

## **Speed Dating: a Process of Forming Undergraduate Student Groups**

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*Abstract: First year undergraduate students working on semester-long group assessments may lack the skills and knowledge to make sound choices in selecting other group members. This paper is an instructor's guide to using speed-dating techniques in a classroom environment to create student groups. The paper also outlines suggestions for lecturers on how to support their students in the experience, based on theoretical constructs around the psychology of choice and work teams.*

### **Introduction**

University lecturers and curriculum developers use student teams for several reasons. Completing assessments in teams can enhance students' communication and teamwork skills while developing knowledge of the academic content. Teams also mimic applied environments such as the workplace (Bacon, Stewart, & Silver, 1999).

Other benefits to learning in groups arise out of positive collaborative experiences in groups enhancing the learning experience while honing communication and teamwork skills which are useful in an academic, professional and social environments (Chapman, Meuter, Toy, & Wright, 2006; Gradwohl & Young, 2003). Research has also shown that students felt they learn more when their group environment is positive (Bacon et al., 1999).

However, group assessments are not without risk; a negative experience can not only harm students' marks but can lead to attrition, academic misconduct, unsuccessful completion of the assessment and frustration (Gradwohl & Young, 2003; Oakley, Felder, Brent, & Elhajj, 2004). Moreover, valuable lessons and self-reflection that may arise out of a negative team experience is usually lost, as students tend to rate the entire learning experience so poorly that they tend not to take content or skills learning away from it. (Bacon et al., 1999).

This is particularly true for first year undergraduate students who may not be familiar with a university or work environment. Group assessments can be the most challenging for students when the assessments are long-term and complex, such as a semester long project or simulation (Bacon et al., 1999; Gradwohl & Young, 2003).

One hurdle students and lecturers face when working with group assessments is the mechanics of forming the group. Generally, group forming falls into three categories: lecturer formed groups, random selection and student formed groups.

This paper suggests that the non-romantic dating method "speed dating" may be a workable model for forming student groups for several reasons. First, it helps students develop a variety of "soft" skills. Second, it gives the students a degree of autonomy within a restricted set, so that students feel more committed to the groups they have formed. Finally,

this process acts as an “icebreaker” for the students at the start of semester and can create a positive classroom environment.

Using the process of speed dating with a set of lecturer-driven coaching tools creates a hybrid model of selection, delivering the benefits of both lecturer and student formed groups.

### **Why Don't Students Choose Well?**

When lecturers are working with student groups it is often recommended they eschew allowing the students to choose their group members (Bacon et al., 1999; Gradwohl & Young, 2003). Some research has supported lecturer-formed groups on the basis that left to their own devices students may form groups which will not enhance the learning environment. For example, academically strong students are likely to stick together as they tend to form their groups quickly, especially if they can identify other strong students in the class. (Oakley et al., 2004). People who know each other tend to work together again and again—which may enhance productivity, but not the learning experience (Bacon et al., 1999).

Second, students may select unwisely. Some research has shown that there were less instances of interpersonal issues between group members when students did not choose their own groups (Oakley et al., 2004).

Some lecturers employ a “randomisation” method, where they form groups by a random or chance system, such as first letter of surname. Although this method seems fair, as each student has an equal opportunity to end up in a group with other students, it often leads to unbalanced teams and has been linked to lower productivity and unsatisfactory experiences (Chapman et al., 2006)

Unaware of the benefits of lecturer-formed groups, students tend to complain about the lack of choice, regardless of the methodology used. Lecturers are advised to counter their groans by pointing out that in the workplace students don't get a choice about who to work with, therefore lecturer-formed groups are more closely aligned with the workplace (Chapman et al., 2006; Oakley et al., 2004).

The overall reasoning behind lecturer-formed groups is simply that the method is more effective and efficient than the students self-selecting. By delving into the psychology behind decision-making and choice one can identify the reasons for students, particularly those new to university, may not make good choices when selecting other members for themselves.

Consider the scenario of a student in a first year marketing unit, which may have up to 40 people enrolled in the class. Imagine how daunting the experience would be for a student who is not familiar with the others in the class. How do they approach others to be in a group? If the student is socially awkward or concerned about rejection, the process becomes even more daunting.

Individuals given too wide a range of choices often defer the decision or allow others to make it for them. This can lead to significant dissatisfaction with the choice down the line (Griffin, Liu, & Khan, 2005). When it comes to forming student groups, not making a choice is probably the worst, and most disempowering, result. And, from a practical point of view, the lecturer usually will round up the “unchosen” into a group of their own (Chapman et al., 2006).

There can be positive skill-building in empowering students to make informed decisions about their groups. An interview/group selection process that is abbreviated and mirrors industry can provide a training ground for future professional encounters. A process where students network in a systemic and non-threatening way also aids with the cohesiveness of entire class as an icebreaker. Such a process would also allow students to

become more familiar with social networking and build communication skills. Self-selection may also enhance the student's own view of the experience. Research has also shown that students felt their best group outcomes were groups where they had a degree of choice about selecting the members (Bacon et al., 1999).

However, how could a student know who to pick based on a limited amount of information gleaned from a brief encounter in class? Lecturer formed groups can often take greater issues into account, such as partnering academically weak students with strong ones or domestic students with international students (Oakley et al., 2004). Armed without the information needed to form groups which have the greatest chance of succeeding, student may make judgements based on other criteria unrelated to the potential productivity of the group.

### **Gleaning Information Through Thin Slice Judgements**

People make judgements and decisions about others through brief encounters on a constant basis, often without even speaking; simply through appearance or non-verbal communications. These kind of judgements, where a person develops an attitude or opinion about another after an encounter of a few minutes is called a "thin slice judgement" (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1992; Houser, Horan, & Furler, 2007).

Thin slice judgements make up part of everyone's everyday existence. However, in professional life ability to make accurate judgements of this nature is a great advantage. For example, networking opportunities in professional life are rampant, especially for graduates offered a variety of pathways to begin their careers. The ability to know oneself and be able to predict a good fit with others is not innate, and developing such a skill requires practice.

Networking and interviewing others in the class is an excellent opportunity to hone skills regarding developing these judgements, networking and interviewing.

Hence, the issue is not whether the student can make the best choice. In a room full of people, there are a variety of combinations that can work well. However, the goal should be to find a good fit. Perhaps the students themselves, properly assisted, have the best chance of determining with whom they would work best.

### **The Elements of a Productive Work Team**

In order to assist the student in deciding who should be in their group, they should have an idea about what makes a productive work team. Succinctly put, a productive team includes aspects of diversity and sameness.

Long-term collaborative assessments can be complex and usually call for a variety of skill sets. For example, business projects may have aspects of marketing, accounting, management and information systems. This is especially true in units that have an interdisciplinary student body. Part of the collaborative experience is learning from others in the group, so students should be encouraged to seek group members with strengths where their own skills are weak. Many complex projects require a diversity of skills sets (Bacon et al., 1999). Encouraging this type of collaboration may also enhance peer-to-peer mentoring in these areas.

The lecturer can create a scenario where gender, ethnic and demographic diversity can be a plus. Generally, students will seek homogeneity in groups. Their inclination is to seek out others from their own discipline who they may know from other classes. School leavers and mature-aged students may not see themselves mixing socially, and domestic students

may feel more comfortable excluding international or students with English as a second language from their group (Bacon et al., 1999; Chapman et al., 2006; Oakley et al., 2004). This result is not advantageous to the learning experiences of the domestic or international students, school leavers or mature age students.

The design of the assessment is key in encouraging students to seek diversity. For example, in a class made up predominantly of business students, assessments can be designed which incorporate skills which value the contribution of other disciplines such as communication, science, and information technology. Likewise, assignments favouring international comparisons will create an environment where international students' life experience becomes valuable to all members of the team.

Research into productive work teams indicates that diversity is important on another level—personality. People with extroverted personalities can be beneficial to groups as a whole. They tend to provide direction, enthusiasm and drive for the rest of the group. However, groups with more than one extrovert can spiral into a political battleground (Barrick, Stewart, Neubert, & Mount, 1998). Students should be encouraged to form groups diverse in personality as well as skill, discipline, ethnicity and gender as it relates to the particular environment and assessment (Bacon et al., 1999; Gradwohl & Young, 2003).

Diversity, however, does not always work in one particular area: conscientiousness. How dedicated each team member is to a given result is instrumental and diversity within a close range does not seem to generate ill effects. However, if there is wide diversity in goals setting within the group, especially if even just one member has significantly lower expectations in work product than the rest of the group, the disharmony caused by the difference can interfere with productivity.

Varying levels of academic dedication can cause disharmony as the more conscientious members of the group re-do the others' work. The inequality and differing expectations lead to accusations of cruising and loafing. This breeds more resentment than if someone is conscientious but lacks the requisite ability to perform at the same level as the other members (Barrick et al., 1998).

Another practical consideration is geography and timing (Oakley et al., 2004). It is reasonable to expect students to meet outside of class to work on the assignment.

New universities in particular may attract a mix of school leavers and mature aged students from a variety of geographical areas. Students have demands outside of class such as family, work, sporting and caring responsibilities. Expectations around group meeting attendance and contributions should be spelled out in advance with prospective group members (Gradwohl & Young, 2003), rather than groups forming and discovering, after the fact, that one or two members cannot synchronise their schedule with the others to fairly contribute in meetings.

In summary, students with an understanding of the assessment, the advantage of diversity and the harmony of homogeneity will be primed to make better choices when seeking classmates to form a student group. The lecturer, after going through the assessment and the elements of a productive work team, still needs to coach the students on one more crucial thing: an equitable process by which they can find out what they need to in order to make the best possible choice.

### **Speed dating in an academic environment**

Rabbi Yaacov Deyo of Los Angeles invented the speed dating concept as a way of increasing the odds of young Jewish people meeting potential marriage prospects in a community (Dominus, 2001). In the Jewish community, dating and marrying within the faith

is of paramount importance. Jewish “singles” cocktail parties were not necessarily successful at making potential mates meet, as the lack of structure of the function would present those at the party with the same issues that first year students seeking members of students groups would face: too daunting an experience with too much choice.

The goal with speed dating is to exponentially increase the probability of finding one or more dating prospects through a brief structured interview process, a kind of round-robin interview (Aish.com, 2008). Generally speed dating sessions are held in restaurants or venues where mingling is encouraged. A series of tables for two are set up with one gender seated at the same table the whole evening. For example, women remain seated for the whole session. In this case, men will sit select a table and commence a brief chat (or interview). The timed interviews five to 10 minutes. Once the time is up the men must move to the next table. Eventually every man and every woman has had a chance for a short discussion. Both parties are equipped with cards where they can rate each prospect as someone with whom they would like further contact, such as a phone call or a date. If both parties rate each other as worthy of pursuing further contact, they receive each other’s contact details. If one or both parties are not interest in further contact, no contact is initiated (Dominus, 2001).

Research into the effectiveness of speed dating as a way of meeting a compatible mate has shown that the process yields better results than no process at all, or random meetings (Houser et al., 2007). Much of the research on speed dating focuses on what each gender seeks in the other. For example, speed-dating research has consistently shown that men focus on age, attractiveness and waist-hip ratio when making their decisions. Women tend to evaluate looks, height and on other issues, such as personality, career, and social background. Women seem to come out slightly higher in the ability to select a compatible mate, but they also tend to be slightly choosier (Houser et al., 2007; Wilson, Cousins, & Fink, 2006).

The fact that men and women tend to look for different things does not mean that either of them are looking for the right things for a best fit. Even with the structure of speed dating, participants tend to ask questions which may not lead to compatibility down the track. They also may not present themselves well during the interview. If one was engaging in the process in the genuine search for long-term romantic compatibility, the Rabbi indicates, then it is important to understand the dynamics of what will make a successful marriage and ask questions which will bring out pertinent information toward that end (Aish.com, 2008). Speed daters may also face the same dilemma as students: they may not be aware of the elements of a good fit, and may need guidance on the kind of information they are looking for.

### **An analysis of the speed dating process in selecting student group members**

There is little evidence that speed-dating techniques are used in an academic environment. There is a documented instance where the technique was used in the context of a social work class; but it was used to illustrate a theoretical point (Maidment & Crisp, 2007). This paper suggests that the technique can be used as a systemic way to assist students in forming groups for long-term projects. The benefits of this approach are the following:

#### **The speed dating process is equitable**

By managing a process where most students get the opportunity to interview most other students for a place in their group, theoretically the selection process is equitable and fair.

**The speed dating process provides a systemic way to broker social networks**

The activity-based nature of speed dating eliminates the daunting nature of approaching other students during the break or outside of class to discuss forming groups. It has the added benefit of being an icebreaker for the class, and giving all student an opportunity to mingle with each other.

**The Speed Dating Process Builds Interviewing and Networking Skills**

With coaching and guidance from the lecturing staff, students are guided on interviewing others and briefed on questions they are likely to be asked. This gives them some time to prepare themselves and reinforces that there are no right and wrong answers; the purpose of the interview is to find a good fit with the others in the class.

Although as a process speed dating can provide a framework to empower students to make good choices, the process itself does not address some key issues.

Specifically, the issues of diversity and homogeneity remain unaddressed. Therefore it is essential that the lecturer provide guidance and a framework regarding assessment requirements and the kinds of questions to ask others. Figure 1 provides a systematic guide to a process, including comments from a lecturer who has trialed this process in a first year undergraduate unit in Bunbury, Western Australia:

Step	Activity	Description	Comments
1	Lecture	<b>Address the Assessment:</b> Outline the length of the project and the requirements, including the method of assessment and the amount of research required. Ideally, various sample scenarios of successful completion of the assessment should be shared. Also, address the ways in which the assessment values diverse skills, knowledge and life experience.	<i>The lecturer should emphasize the advantages of skill and cultural diversity in the group as it relates to the assessment</i>
2	Activity	<i>Note: This activity is optional but works well with a geographically diverse group.</i> <b>Segregate the class geographically:</b> Ask everyone to stand up and seat students together who live near each other. This is especially handy for students who have a long commute to the university and may seek to carpool to class or meet off campus outside of class times.	<i>Informal feedback from high achieving groups indicated this exercise is one of the most valuable of the process</i>
3	Lecture	<b>Interview coaching:</b> Deliver a targeted lecture on interviewing, plus a sample series of questions that may deliver a “best fit” group. <i>Look for similarities:</i> When are you available to meet outside class? What level of mark are you seeking on this project? Are you the kind of person who works through the semester steadily or seeks to complete everything right before the assessment is due? <i>Look for differences:</i> Which skills relating to the assessment can you bring to the team? Are you comfortable leading or have you led a group team like this before? What is your course/discipline/major? Are you an international student or someone who has lived overseas?	<i>The lecturer should illustrate that this process is about trying to find the best fit (skills &amp; ethnically diverse; homogeneous in goal &amp; scheduling), not about being popular. Working on interview skills is helpful, as well as role playing and giving students sample questions.</i>

4	Activity	<b>Speed Dating:</b> Pair the student up within their geographically desirable group (all groups should have equal members which may mean amalgamating smaller “neighbourhoods” into a larger group). This can be done standing up if the room does not have the table and chairs available. Have half the students stand still and the other half circulate amongst the smaller group only. Give them 3-5 minutes interview time per person. Students should keep a piece of paper noting who they think is their “best fit”. They should find a few who are their best fit.	<i>The initial interviews should be conducted within geographically homogeneous groups in the first instance. Student can cast their net wider if they need to.</i>
5	Activity	<b>Pairing:</b> This can be done by the lecturer, but is time consuming and may deprive students of the opportunity to broker their own arrangements. If the lecturer does this, then they form the groups based on the students’ ratings. The student themselves however, can take a 10 minute to commence forming groups. Initially in pairs or in groups of three. These “incomplete groups” can search for additional members, assuming the assessment requires a larger group.	<i>This aspect of the process is more informal. As groups form, some people will naturally be left out. Give the students less time so they don’t dawdle during this step, as it can take forever otherwise.</i>
6	Activity	<b>Completing the group:</b> Incomplete groups then use the same techniques to search for additional incomplete groups with whom to partner. Individuals who have not yet found a group interview incomplete groups. At this stage, the incomplete group doesn’t make the selection about whom to select; the person who has not yet found a group gets the choice in selecting a group which suits them. Individuals must select a group. Individuals who are not in groups because they were not in class that day are interviewed by the lecturer and placed with an appropriate group.	<i>It is important to give those who have not been selected for a group a feeling that they have more power than those who didn’t select them in this instance or they may feel left out.</i>
7	Activity	<b>Group finalisation:</b> Groups then sit down and negotiate a contract with some of the following details: Time/place of group meetings Division of labour/group roles Goals (High mark or passing mark) Scheduling Group contract details must be specific, and every contract is to be vetted by the lecturer. Students are then welcomed, if they find their group is not diverse enough or if they haven’t made the best choice, to circulate amongst other groups and find a better fit based on the above.	<i>Have the students see the contract as a pre-nuptial agreement, to be enforced by the lecturer if a group member doesn’t live up to it. Moderate the contracts so they are detailed, not too vague and not too harsh.</i>
8	Activity	<b>Group interview:</b> The lecturer reviews the contract and interviews the group, reserving the right to make changes based on their knowledge and input.	<i>Group contracts can be used as guiding documents by the lecturer to place students who enrol late or do not have a group.</i>

**Table 1: A systematic guide**

The eight step process may take several weeks to complete, or it may make up the content of an entire class meeting. As attendance in the first few weeks of semester can be volatile, so ideally this process can take place over several weeks to allow for those not present in one class session to take part or for those who are withdrawing from the class to inform their group.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to propose an approach to forming student groups which can both empower the student to determine their own work team while ensuring that they are using a system and have the knowledge to make wise, equitable choices.

Generally, people are inclined to form social and work teams with others they perceive to be like them. However, homogeneity of this kind may not yield the best result of the assessment requires a diverse skill and knowledge set. Moreover, the process of education is generally accepted to one where students broaden their horizons, rather than maintain their original points of view.

By carefully constructing assessments to value diversity, lecturers can more closely mirror a professional environment while encouraging students to seek diversity through the reward of successful completion of the assessment. By encouraging students to reflect on what they have to offer a group and to seek out others who offer “best fit” for this assignment, lecturers are equipping students with valuable skills for their professional and personal lives. By using the “round robin” interview techniques of speed dating lecturers are creating an equitable opportunity for all students to participate in the group forming process—regardless of personality type (extraverted or introverted) or previous alliances within the student group.

Finally, by empowering students to make their own *informed* decisions about the members of their group, they are developing skills that will serve them well in the future, and reap the rewards, or consequences, of what they have sown.

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