

Group learning facilitation: a group-centric study conducted at the library Open University of Sri Lanka with a female learner perspective

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Abstract

In an Open learning environment group learning is encouraged by the faculty as the student have minimum number of face to face sessions with the academic staff. It is not a standard practice accommodating group learners inside the reading rooms and the students have a restricted attitude towards the library. However there were continuous requests especially from female students to provide group learning facilities within the library. Hence there was a necessity to investigate the potential of the library for the purpose and to study group dynamics of students. Population considered was the group learners visited the library during 2012. Research method used was survey method and instrument used was semi-structured interview. Student group was the unit of analysis. Multivariate analysis reveals, in majority, groups mostly have unisex composition and female groups highly preferred library due to the obstacles they face when grouping outside the library. Specific learning tasks carried out by the groups within the library and advantages derived by students (analysed by gender and by faculty) were studied. Facilities expected by the learners (especially by female students) other than the existing facilities provided by the library were also examined. It was revealed that service attitudes of frontline library staff towards group behaviour are not encouraging. The study recommends that the library has to upgrade some physical facilities, resources, rules, regulations and standards to accommodate group learners and emphasizes the need to train the library staff to adjust with the modern learning behaviour.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The ODL learning system is highly based upon resource-based learning (RBL) model. In RBL the students have to use materials in multi-media such as recommended texts, workbooks and other recommended digital media in completing their study tasks. Access to these materials is normally resourced by the institutional library through onsite service and online service delivery. The ODL targets individual learner in distance mode though for some learning activities group work is encouraged. Interaction and discussions and productive dialogue characteristics of good learning according to the social learning theories (Bandura, 1971; Brook, 2006; Paulus, 2005). The ODL learners as an independent learner do not visit the teaching institution very often. They are provided with study materials in multimedia including printed and web based learning system access. Unlike in the traditional university setup, the ODL learners are self learners in the distance mode with less teacher-student interaction. However it is a longstanding practice at the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) that the students have been forming into small groups in performing study tasks. Most of the students visit the university for pre-determined purposes such as; to complete learning tasks assigned, to submit learning task, to sit for examinations, for course/module registration and related purposes. It was observed that most of the students getting themselves accommodated into groups when completing learning tasks before deadlines

given by the faculty. It is visible everywhere in the campus that the students get together and work in locations like summer houses, faculty corridors, canteens, informal shelters, loans, steps etc. The present study concentrates on group learning behaviour of students with a female bias, when they visit the university to complete their learning tasks.

2.0 PREVIOUS RESEARCH RELEVANT TO THE STUDY.

Most of the research conducted on group learning is of group dynamics or ideal learning model in organizations for better productivity. Few studies selected to establish the present research on firm base. David Casey, Paul Roberts and Graeme Salaman (1992) discusses about group facilitation and its impact over the group dynamics for better output in group learning. There are many studies prove that when learning in groups learning efficiency goes up (Brooks,2006; Lippincott, 2006; Dennon, 2007 etc.).The objective of Ealine Lizeeo's study is to explore factors that influence the quality of group learning (accessed in April, 2013) group dynamics and effectiveness models. Kurt Lewin's (1890-1947) work had a profound impact on social psychology and, more particularly for our purposes here, on our appreciation of experiential learning, group dynamics and action research. It is not an exaggeration to say that Kurt Lewin had a profound impact on a generation of researchers and thinkers concerned with group dynamics (Smith, 2001). Social learning theories (Bandura, 1971; Brook, 2006; Paulus, 2005) too discusses about effective and productive learning when perform the tasks in groups.

3.0 BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

However it is a longstanding practice at the Open University (OUSL) that the students have been forming into small groups in performing study tasks. It is visible everywhere in the campus that the students get together and work gathered at informal locations elsewhere in the campus. According to their own accounts, they have a freedom and enjoyable learning sessions when they learn in groups. Their group dynamics are controlled by the nature of the members and session objectives of the each group. Nevertheless they confront some issues when they learn in open areas that affect the group learning outcomes negatively i.e. the university provides Wi Fi access confined to a few areas and the students do not have access to the internet while learning in informal groups, unless they placed themselves closer to internet active areas or enter into a computer laboratory or the library b) the ODL learning system is highly based upon resource-based learning (RBL) model. In RBL the students have to use online learning and other materials like audio-visual materials recommended for study units, recommended texts and workbooks and other digital media that are available in the library in completing their study tasks c) As communicated in a preliminary survey conducted by the library, the groups are constantly disturbed by fellow students outside the groups formed and unexpected joining of ad-hoc learners to regular groups, disturbs consistent learning pattern and the learning speed of the group d)The climatic conditions also have unfavourable effect on groups when they learn in open spaces.

The present study hopes to explore the reasons for choosing locations outside the library and why they request the library to provide group learning spaces. It is also need to investigate if the library provides suitable group learning environment whether they can accomplish their learning based expectations (Webster, 2010). Objectives of the study are to explore the potential of the library as a learning space in facilitating a group learning environment, to investigate the barriers encountered by students, especially by the female students when learning in groups outside the library and to explore the benefits derived by the female group learners when learning within the library

4.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology adopted was survey method and the 'unit of analysis' was the study groups formed in unisex..

4.1 Research Approach and Design

The research approach selected for the study is inductive through a course of Action Research as the study necessitated to conduct in an actual environment to explore actual group learning patterns, perceptions, attitudes etc. of the distance learners and associated library staff.

The research design adopted was in two stages;

Stage 01 :

A preliminary survey had been carried out to find out the status of group learning environment outside the library and to learn what kind of facilitation the group learners expect from the library. When investigating this environment special attention was paid to the female group learners.

According to the preliminary survey (focus group discussions) conducted the students are of view that, if the library provides the facility it will be the best location for group learning . The environmental factors they prefer in the library are; availability of internet access both wired and wi-fi for their laptops, access to multimedia room, collection of course materials and question paper archive, availability of recommended materials and the learning environment with less disturbances from their peers. The groups communicated that they prefer the library more if it provides; spaces for group learning, reading room rules relaxed, allow other reading materials to be brought into the library, separate silent learning area, desktop computers with internet access closer to study groups area, coffee machine/milk outlet etc.

Stage 02:

Upon the facts gathered through the preliminary survey it was decided to make following adjustments to the existing arrangements in the library to accommodate study groups in a suitable learning environment. Three adjustments were made for the purpose.

a) Adjustments made to the library policy:

- Reading room rules were relaxed as follows;
 - discussions allowed in low voice
 - hand phones allowed in silent mode
 - extra stationery allowed
 - Phone/ipad/ laptop charging allowed
- Library rules were relaxed to bring in certain materials such as course materials, photocopied text etc. to the library after showing /getting necessary endorsement from the library staff.

b) Reading space arrangement

- 'silent spaces' were shifted to the upstairs of the library
- Separate areas were reserved for the serious learners
- Ground floor was assigned for the group learners
- Accommodated more discussion tables and comfortable seating arrangements
- Rehearsing the presentations were allowed after reserving the facility

c) Staff training

Front line staff was trained by holding in house workshops;

- to make them aware about constructiveness and necessity of encouraging group learning in an ODL environment
- to introduce a liberal attitudinal shift that is necessary to encourage group learning environment
- to inculcate group learning facilitation skills

4.2 Population

Population considered for the present study, was the group learners visited the library within from March –June 2012. Among the total visits (13681) only student visits (11976) were considered as the research cohort and only the students of level III to V/VI were considered for the study. Student numbers visited the library in groups during the period was approximately 6810.

4.3 Sample selection criteria

Data was collected from March to June 2012 through Monday to Friday and during the peak time of usage (10.00 am to 2.00 pm). Groups that were already interviewed were avoided when selecting for the interviews even if the new members had joined the groups newly. Students clustered in 03 member groups and above are treated as a group. Data were collected through 23 working days except the weekends and during the peak time of usage (10.00 am to 2.00 pm). Some days where few users attended the library were avoided for data collection. Groups revisited were avoided from the sample count. Distribution of groups consulted is given in Table 1.0.

Table 1.0 : Group Consultation – faculty wise distribution

No. of Students in a group consulted	Total No. of Groups	Composition of groups		Total No. of students in groups	No. of Groups Faculty Wise			
		M	F		Eng. Tech.	Nat. Sci.	Hum. Soc. Sci.	Edu.
3	18	6	12	54	12	5	1	-
4	22	10	12	88	11	9	2	-
5	20	9	11	100	10	9	1	-
6	19	14	5	114	6	12	1	-
7	12	4	8	84	4	7	1	-
8	10	7	3	80	3	6	1	-
9	8	8	0	72	3	3	2	-
10	9	9	0	90	3	6	-	-
11	0	0	0	0	-	-	-	-
12	2	2	0	24	-	2	-	-
Total	120			706	53	58	9	0

4.4 Data collection methodology

Research tool used to gather data on study groups is Interview method and a semi-structured interview schedule was used to gather data.

4.5 Structure of the Interview schedule

Questions that will be asked to obtain answers to achieve the Specific Objectives(SO) are as follows:

SO 1 – Q1 = What are the reasons for studying in groups? (Reasons given to check mark)

SO 2 – Q 2 = What inspired them mostly? (reasons given to check mark)

Q 3 = What advantages they derive when learning in groups?(scale given to select)

SO 3 – Q 4 = What level of efficiency is gained in performing study tasks in groups? (concepts given to select)

Q 5 = Attitude towards library services (aspects questioned).

5.0 ANALYSIS OF THE CONCEPTS STUDIED

The data collected on the concepts of the research was analysed according to the analytical frame given in Table 2.0.

Table : 2.0 Analytical frame

No.	Concept analyzed	Expected Reasoning
1.	Reasons for studying in groups	To understand what inspired them to be in groups in the library
2.	Expected facilities by the students when group learning in the library	To realize what the students actually need and what the library had supplied at present
3.	Advantages derived by the students in accomplishing the study tasks	To understand the level of efficiency derived by the students by using the grouping spaces
4.	Level of achievements according to the student's perception	To measure the efficiency level attained in group learning
5	Attitude towards support received from the library staff when learning in groups	To foster a supportive, comfortable learning culture within the library

Unit of Analysis is the 'study group' formed in unisex. The groups who had mixture of members in gender were avoided. As the group is the unit of analysis group views were considered for the study.

5.1 REASONS FOR LEARNING IN GROUPS

According to responses received for the questions asked students communicated following facts as the reasons to learn in groups in the library.

Table 3.0 : Reasons to learn in groups

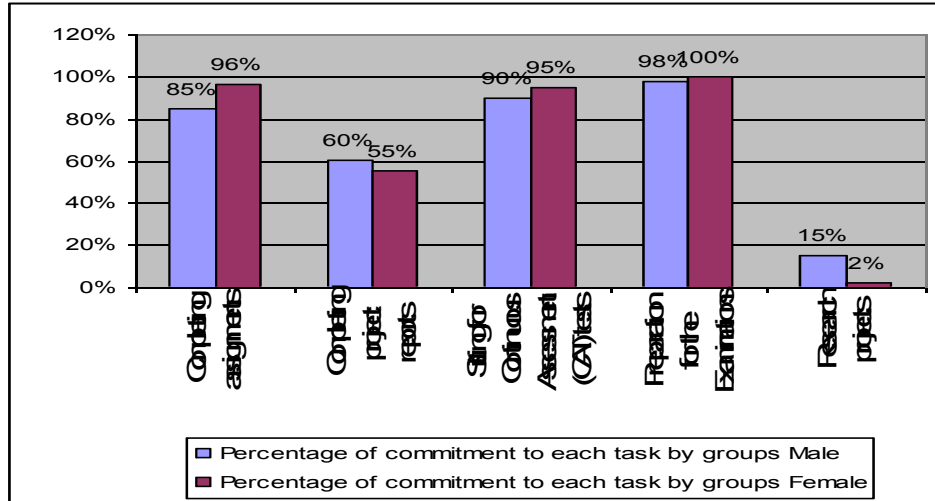
	Reasons	n/Tot % (Male groups)	n/Tot % (Female groups)
1	Favourable learning environment in the library	79%	83%
2	Level of Freedom allowed within the library for discussions and free formations	55%	45%
3	Material availability including A/V based and online study materials	79%	83%
4	Internet & Wi-Fi access	100%	100%
5	Comfortable accommodation of groups	39%	65%
6	Less disturbed by peer students	85%	68%

Responses received for the reasons in the above table communicated by both male and female groups are most similar except regarding the reasons no. 5 & 6. Females groups preferred (65%) to accommodate themselves comfortably inside the library while male students had taken the comfortability as a less important reason. It was also seen that male students have more disturbances from peers when learning outside the library. Second reason; free formation within the library was averagely responded as the decent conduct and decorum within the library are still observed though some rules were relaxed.

5.2 Learning tasks carried out by the students

Reasons for learning in groups can also be further analysed upon the responses received for the study tasks they preferred to perform in groups. Table 4.0 indicates the responses in percentages by gender.

Fig: 1.0 : Study tasks performed



Using the library to perform the study tasks in groups shows almost similar choices except in reasons 1 & 5. Lesser percentage indicates males prefer to do assignments as sole learners (85%) than female students. Female students 100% preferred to use library for the preparation of semester examinations. The varied response for reason 5 may be due to the students' engagement in employment etc. as the research projects need to complete in the final year. Therefore their main intention of group learning is to complete study tasks and getting prepared for the examinations rather than for research purposes.

5.3 Advantages derived by the students in accomplishing the study tasks

Table 4.0 : Advantages derived by learning in groups

No.	Advantages	Highly agree		Agree	Not agree	Indifferent
		Male	Female			
1	Knowledge obtained from ODL materials are well established through group discussions	Male	98%	-	-	2%
		Female	95%	5%	-	-
2	Knowledge exchange is high when learning in groups	Male	88%	10%	-	2%
		Female	97%	3%	-	-
3	Learning in groups is a fun and enjoyable with high team spirit	Male	97%	3%	-	-
		Female	89%	11%	-	-
4	More confident to face presentations and exams	Male	98%	2%	-	-
		Female	98%	2%	-	-

Attitudes checked in the above table indicates that the groups are of favourable to the attitudes checked as scales scored were in 'highly agree' and 'agree scales'. Female groups were in

higher confidence level in case of fact no. 2 and similar with male group in 4. According to the data, fact 3 was not scored high by female groups, may be due to the reason that they are more study centric than male students. The point is further supported by their opting higher scale for the reason no.2.

5.4 Level of efficiency gained by learning in groups

The study also looked into the level of learning efficiency (in exams, assignments, project reports etc.) gained through group learning according to the perception of learners. The table 6.0 indicates group perceptions.

Table 5.0 : Level of efficiency gained

	Efficiency norm	High		Medium		Low	
		M	F	M	F	M	F
1	Speed of learning	84%	78%	16%	22%	-	
2	Comprehensiveness of areas of study covered	77%	68%	23%	32%	-	
3	Relevancy to the study task at hand	98%	100%	2%	0%	-	
4	Performance at the examination (according to the student opinion)	85%	72%	15%	38%	-	

Level of efficiency gained by the students was calculated upon their own perceptions communicated relating to the five efficiency norms tested. All the norms were received the scales of High and Medium. Preference 'Low' was not responded by any group. The Norms 1 and 3 were received high scores which indicate the students regardless the gender attained high speed of learning, level of efficiency relevant to the study task at hand. Norms 2 indicates female student have slightly lesser confidence level in obtaining comprehensive knowledge in the study areas covered in group learning (68% at high level).

5.5 Facilities expected by the students

The students were inquired about the facilities they expect for learning in groups. The students were presented with array of options but the Table 7.0 is tabulated only with the options which received responses.

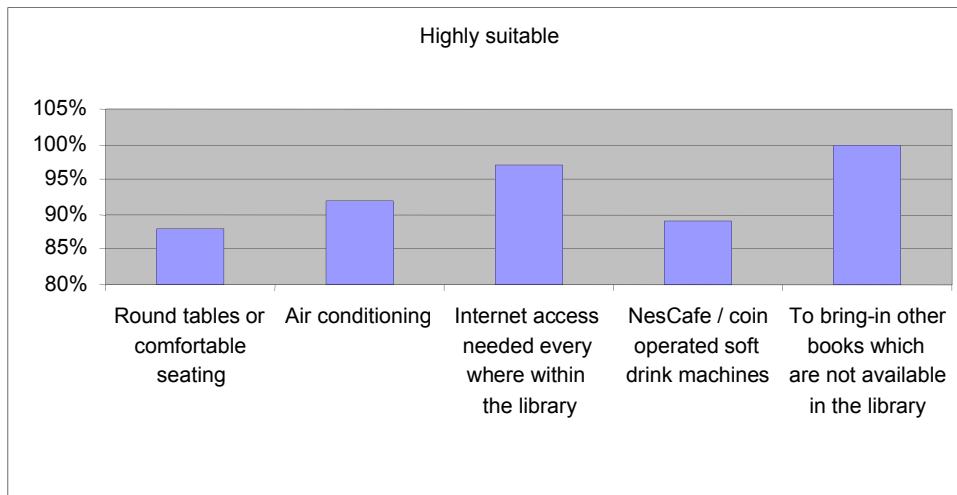
Table 7.0 : Facilities expected by the students

No.	Reason	Highly suitable	Suitable	Less suitable	Indifferent
1	Round tables or comfortable seating	88%	08%	-	04%
2	Air conditioning	92%	08%	-	-

3	Internet access needed every where within the library	97%	03%	-	-
4	NesCafe / coin operated soft drink machines	89%	5%	-	06%
5	To bring-in other books which are not available in the library	100%	-	-	-

Figure 2.0 below concentrates only on the responses received in highest scale 'highly suitable' which indicates how important the facilities they expect from the library for their learning.

Figure 2.0: High ranks received for facilities



Since there was not much difference in the numerical values obtained as responses, overall response rates are given against each facility expected by the users. Existing reading room arrangement of the library has square bays due to the shape of the reading tables ordered earlier. It is however obvious that the group discussions could be well facilitated if round table are used. Students regardless the gender opted for the round shape for better networking. The OUSL library is situated in Colombo, in a humid tropical region, so that the library gets heated during most part of the year. Though most of the students request air conditioning. It is obvious that the students need some refreshing drink that could be obtainable closer/inside the library while they learn and the nearest NesCafe machine is located at another faculty but the students has to walk some distance. All the students (100%) need to bring in extra study materials which are not belong to the library. According to the reading room regulations materials not belong to the university are not allowed to bring inside.

5.6 Support from the library staff

It was also considered to assess the attitudes of the students regarding the support given by the library staff especially by the front line staff in entertaining the group learners inside the library. Students' perceptions towards the library staff on duty are tabulated in Table 8.0.

Table 8.0 : Support given by the library staff- student perceptions

No	Attributes towards group learning	Highly Satisfactory		Satisfactory		Not satisfactory		Indifferent	
		M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
1	Welcoming	10%	3%	63%	21%	18%	75%	8%	1%
2	Supportive	19%	18%	54%	35%	25%	47%	1%	-
3	Encouraging	8%	12%	18%	20%	45%	68%	29%	-
4	Advisory/Mentoring	-	-	-	-	98%	99%	2%	1%
5	Knowledgeable in group dynamics	12%	20%	19%	8%	69%	72%	-	-

As indicated in the above table five aspects assessed were critically responded by the users. It was seen that majority of the students are not in high regard relating to the behaviour of library staff towards them. Especially the female students have shown that the library staff is not upto their expectations. Unlike the other norms studied in this research the staff factor was a critical point to be considered.

8.0 OUTCOMES OF THE STUDY

According to the responses received main finding can be summarised as follows.

The students prefer the library as a learning space due to six important reasons summarised in the table 3.0. Freedom of the environment when learning in open spaces outside the library was not an inspiration for the students but prefer to cluster inside the library. According to the responses of the groups it could be gathered that the female students prefer some comfortable arrangements in the library reading room and the females derived higher advantages than the male students. Peer disturbances were a critical factor for the male students when they learn in open areas such garden spots, canteen areas etc., so that they prefer library. According to the responses it was found that the library is the ideal learning space for the group learners.

The study found that students get into groups to perform multi study tasks. Female groups had highly agreed that they get into groups to perform semester examinations and to get prepared for CAT tests. Among the reasons Wi Fi access, supporting materials and multimedia resources available in the library were an inspiration for the group learners regardless the gender. It was also gathered that the students prefer some facilities in physical environment within the library

when working in groups. It was realised that the library had to improve considerably in providing facilities to meet the student expectation.

It was also emerged through analysis that the ODL materials are well exploited by all groups interviewed and knowledge exchange had a high mobility within group members. It was evident that learning in groups is a fun and enjoyable with a high team spirit especially within the male groups. Female students indicated that they obtained high level of confidence to face assessments, vivavoce and examinations. According to the learners level of achievements is high in accomplishing learning based expectations by learning in groups regardless the gender. The fact was proved by analyzing the efficiency norms tested in the study. All the four norms obtained weights more than 75% for 'high' level of efficiency. It can be concluded that the learning efficiency is high when learning in groups inside the library. Therefore the students were highly confident about the group learning approach for high performance level.

According to the user perspective library staff is not all that supportive for the group learners and encouraging the new learning environment. The female students placed very low value and not satisfied with the support received from library staff. The fact indicates that the library staff should to be trained in supporting group learning environment and inculcate skills within them to support social behaviour of the user.

9.0 STUDY IMPACTS OBSERVED

Since the study is an action research the researcher had made some physical changes and policy level changes in the library environment to accommodate learning groups. After conducting the research the changes were accepted permanently and yearend statistics were analyzed to understand the impact of the change over the user behaviour. It was found that the Number of library visits was increased from 58746 to 94163 in 2012. Computers placed at reader bays were highly used. According to them they are less disturbed and the learning time had increased constructively. Usage of knowledge material was high including audio visuals according to the reading room and A/V room statistics. The numbers had increased from 162002 to 201993 during 2012 and number of books to be shelved had increased accordingly.

10.0 SUGGESTIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH:

Since the students have inspiration to use the library group learning it is advisable to improve the physical environment/ special facilities/ common amenities as expected by the users. Surveys were planned to further carried out to find out the well being of the groups in achieving their learning targets.

It is also important to provide online help in using repositories and other web based services. It was gathered that there are still some regulatory requirements unfulfilled in user point of view such as bringing in text books not belong to the OUSL library collection. The rule, which the library could not relax easily due to the threats experienced with delinquent users. Installing a coffee machine in the vicinity of the library would be an inspiration to the user to use the library. However it was decided to place a coffee machine at the cloak room entrance, outside the library. The library staff should be trained to adjust their attitudes and their behaviour towards socialization with learners positively to foster a cluster learning culture within the library. Since the present study shows that the library is a good group learning space the faculty should encourage their student to perform more and more study tasks using the library.

In summary the group learning culture promoted within the OUSL library had boosted up its image, its resource usage and number of visits to the library for learning purpose and for social networking making the library alive and vibrant. The positive impact of the usage is seen through higher visibility of the visits made to the library web portal, e-repository of past question papers where the latest daily visit recorded 2000/day, onsite and online inquiry service etc. Above all it is a happy scenario to see a cheerful community of learners nestles within the library trying to

achieve one common learning target; a degree. The study was done in an actual environment, so that the researcher did not disturb the serious solo learners during the time of survey to obtain 'counter views' regarding group learning. Since the sample groups do not tally faculty wise and gender wise, researcher could not compare the concepts studied between faculties. The author hopes to do an in-depth study on 'group dynamics' and faculty wise study in near future.

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