



Group Discussion : A Cognitive Tool for Life Skills Evaluation

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ABSTRACT

Group Discussion is widely used by leading corporate houses as one of the main rounds of the recruitment process. At New Horizon College of Engineering, Bengaluru, the Centre for Life Skills and Lifelong Learning implemented this method as a tool for assessing industry-readiness. This research paper aims at studying the establishment of the process, the customization and streamlining over a period of 4 batches and offers a view of the degree of success it has achieved, vis-a-vis the initial expectations. It explores salient findings from the process involved: how Group Discussion can be used as a 360 degree tool for evaluating life skills as a whole.

Keywords : Group Discussion, recruitment process, industry-readiness, life skills, 360 degree evaluation tool

I. INTRODUCTION

The authors have been principal contributors in setting up of Group Discussion as an examination and evaluation process at New Horizon College of Engineering, Bengaluru. One of their earlier tasks was setting up the Centre for Life Skills and Lifelong Learning at the college. The thought process was that this was the way forward to differentiate between placements and quality placements. The college was one of the earliest in the city to recognize the need for a dedicated Life Skills department, and establish the same in the world of immense competition for Engineering Graduate placements. It was decided that the students would be introduced to Life Skills at the 2nd year level of their 4-year course. The idea was to bring in the idea of “the best version of oneself” at the basic learning stage.

Deliberations and discussions led to the team members settling upon Group Discussion as the

evaluation method for the Life Skills learning. Communication skills was to be the prime focus factor in this process. Other observation factors would be general awareness and basic behavioral etiquettes. The students were asked to turn up in formal wear, grooming principles having been covered in the Semester module.

In December 2017, the first attempt at putting the above idea in place was carried out by the 5-member Life Skills Team. Officials from the Training and Placement Department were invited as External Examiners. The process was executed well, with appropriate prior-planning. More than 850 students appeared for the process which was spaced over a period of three days.

The students had made an attempt to dress up in basic formals: neatly ironed collared full sleeved shirts, formal trousers, formal leather shoes with socks. Formal wear not being part of the daily

campus etiquette guidelines at New Horizon College of Engineering, this was considered to be a notable achievement.

As part of the process, the team members shared their observations over the semesters about how students were being able to use the Group Discussion platform to showcase their abilities with respect to not just the familiar parameters of communication skills, general awareness basic behavioral etiquettes and formal grooming, but also various other life skills. These included critical and creative thinking, stress management, negotiation, group decision making, empathy, emotional intelligence, peer-level micro-mentoring, body language, team work, leadership, ownership, time management, besides a number of non-verbal skills like body language, eye contact, posture, gestures and voice modulation.

The Board of Studies at New Horizon College of Engineering has Alumni members and industry experts as part of its list of affiliates. Their regular recommendations ensure that the syllabus contents at the college are always updated as appropriate.

In late 2018, the module guide was modified to incorporate the findings. They were also brought into practice for the Pre-Placement training process for both Engineering as well as MBA students. It later met reasonable success in a Train-the-trainer program used for New Horizon Faculty Members.

II. RESEARCH

A. Objective-

To establish that Group Discussion is a 360 degree evaluation tool for Life Skills as a whole, encompassing all Life Skills learning.

B. Research Questions-

- How is Group Discussion used for assessing all Life Skills, as per the module under use?
- How can the recommendations benefit the rest of the world?

- How did the Centre for Life Skills and Lifelong Learning at New Horizon College of Engineering streamline the process based on the findings?

C. Literature Review

It has been observed that not much accessible research work exists in the published form, which directly connects Group Discussion to a larger life skills learning platform. A large number of research work exists on using Group Discussion as an evaluation tool for Communication Skills. "Focus Group" is a term used widely to research about group behavior patterns in group decision making.

A good amount of research work exists on "Group Discussion Tips". The primary focuses are the verbal and the non-verbal aspects. Knowledge depth, persuasion skills, analytical skills, personality and leadership have been touched upon as evaluation points for Group Discussion by some articles, not much in-depth analysis has been done.

There exist articles on how Group Discussion has been used to tackle issues ranging from abusive husbands, parental education, psychological debriefings and improving manuscript evaluation procedures. A research by CS Canada (Li Juan, 2014) [1] maps Group Discussion against the parameters of co-operative learning and proximal development. Niti Aayog Literature [2] and NASCOM statistics [3] also carry references to Group Discussion as process to evaluate communication and analytical skills.

Observations from running four batches of 2nd Year Life Skills classes, each having a strength of 800+ students on an average form the primary resource of this research.

On a random basis, templates published by three top sources (YUVA, infoway24.com and researchgate.net) are shown in figures (1), (2) and (3) below:



Fig. 1 [4]

Program	Affirmations	Remarks
Content	Simple, clear, easy to understand, context based, explicit	Incorporation of more skill demonstration, structuring of framework of skills on the OSCE principles
Structure, delivery and presentation	Well organized, useful for professional activities, able to implement the knowledge and skills into practice	Local language More practice hand on sessions required Practical live demonstration More time to be devoted to the training: about 3-4 days
Program Materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clear Easy to understand Context based Appropriate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Skill demonstrations using more pictures and videos Changes in some pictures Adaptation to local language Inclusion of more neonatal mannequins for skill demonstration and practice Universal referral note needs incorporation More practice exercises are required
Assessment Tools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Observed structured clinical examination (OSCE) Multiple Choice Question Examination (MCQ) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> OSCEs are perhaps an unfamiliar format; the practical demonstration should also be on similar lines Some questions need modification as per local practice

Fig. 2 [5]

Youth United For a Vision to Achieve
MOCK GROUP DISCUSSION
SCORE CARD
 Topic: _____
 Time Slot: _____
 Evaluator: _____

PARAMETER	Weightage													
Content Subject knowledge	.30													
Creativity and originality	.05													
Voice Tone and pitch	.05													
Body language Posture	.10													
Eye Contact	.05													
Analytical Ability	.05													
Fluency	.05													
Initiative	.05													
Leadership	.10													
Group Behaviour	.15													
Enthusiasm	.05													
Listening	.05													

Template published by YUVA

Fig. 3 [6]

The above represent a cross-section of the existing research on the subject.

III. METHODOLOGY AND FINDINGS

A. Kolb's Learning Cycle-

- Abstract Conceptualization
- Active Experimentation
- Concrete Experience
- Reflective Observation

As represented in Figure (4)

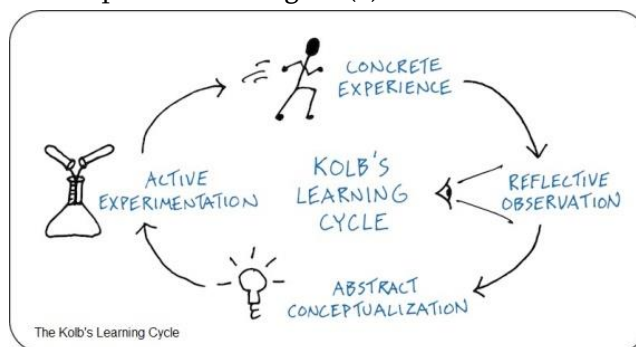


Fig. 4 [7]

As part of the regular curriculum for 2nd year students, Group Discussion was designed as the culmination of the semester. The same process was also followed for the pre-placement training for final year students. It has been observed that to excel in Group Discussion, students had developed the newspaper-reading habit, had begun to exercise negotiation skills (as opposed to settling disputes through arguments) and started to dress better. Notable efforts were observed in the following:

- Empathy: The understanding of the difference between sympathy and empathy was put into use.
- Time Management: Learning to use the allotted time to not only display their communication and thinking skills, but going on to use the available time to display all the other Life Skills learning from the semester.
- Leadership: Group Discussion is an able platform to display leadership skills, especially when the discussion goes off-topic
- Teamwork: Group behaviors and using non-verbal gestures to help non-starters to gain courage to join in.

- Stress Management: Group Discussion can be stressful if the topic is alien to a participant, or in the case of too many people opposing one participant, or not being able to have performed to one's ability in first attempt (s), etc.

- Etiquette: Students started to display improved etiquettes with respect to campus, social and conversational etiquettes. Interrupting other speakers at the right moments during the Group Discussion proved to be a good practice opportunity.

- Critical and lateral thinking: To get the basics right, the critical thinking is crucial. Lateral thinking gains importance to get the extra brownie points, bonus marks, and assumes utmost importance in the case of it being an elimination process.

- Emotional Intelligence: Leadership skills, Empathy, Inter-personal skills, motivation, self-regulation all form part of a rounded delivery in a Group Discussion.

- Ownership: As is taught in the Life Skills module, ownership is equivalent to leadership. Group Discussion sessions throw up opportunities to take up ownership of the thought flow.

- Group Decision Making: Depending on the topic in focus, ample opportunities to explore group decision making options are exercised.

- Negotiation Management: Debate, logic with negotiation skills of being able to consider all perspectives.

- SWOT: Thorough self awareness of one's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats helps one strategize one's preparation for the evaluation process.

- Peer-level Micro-mentoring: The process followed ensures that students learn while observing other participants, giving them feedback about their performance. This also shows a way in which students can practice Group Discussion even in the absence of a trainer.

- Non-verbal skills: Body language, eye contact, posture, gestures and the value of pauses have been focused on.

- Listening Skills: Active and effective listening has proved to be one of the most important skills to be successful in Group Discussion.

B. Survey of placement records-

The 1st batch to undergo the Life Skills module in 2017 came up for Pre-Placement training in mid-2019. By this time, the implementations had been put into effect. A refresher course for the Group Discussion was done for the group. Having gone through the module earlier in end-2017, the batch was better equipped to receive the training. The results showed in the placement record of the on-going placement batch. While the exact figures of an on-going placement batch cannot be made public yet, it definitely showed a cumulative qualitative and quantitative improvement of more than 20% over the previous year. While not all companies used Group Discussion as a step for their recruitment process, a significant number did. Moreover, the learning from the process had contributed to a well-rounded preparation.

C. Industry feedback-

The authors had, in their own capacities, been in positions to interact with members of the industry about recruitment-process candidate-feedback. The discussed points were implemented into the module process as and when appropriate. Two examples:

Mu-Sigma is an IT company in Bangalore. They offer a rather attractive pay package, and hence are a much sought-after employer. They have a Group Discussion as their main round. Their topics are often based on marketing of IT products within select geographical zones. This has often tended to confuse Engineering candidates, who find it a challenge to learn about marketing strategies overnight. The short-listed students were taken through a crash course, wherein they were just reminded of the Group Discussion basics, besides the importance of doing their appropriate homework for every selection process: in this case, a quick Google

search of marketing strategies. They had to be reminded that they would not be evaluated for choice of strategy. The effort yielded a good success rate.

Accor Hotels is a hotel company, with its head quarters in France. They often give topics based on gender sensitivity as part of their recruitment process for Management Trainees. Long before the LGBT law (Section 377) was passed in India, they gave topics related to entertaining of homo-sexual guests in their hotels. They expected candidates to deal with the given situation normally, without any visual discomfort, as theirs is a French company, and homosexuality has been legal in France for long. While this is an example from a non-engineering industry, their case study is done to illustrate the importance of doing one's homework about the company being interviewed for.

IV. ANALYSIS

The findings of the research indicate a definite connection between Group Discussion and all the Life Skills learning of the 2nd Year module imparted at New Horizon College of Engineering. The module includes the following topics:

- Self Awareness – includes core self evaluation, emotional intelligence, SWOT
- Critical and Lateral thinking
- Stress, Time and Negotiation Management
- Leadership, ownership and teamwork
- Grooming and Etiquettes
- Individual and Group decision making

It also includes a thorough evaluation of the following 1st year modules:

- English Communication
- Non –verbal communication: includes confidence, body language, posture, gestures, eye-contact, voice modulation and the value of pauses

As may be equated, a 360 degree life skills evaluation tool essentially marks a candidate's industry-readiness overall.

Group Discussion has also proved to be a good starting platform for those fighting to overcome the fear of public speaking. Group Discussion provide for a comparative comfort zone of a smaller peer group, as opposed to a larger audience to begin with.

The peer-level micro-mentoring process makes it easier to mend salient bad habits. It also helps to identify the idiosyncrasies, which may otherwise remain unobserved. An instructor pointing out mistakes, as opposed to a peer doing the same often has different outcomes.

The increased number of students taking up the newspaper reading habit is a direct success of the process. The present generation is often found more adept at following the news through mobile phone apps. That need not be discouraged, though. The bottom-line is: keeping abreast of what is happening in one's world should not be akin to an assigned task.

Attitude cannot be taught, yet is a major parameter of evaluation in the recruitment process. The self-preparation involved in getting ready for Group Discussion is a sound tool as an attitude fine-tuner.

The Centre for Life Skills and Lifelong Learning at New Horizon College of Engineering has incorporated some of the above observations as part of its semester module to impart upgraded learning to the students.

V. CONCLUSION

The observations made by the Centre for Life Skills and Lifelong Learning with relation to Group Discussion being a 360 degree evaluation have been incorporated in its updated curriculum. These have emanated from repeatedly running the program for batches of students.

The measurement of outcome is not a uniform system which has been adopted and followed universally.

This research work highlights some gaps as identified in the process. The purpose of the research is to find solutions to those gaps. Making the learning process more rounded is a constant endeavor.

It is recommended that the findings be universally adopted, by educators as well as industry experts.

It leaves scope for further research on the subject. The importance of Emotional Intelligence in Group Discussion, how an effective SWOT analysis may impact performance in Group Discussion, the importance of timing and humour are some of the areas which, one feels, may be looked deeper into.

VI. REFERENCES

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