

Rethinking the Group Project: Presentation Relays

Justin Ramsdell, Psychology

In my PSYC 441 (Criminal Behavior) course, I assign group presentations. Halfway through the semester, I give everyone the curious case of “Mr. B.” The students get all of Mr. B’s background information as well as a copy of the psychological evaluation I wrote for the court. Then, each group has to present how their assigned theory explains Mr. B’s criminal behavior. The trick here is that you cannot fully answer the question of how narcissism played a role without fully considering all of the other factors and ruling out their influence. So...something that seems relatively easy is actually quite complicated and a lot of work. However, it brings all aspects of the course together, and since everyone is aware of the background information, we are all starting on the same page.

As is usually the case with any presentation I assign, I allow the students to use PowerPoint but limit their use of words to 10 words per slide for two reasons. First, PowerPoint is a visual tool, and we can all read. If I wanted to read, I would have asked for a paper instead. Second, I want to be sure the students really understand the information they are presenting and not reading something they have copied from another source without sufficient understanding. I want to be sure they have chewed it and digested it before presenting.

After the first time I tried this particular assignment, I realized that the students were dividing up the tasks of the presentation in a “you do this and talk about it, and I’ll do that and talk about it” kind of way. The greater point of them chewing and digesting the information was lost.

So I instituted a little thing I call the “presentation relay.” In the “presentation relay” format, the group creates a presentation with the same limitations as before. However, when they present to the class, I ask them to line up behind the podium in a random order. They are allowed to bring notes, but only hand-written notes not shared amongst the group. Whomever I ask to stand first in line begins the presentation. At random intervals during the 20-minute presentation, I honk a bicycle horn. Once I do, the next person in line has to step forward and pick up the presentation where the other person left off. During the course of the presentation, I cycle (pun intended) through the group twice. To be sure, this format greatly increases anxiety. However, it is the only way I have found reliably **ensures every student understands every part of the presentation and has fully chewed and digested the information**. There is some complaining, but afterward, the vast majority of students describe the process as having been fun.



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