Transforming Classes Through Group Dynamics: From Theory to Practice

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As teachers we all have experiences with "good" and "bad" classes. Often our perception of the success or failure of a particular class rests not on the academic achievements of our students, but on something more intangible: group cohesion. In this paper I draw on literature from the field of group dynamics to highlight the importance of whole-group dynamics, both to our students and to us as teachers, and offer practical teaching ideas that can be implemented in any teaching environment. Areas focused on include ideas for creating rapport and sharing personal information, strategies to help avoid the formation of cliques within the classroom, and ways of fostering group identity so that the class recognises itself as an identifiable and identified group. I also include tips and techniques for encouraging warmth and support between class members and promoting an absence of fear in the classroom.

教師なら誰でも「良い」クラスと「悪い」クラスを教えた経験を持っているだろう。多くの場合、クラスの成功や失敗といった教師の感覚は学生の学力達成など目に見えるものよりは、むしろ無形のもの、集団結束力（group cohesion）に基づいていることが多い。本論では集団力学（group dynamics）の分野の先行文献を元に学生のみならず教師にとって全体的な集団力学がいかに重要であるかに焦点を当て、あらゆる授業環境でも実践できる実用的な教授方法を提案する。主に扱う分野として、学生同士が信頼関係を築き、個人的な経験を共有できるようにする工夫、クラス内で特定の学生の仲間はずれを生み出さないようにする方法、クラス全体が学生の属するグループとして認識できるようにする集団同一性の高め方、また、学生間の思いやりや助け合いを促し、不安にさせる要素をなくすコツなどが含まれる。

In recent years there has been a strong focus on the role of motivation in second language learning from a number of different perspectives, such as intrinsic and extrinsic goals (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and the ideal L2 self (Dörnyei, 2005, 2009). However, the tendency has been to focus on individual students or small classroom groups, with an emphasis on individual learners' styles (Oxford, 1990), individual needs (Skehan, 1991), student autonomy (Pennycook, 1997), or task-based programmes for small groups (see Dörnyei, 1998, and Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2012 for comprehensive overviews), with comparatively little research on the role of whole-group dynamics. After briefly reviewing the literature on group dynamics in second language learning, I will focus on three areas that have been identified as conducive to encouraging this cohesion: creating rapport amongst class members, avoiding cliques, and fostering group identity. Practical advice on the implementation of these ideas will be extracted from the literature and expanded upon, based on my own experience.

Group Dynamics in Language Learning

Although groups have been studied from a sociological and psychological perspective since the end of the 19th century and *group dynamics* as a codified area of scientific research since the middle of the 20th century (see Forsyth, 2006 for an overview), it is only since the 1990s that these ideas have begun to be applied to language teaching and learning. I will focus mainly on the findings of Hadfield (1992), Senior (1997), and Dörnyei and Murphey (2003) for the purposes of this paper. All researchers combine theory and practice in varying degrees that I have found to be very useful in my own classes. I will also draw on more contemporary ideas regarding the role of social media as a vital tool for enhancing group identity.

Hadfield's *Classroom Dynamics* (1992) was the first attempt to identify the importance of group dynamics to language teaching. Hadfield found that it was not institutional factors of success such as academic achievement, materialistic factors such as classroom facilities, nor even content-related factors that caused teachers to label a class positively or negatively, but rather something less tangible: "group chemistry" (p. 9). In Hadfield's research all teachers surveyed understood and had experienced instances of classes that "did not gel" (p. 8). Reasons for this "lack of gel" included comments such as "students

don't listen to each other," "they are territorial," and "there is no trust" (p. 8). She provides a comprehensive list of what should define a successfully bonded group. These include the following:

- members have a definite sense of themselves as a group;
- there is a positive, supportive atmosphere;
- group members are not cliquey or territorial;
- the members of the group trust each other; and
- the group has a sense of fun (Hadfield, 1992, p. 12).

These findings were echoed by Senior (1997) and expanded to include a breakdown of the various facets of the group bonding process. These include the need for teachers to create a conducive atmosphere or "climate" (p. 6) for successful cohesion to take place, establishing norms and expectations, and finding roles within the group for individual class members. She also built on Hadfield by adding the following as indicators of a "good" language class:

- a feeling of warmth,
- an absence of fear,
- a safe environment,
- group solidarity,
- a sense of camaraderie, and
- a feeling of cooperation (Senior, 1997, p. 3).

Dörnyei, along with a host of collaborators (Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1994; Dörnyei, 1997; Dörnyei, 2005; Dörnyei & Malderez 1997; Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003; Ehrman & Dörnyei, 1998), picked up the study of whole group dynamics in language learning as an extension of his pioneering work on motivation and focused it into a more coherent discipline that links back to general theories of group dynamics. His main focus was often on the psychological relationship between group members and how this affects the group as a whole. This provides valuable and useful insights for us as language teachers.

In their comprehensive book on the subject, *Group Dynamics in the Language Classroom*, Dörnyei and Murphey (2003) combined theory, practice, and personal experience to address both of these interaction types and more. They focused on the life cycle of a group and built on Hadfield's and Senior's list of indicators of a successfully cohesive class. These include the following:

- learning about each other by sharing personal information;
- proximity, contact, and interaction, including spontaneous communication between members;
- shared group history;
- public commitment to the group;
- investing in the group; and
- extracurricular activities (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003).

The Role of Social Media

A further aspect of group dynamics that has yet to be addressed directly, but which is of vital importance, is the role of new technology, most pertinently, social media. Although there has been research on use of social media in language acquisition and production of English (e.g., Richards, 2015) and other studies on using classroom blogs (de Almeida Soares, 2008; Hung & Heng-Tsung, 2016) and Facebook exchanges (Blattner & Fiori, 2009), the *social* role of social media has largely taken a back seat to the linguistic role. However, encouraging student-led use of social media, completely free of teacher interference, can be a valuable way to extend the time and space of the classroom experience and provide extra opportunities for students to get to know each other in a natural and organic way. It is important, when setting up a social media platform, that it is done with subtlety and matches the preferences of the students, not the teacher.

For example, echoing the work of Takahashi (2014), in my own teaching context of Japan, Facebook is seen by students as too formal and is mainly used for communication of significant events or with less intimate relationships. In contrast, the most popular form of social media interaction between young people is the service Line, a free messaging service that allows users to send text-based messages, voice messages, and a wide range of emoticons and animations. Current statistics put the number of Line users in Japan at 68 million, with just under 95% of smartphone users in the 10-29 age range using the Line application (Statista, 2017a; Statista, 2017b).

With near universal access to social media platforms, tools like a classroom Line group can be vital in solidifying the cohesion and relationship building that occurs in the physical classroom. In my own preliminary research in this area, (Lawrence, in press) I found that groups of students who had formed a class Line group (with no input from myself) had a very positive experience of the class and felt that the Line group had enabled them to enjoy the learning experience more. They even reported that it had positively influenced their class attendance.

Creating Rapport Amongst Class Members

Theory

As Hadfield (1992), Senior (1997), and Dörnyei and Murphey (2003) all pointed out, creating rapport between class members is essential for cultivating a bonded group, and the most effective way of fostering cohesiveness is by sharing genuine personal information (Dörnyei, 1997). A key component of this is that both the teacher and other students know the names of all the students in the class (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003). In fact, research by Kenny (1994) found that students' positive perception of the class and of their own performance in it changed according to whether or not they were aware that the teacher knew their names.

According to Senior (1997), rapport can be created by breaking down barriers between class members and encouraging them to get to know each other as a whole group. Information and ideas should be extracted from students in such a way that the whole class knows something about every class member.

This is expanded upon by Ehrman and Dörnyei (1998), who outlined the characteristics of a good icebreaker as an activity that does the following:

- ensures that everybody talks to everybody else,
- involves sharing personal information,
- includes various learning formats (e.g., pair work, small group work, larger group work),
- promotes cooperation,
- moves people around in the classroom, and
- involves as much humour and fun as possible (Ehrman & Dörnyei, 1998, p. 237).

It is worth noting that for teachers who are constrained by strict curriculums, time constraints, and adherence to textbooks, it is more than possible to combine these personal sharing activities with grammar points or target lexis (Hadfield, 1992).

Practice

For learning names, Hadfield (1992) recommended a "guess my name" game in which all student names are put into a hat in the first class, students each draw one name, and students are then required to mingle until they find the person with that name. Dörnyei and Murphey (2003) suggested telling the students that they will be tested on the names of their classmates in the next class and requiring them to actively memorise them as they might do a vocabulary list. Other rapport-building activities and icebreakers may include whole-class information gathering tasks (Senior, 2002) such as class surveys and games.

As an example of a grammar-focused activity, Hadfield (1992) suggested a True Confessions activity that allows students to reveal personal information about themselves while practising the past simple tense aspect. This is just one of many empathy-building activities that help students understand each other and therefore better relate to one another. Others include In Their Shoes, in which students attempt to answer as they think another group member would answer, or "ghostwriting" another class member's biography.

What I Do in My Classroom

In the first lesson of a course I have found Name Circles and Fruit Basket to be very effective and popular with students (see Appendix A for full descriptions). These represent fun and interactive ways for the whole class to share information and can also be utilised to practice grammar points (present perfect, simple past) or a specified lexical focus (clothes, personal items).

With regard to social media, incorporating social media-based whole-group activities early on in a course can be very useful. Task-based activities that lend themselves well to social media interaction include inviting, refusing, organising, coming to agreement, and making promises (see Appendix B for a practical example).

Avoiding Cliques

Theory

Another important requirement for whole group dynamics is ensuring that cliques do not form in the classroom and that students do not become too comfortable with one regular core group of friends or confidantes. Apart from the very practical reason that students who always work with the same partner may just become "bored with each other" (Hadfield, 1992, p. 52) (especially true when students are sharing personal information every lesson), there is also a danger that when two or more factions develop within a group, these cliques may become increasingly disparate, with conflicting norms, codes, and goals.

Hadfield (1992) warned that it is important to establish this from the beginning of a course as once a small, established group becomes territorial, breaking it up may cause resentment. As Dörnyei and Murphey (2003) noted, humans are naturally territorial, which means that in as little as two consecutive lessons, students often see a certain seat

as "their" seat. These "fixed-position preferences . . . can negatively affect contact and interaction among students" (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003, p. 85). Therefore, changing the seating pattern every lesson and within lessons is essential to prevent this happening. By doing so we allow students to claim the whole classroom as their space, which can have a positive influence on the dynamic of the whole group.

Practice

There are two main types of class activity to help the avoidance of cliques: re-seating and mingle, or full-class interactive, activities. Re-seating activities can include students organising themselves into groups according to height, personality types, month of birth, or matching numbers. Mingle activities can be in the form of class surveys, Find Someone Who . . ., Speed Dating, or any number of similar activities. One interesting activity suggested by Hadfield (1992) is Pyramid Discussions. The discussion starts in pairs, then each pair joins another to make a group of four. At this point the discussion thus far can be summarised and added to. The group of four then becomes a group of eight and the process is repeated. Twists and caveats can be added by the teacher to keep the discussions interesting and fresh. As before, all of these activities are easily adapted to desired grammar or language points and should match the purpose of the task in hand.

Additionally, use of a student-led social media platform also helps to alleviate the tendency to form subgroups. If all group members are included in all of the communications, there is a sense of openness and equality and each individual member can choose to what extent they want to actively participate, whilst remaining accessible to all of the interactions of the group.

What I Do in My Classroom

For re-seating, I make sure to change the seating patterns as often as possible and try to randomly select small groups (see Appendix C). The type of full-class interactive activity that I have found to be the most effective and enjoyable is Class Survey (see Appendix D for an example). As well as allowing every class member to physically interact with every other, producing a final data set also helps to create a sense of group identity.

In order to ensure that a class is using social media, such as a class Line group, I first ask the students directly whether the class have already set up a class group by themselves. If they have not done so by the third week or so (of a 15-week semester), I usually set a classroom or homework activity that requires a group discussion on social media (see Appendix E for an example).

Fostering Group Identity

Theory

For a group to be a group, it is necessary that the members of the group recognise themselves as such. This is done by defining the class as a group within the classroom and outside of it, as distinct from other groups. Building a group identity can be done by creating Group Legends, which include a shared group history and a group mythology and may also involve a group name, motto, or symbol (Dörnyei, 1997; Hadfield, 1992). Group history can be a powerful tool in establishing a feeling of *groupness* and can be achieved in a surprisingly short amount of time. This is often achieved through one-off memorable episodes that can be recalled at will. The "remember the time when . . .?" phenomenon is used by all kinds of groups from friendships to work teams and can provide a useful bonding experience. This feeds into the concept of establishing a group mythology. This is the perception that the group has of itself that is not necessarily rooted in the reality of the situation, but can be a useful tool to promote cohesion if the perception is kept positive. Many groups, organisations, clubs, societies, and even countries identify themselves by a logo, a motto or slogan, or both. These can prove to be extremely evocative and instil a strong sense of belonging and pride, which has been identified as one of the key components of cohesiveness in a group (Mullen & Copper, 1994). This pride can often be achieved by the experience of "joint hardship" (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003). Facing and overcoming a challenge is a common bonding strategy for sports teams and can be equally applied to the classroom.

Another important part of fostering this sense of group identity is creating the perception that the group is a unique entity, with different rules and behaviours than other similar groups. This can usually be achieved by the group comparing and contrasting itself to other groups, either informally in the course of everyday social interactions with members of "outsider" groups and also by teacher-initiated intergroup activities and competitions.

Practice

One useful strategy to establish a sense of uniqueness is to draw up a list of class rules or a class manifesto, what Dörnyei and Murphey (2003) called "learning contracts" (p. 43). This can be done as a whole-group exercise in the first lessons of a course, can include input from both the teacher and the students, and should involve compromise on both sides. This list of rules or principles can be displayed on the board in each class and can be referred to if any of the class norms are breached. This can be a fun exercise that not

only codifies the ideals of the class members, but also allows the students to have autonomy and input into the direction of the class. It is also useful as it allows members of that class to see themselves as unique and different from their friends in other classes.

It is also useful to allow the class to choose a meaningful class name to replace the usual impersonal combination of numbers and letters that are used to assign classes. One interesting way to choose a name involves class members sharing images from their phones to find one thing that they all have in common. This common item then becomes the name of the group.

Inculcating a sense of group history can be achieved through regular reflection. This not only helps to reinforce and recycle previously taught language points but allows the class members to gradually build up a solid sense of themselves as a single entity with shared experiences. Things teachers can do that encourage the group to overcome hardship in a safe and controlled environment include making unannounced deadline changes, extending the requirements of a written assignment, or increasing homework. Although these interventions may be initially greeted with resentment, if they form part of group-focused exercises they can be very effective in increasing the feeling of being "all in it together." The success of these is difficult to measure and I have usually compensated for it by giving rewards of reduced assignments and waiver of homework requirements at a later point in the course.

Other activities include setting group projects, including group homework as an effective way to extend the time spent together, and forcing the relationship between members to break the confines of the classroom. This can also be done by taking the class outside the classroom, as the simple act of communicating with someone outside of the usual physical environment instantly changes the dynamic of the relationship with that person. Practical ideas for this can be digital photo scavenger hunts, giving directions, and guided tours.

Again, social media can also be used to provide spontaneous communication outside of the confines of classroom time. It also allows relationships between group members to develop organically away from the gaze of the teacher. For example, each Line group has a name that is chosen by the students that set it up. I have found that this is often based either on some derivation of my own name or on a class in-joke or event that has happened in class. Additionally the animations and emoticons that are used serve as logos or legends and the group itself represents a semipublic commitment to the group. As well, the Line group provides a written documentation of the group's shared history that can be referred back to at any time. These are all important aspects of group dynamics as identified by Dörnyei and Murphey (2003).

What I Do in My Classroom

I always use the first class of any course to negotiate group rules with the students and use subsequent classes to build up a strong sense of group identity using nicknames and activities designed to initiate joint hardship (see Appendix F for a full description).

Regarding social media, I have tried different forms, from Facebook groups to class blogs, but (in line with the literature) I have found that by far the most effective has been to subtly encourage each class to set up a class Line group. Although I am usually invited to join, I never join the Line groups, nor do I insist on students using English to communicate (unless it is a specified homework task). As mentioned earlier, I believe that there has been so much focus in SLA on the language possibilities of social media that the "social" aspect of it has been overlooked. Personally, I have found that the social benefits of social media far outweigh the minimal language gains that may be made.

Conclusion

In summary, group dynamics are of vital importance to the success of a class and are seen by teachers as a key barometer of "good" and "bad" classes. In this paper, I focused on three aspects from the literature: creating rapport, avoiding cliques, and fostering group identity. I provided practical ideas for implementing these aspects in classrooms both from the literature and my own personal experiences and experiments.

Many of the activities suggested in this paper are already being carried out intuitively by many language teachers. I hope that by focusing these intuitions into a coherent strategy, backed up by research, I will help teachers have the confidence to expand their repertoire of group building strategies to make group dynamics a central part of their teaching methodology.

Bio Data

Luke Lawrence has taught in Japan since 2002 and is currently teaching at Yokohama City University. His research interests include group dynamics, native-speakerism, and various aspects of teacher identity.

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Appendix A
Creating Rapport Amongst Class Members

Name Circles involve asking the whole class to form a large circle and get each student to state his or her own name while reciting all of the names of the people before them in the circle. I then go back around the circle in the opposite direction with each student adding a hobby or interest.

Fruit Basket uses the same set up as Name Circle to elicit information about all class members simultaneously. In this game there is one less chair than there are class members, one student (or the teacher) stands in the middle and instructs everyone who has a certain attribute, experience, possession, or feeling to change chairs. The student in the middle tries to take one of the chairs. The person who fails to secure a chair must now stand in the middle and repeat the process. Ideas for changing seats can include simple personal information (*everyone who has a brother*) to the present context (*everyone who is wearing jeans today*), to the fun and humorous (*everyone who wants to finish class early and have lunch*).

Appendix B
Using Social Media to Create Rapport

One enjoyable and practical activity that I have found works well is organising a class get-together. I first nominate an organiser to initiate the discussion and send an invita-

tion message to all classmates. The class members then negotiate a day and time that is convenient for all class members to meet for dinner, *karaoke*, or other similar activity. I encourage students to use their real schedules and if possible to actually meet for dinner or *karaoke*.

Appendix C
Avoiding Cliques

I usually do this by simply shuffling the class name cards at the start of every lesson and calling out names in the order that they come. I match the groupings to the type of activities I will be doing that day and try to expose the students to a wide variety of groups. For example, I use pairs; groups of four, five, and six; half class; and whole class in horseshoe formation.

Appendix D
Class Surveys

One example is a How Green Are You? survey. This involves asking five simple yes or no questions about daily environmentally friendly behaviour (e.g., *Do you take your own eco-bag when you go shopping?*) Students have to ask every class member the same questions and are encouraged to react to answers and ask follow-up questions. The results are then tallied on the board, giving a visual representation of the whole group's activities.

Appendix E
Homework Ideas Using Social Media

Ideas include (a) recommending a film or song to classmates and (b) commenting on their opinion of that day's class.

Appendix F
Fostering Group Identity

In the first class I distribute a sheet of paper with my own proposed group rules and ask students to work in small groups to add their own proposals**.** One of the class rules proposed by a recent class was that if they arrived within 5 minutes after the start of the class they would not be officially counted as late. I amended the proposal to make it 10 minutes and the students were happy in the knowledge that they had a unique rule that did not apply to other classes.

Another interesting technique is assigning nicknames to certain group members. This technique must be approached with caution as to avoid any individual student feeling that they have been singled out or picked on, but if done sensitively it can add to the uniqueness of the group as the nicknames for these students only exist within this class. This is usually a lot of fun for all class members and helps to build camaraderie within the group. This also helps to establish a shared history.