided a strong foundational benchmark for future findings.

Following the baseline survey, students were given field journals in which they were asked to record daily progress and any other general observations about their interactions with their peers and other stakeholders. I coupled the participant observations with a photographic record of their progress. As Stringer suggests, “Field notes are commonly used for observations, videotapes and photographs may also provide a powerful record of events and activities.” (p.113). By recording their own observations alongside the photographic record, one can glean interesting data correlations.

Students participated in a number of stakeholder consultations. Their experiences of these interactions were gathered in a consultation survey, which aimed at gathering a balance of quantitative and qualitative data centering around their communication skills (language and body language) and the value they gained from the consultations. The boys also reflected on their experiences in their field journals.

The research project was bookended by an exit survey. Stringer (2014) suggests that the value of a survey as a source of information increases near the end of the project as well as “extend[ing] the data collection process to a broader range of participants. It provides the means to check whether information acquired from participants in the first cycles of a process is relevant” (p.118). The exit survey was considered equal in importance to the initial baseline survey as it provided a direct correlation between the boys’ prior experiences with collaborative work and any changes that resulted from the shift in practice. This survey was also very rich in qualitative data.

### **Data Analysis**

The data collected throughout the action research cycle was categorized based on emerging themes. Emphasis was placed on boys’ voices and other qualitative data that emerged from the field journals and the surveys. The data were then distilled into major findings, which were used to inform the findings of the project.

## Discussion of Results

At the onset of this project, participants completed a baseline survey to gauge their experience with, and approach to, group work. This survey also served as a benchmark for my research premise and was used to determine whether my research approach was well founded in student experience. Data yielded from this distilled into two main categories relating to group work: *work division* and *communication*.

The vast majority of participants felt that the work was divided unequally, with the more highly achieving students carrying the group. This led to an unequal division of tasks and students either being overwhelmed with work or disengaged as a result of less work and contribution to the group. Comments from the boys in this regard included:

*“We tried to divide the work equally but my partner did not complete their task.”*  
*“Smartest kids took the most work, did well. Rest of the group was mediocre.”*  
*“I felt as though I carried the work of the project.”*  
*“It soon became a project where me and one other member got overloaded with work.”*

The second major finding that emerged from the baseline survey was the lack of communication experienced by a vast majority of students when engaging in group work. Most students reported a lack of communication amongst the group, which I believed contributed to the unequal/inefficient work division discussed above. For example:

*“I felt as though we did not communicate who would do which section of the work.”*  
*“We did not communicate who would do which part which led me to completing most of it.”*  
*“There was not a lot of communication.”*  
*“It was very hard to communicate how to split the essay.”*

In conclusion, prior to beginning the project, most students reported an inconsistent enjoyment of group work resulting from lack of communication and unequal task division. These findings confirmed my suspicion that there was something lacking in the pedagogy around group work in general, as well as in the nature of the tasks students were being assigned. At the conclusion of

the research project and following the data analysis, three main themes emerged: connectedness, collaborative language and team task.

### **Connectedness**

One of the three major themes that emerged from the data collected throughout the project was the idea of connectedness in relation to both task engagement and collaborative skills. By changing the rhetoric of collaborative work from group to team, students found they were more connected to their teammates and as a result, had a more open line of communication. On a macro level, this led to a willingness to resolve disputes and manage group dynamics. Some students also reported that they were less focused on completing tasks and had a greater sense of working together towards a goal. In short, there was a subtle, but powerful, shift from independence in group work to codependence in team work:

*“I feel as though in a team you are more connected to the people you are working with when in group it is though you are forced to work with these people and are not comfortable with them.”*

*“There is a difference between working in a team and a group because in a team you are more connected to your teammates than you are in a group. Also in a group, everyone is assigned one role but in a team, everyone works together to complete multiple things.”*

### **Collaborative Language**

The main goal of this research project was to determine whether a change in the conceptual framework around group work and its resulting rhetoric would affect the collaborative skills of participants. Two things became clear in the findings. The first was that participants were more generally aware of the language they were using towards their peers. This most likely stemmed from the introductory session we completed on effective collaborative language and was a finding I expected to see at least to some extent. The boys noted:

*“At times it was difficult to control my language towards my team members because we’ve developed a habit of chirping each other ... I usually realized and apologized. This led to a more inclusive and calm environment where we could all share our ideas.”*

*“I used my words effectively and wasn’t negative, allowing my group to work well.”*

The second, and in my mind, more interesting data revolved around the boys' use of personal pronouns in their reflections throughout the project. On a micro level, the language they used in their reflections had a slight shift from the use of singular personal pronouns (I, me, myself) to plural personal pronouns (we, our). I found this to be an indication of a subtle, but essential shift in thinking, which fundamentally lead to a shift in approach, a shift in language and a shift in engagement. For example:

*"I felt as though I carried the work of the project."*

*versus*

*"We collaborated well. We came up with a couple of ideas and then dissected them."*

### **Team Task**

Although the research project set out as a study of the semantic shift around collaborative work, the data showed that the nature of the task itself was fundamental to providing the ecosystem where effective collaboration could thrive. I found that it was simply not enough to assign a task and then instruct the participants in effective collaborative strategies; the task itself had to be mindfully created to allow participants to exercise their newfound linguistic awareness. Based on the findings throughout this project, I believe there are three essential factors to designing such a task.

1. The task has to be open ended and allow for student input, creativity and team cohesion. The more assigned and closed a task is, the more likely the participants are to revert to task division and ultimately independent completion of the said tasks.

*"[I felt differently about this project] because other collaborative projects have not had a creative aspect like we have in art. Usually we have a clear cut objective we must complete, for this project we had freedom to build what we wanted to build where we wanted to build it."*

*I felt this project was different due to how open the project was (meaning anything could be done). This meant that the project was less about assigning tasks as it was finding*

2. The participants have to be given supervised, communal time during class in order to complete the task. For this particular project, students were not allowed to work on the project independently or outside of class time. This allowed the students to shift to a codependent way of thinking where they were forced to collaborate on *all* aspects of the project. Consensus was required for the project to move forward and there was no opportunity for one person to carry the work. Because of this framework, participants naturally gravitated to more effective language, positive interactions with their peers, and a higher engagement level. In other words, their collaborative skills improved.

*“The project was more collaborative than others. Usually each person in the team/group is assigned a role and there is no real collaboration. Instead on this project, the team worked on a single task together.”*

3. Collaborative projects are more effective when designed around a real-world application or problem. By allowing the students to feel like their ideas, voices, and input could contribute to a solution of a real problem I noted an increased and dramatic change in engagement levels. Where possible, expert consultations or visiting teachers are also a great way to mimic a real-world collaborative environment. By being aware of other stakeholders, students are more open to criticism and a cross pollination of ideas and as a result they feel more bonded and tied to their team. This collective engagement is the foundation of collaboration.

*“I knew this project could have a potentially huge impact with the school and so I put more thought into it than previous group projects”*

*“The project was more collaborative than others. Usually each person in the team/group is assigned a role and there is no real collaboration. Instead on this project, the team worked on a single task together.”*

### **Conclusion and Implications for Future Practice**

The findings of this action research project indicate that by shifting the language of collaborative work from “group” to “team,” students experienced an increased feeling of connectedness, as well as a greater awareness of the collaborative language they used within their team. An

additional finding which resulted from the project and which was not sought after within the parameters of the research question was the importance of designing a team task which lent itself to collaboration. It became clear that simply taking a regular, individual task and asking students to complete it as a group is actually counter-productive.

These findings will have a direct effect on how I structure and teach collaborative work in my classroom. I intend creating a checklist for optimal collaborative unit design and using that checklist to design and redesign future tasks. I think an interesting opportunity for further research would be to explore the “real-world” angle of team task design. At the end of this project I was curious as to whether framing tasks around a real-world problem, where students had a greater sense of accountability to the community, would enhance collaborative skill building.

#### **Reflection Statement**

At the onset of this action research project I was apprehensive about being able to meet all the formal deadlines and at the same time deliver a quality unit for my students that allowed me time to reflect and analyze. As the project rolled out, I was quickly involved in all its aspects and grew to enjoy the extended reading, the analysis, and the process. I found that it was structured in a way that informed my action in a positive way. I was really impressed with the value one can gain from shifting one’s teaching practice even in such a subtle way. The project itself was something I looked forward to in my week and I think I can say the same for my students.

What I found exciting was the fact that I had no idea how the project was going to go. I am new to action research and our team task was also new to me. I enjoyed the surprise of seeing my students come up with solutions autonomously and taking the formal “teaching” out of my hands and into theirs. I was also pleasantly surprised by the care and support we received from our administration, who were interested in what the students were doing. This in turn made my participants more ambitious in their work. It was an overall great experience for me and one I plan to continue in my teaching practice.

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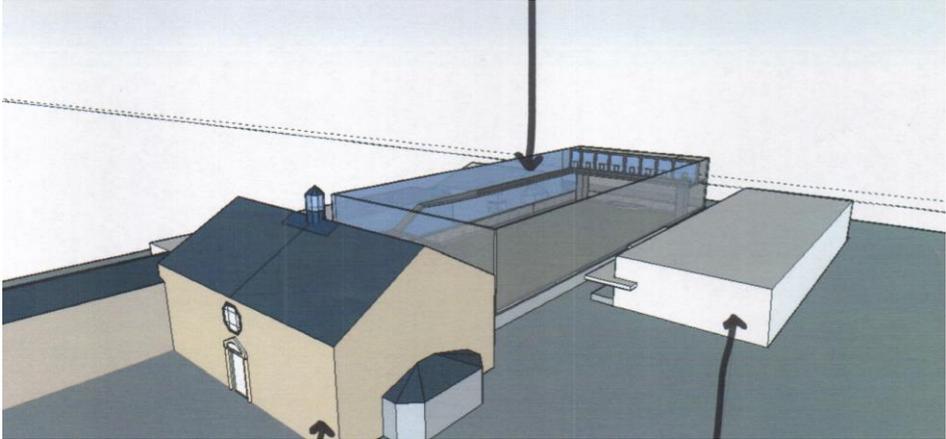
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**Appendix**



Team 1: Final design of new school entrance rendered in Google SketchUP



Team 2: Final design of enclosed formal garden with offices rendered in Google Sketch UP



Team 3: Final design of new school underground parking garage rendered in Google Sketch UP



Team 4: Final design of enclosed formal garden with offices rendered in Google SketchUP



IBSC participants presenting their ideas to the Leadership Team



Members of Team 3 consulting with our Facilities Director



Members of Team 2 consulting with our Facilities Director and our Head of Arts



Students working on a scale model of their design