

## Factors that Hamper Communication among Student-Teachers Working as a Team in the Framework of the Application of the Project Method - Research

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### Abstract

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The current research studies the hampering of communication among members of a working team in the framework of the application of the project method in training future teachers, through recording the views of students of the Department of Primary Education of Democritus University of Thrace. The anonymous written questionnaire, completed by future teachers that worked in teams during ten programmed weekly meetings, served as a research tool. The results show clearly that the students – during the implementation of the project that they undertook – mentioned that the negative communicational behaviors which took place in the framework of the team member meetings, as well as the conversations among them, disorientated the members from the team goals and disorganized them, without, however, causing problems in team coherence and without negatively influencing their interpersonal relationships. The factors that hampered communication among cooperating members were reported to be the disposition of members as well as the lack of information, while it was stressed that irony, ridiculing and criticism of the other can also lead to hampering of the communication process.

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**Keywords:** project, teacher education, communication, group, interpersonal relationships

### Introduction

Higher education as well as after-lyceum vocational education brings graduates on the first step towards their professional course. In most professional contexts, the ability to work in groups is ranked among the basic skills considered necessary by employers, not only in order to find occupation but also to maintain employee efficiency (Morreale, Osborn, & Pearson, 2000: 2). However, in order for young people to acquire – beside academic knowledge – skills and competences such as collaboration, communication etc, teachers must – in the framework of school education – turn to more student-centered teaching approaches (Cheng, Lam, & Chan, 2008: 206). The project method can contribute towards attaining this goal. The project method is a teaching approach during which students collaborate in small teams, undertaking certain duties. More specifically, they either pose a question or set a common goal (Prichard, Bizo & Stratford, 2006), research the specific field and create an end-product (Thomas, 2000) which they, in due course, evaluate together with the creation process itself (Kokotsaki, Mentzies, & Wiggins, 2016).

In order to implement the project method, it is sufficient for future educators to undergo a comparatively short-term training (Wurdinger, Haar, Hugg, & Benzon, 2007). At the Department of Primary Education of the Democritus University of Thrace, the training of future educators with the project method is implemented since the academic year 2001-2002, in the framework of the academic course “Teaching Methodology II”<sup>2</sup>, while it was established in the curriculum of the above-mentioned department by professor Eleni Taratori<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> In the subject “Teaching Methodology I – microteaching”, the students practice specific social, pedagogical and teaching skills. Microteaching was implemented for the first time in the Department by professor Eleni Taratori in 1993.

<sup>3</sup> The emeritus professor has published several theoretical and research attempts regarding the possibility of implementation of the project method in primary school: Taratori-Tsalkatidou, 1996· Taratori, Chatzidimou & Chlemes, 2001· Chatzidimou & Taratori, 2001· Taratori-Tsalkatidou, 2005· Taratori, et al., 2005· Taratori, 2007· Taratori-Tsalkatidou, 2015.

More specifically, during their 6<sup>th</sup> semester, the students are informed on the theory of the project method and subsequently undertake to implement a project on a topic that touches upon their interests. The implementation begins by defining the topic, delimiting the project aims and dividing participants in teams. Team members work autonomously in scheduled as well as unscheduled meetings, both in the department facilities and in other spaces (Kougiourouki, 2019). They collect information and share them among other team members, they offer their ideas and listen to the others' ideas, they justify and support or criticize an idea (Blumenfeld, Kempler & Krajcik, 2006) and prepare the end-products of their work as well as its presentation. As in every cooperating team, in the teams where the future educators of our Department work, the members offer information, discuss and reflect both on the content of the project on which they will work (Remedios, Clarke, & Hawthorne, 2008: 12) and on the cooperation process as well as the behavior towards one another (Hertz-Lazarowitz, 1990: 14). However, cooperation does not necessarily signify consensus of all team members. The ideas and views that are offered by each team member may vary; however, they have a common goal: to contribute to the subject under discussion (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011: 195).

Similarly, the communication among the members of a team is not always efficient. As it has been pointed out by Stamatis (2011: 79), the communication process among them may be hampered by “bad practices” on behalf of the speaker, such as addressing their interlocutor using commands, advice and suggestions, ignoring his/her feelings, addressing questions that may make him/her feel being interrogated, interrupting him/her, negatively criticizing<sup>4</sup> him/her, being ironic or overly praising, exaggerating in giving information, changing the topic on purpose or even reaching arbitrary conclusions. The long-term application of the project method in the aforementioned department and our involvement with this<sup>5</sup>, has aroused our interest to get further involved with the aforementioned method in the framework of teacher training and specifically with the negative behaviours that take place during team member meetings and the discussions among them, the effects of these behaviours on the smooth team operation and on the interpersonal relations among its members, as well as the factors that hamper communication among cooperating team members.

## Methodology

**Starting point** for conducting this experiential research that deals in investigating the views of students regarding the hampering of communication that develops among members of a collaborating team during the implementation of a project, has been not only the realization that Greek literature is lacking papers that research this topic theoretically and empirically, but also our own personal interest on this subject. Its **main aim** is to research the views of future educators of Democritus University of Thrace regarding negative communicational behaviours that have been observed during the meetings of team members and the conversations among them, their consequences on the smooth function of the team and on the interpersonal relations of its members, as well as the factors that have hampered communication among collaborating team members. To achieve the research goal, the **written questionnaire** was used as a **research tool**. It comprised 31 closed-ended questions, as well as questions about personal data of participants. Student-teachers (both male and female) of 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> semesters of the Department of Primary Education of Democritus University of Thrace, who had received training on the implementation of the project method during the course “Teaching Methodology II”, were our **research sample**. **Data collection** took place in January 2019 and lasted three weeks. **Statistic processing** and **data analysis** was conducted using the SPSS programme – Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, Version 21.0.

## Results

The results of the present research come from 265 students of the Department of Primary Education of Democritus University of Thrace, out of whom 48 (18.1%) were men and 217 (81.9%) were women. 128 (48.3%) were studying at the 5<sup>th</sup> semester, 126 (47.5%) were studying at the 7<sup>th</sup> semester and 10 (3.8%) were “out-of-circle” participants. 197 (74.2%) were from 20 to 21 years old, while 68 (25.8%) were above 21 years old. Twelve of the participants were already graduates of another Higher Education Institution and five (5) held a Master's Degree. The research outcomes that emerged from the fields mentioned in the future educator views regarding the hampering of communication that develops among them in the framework of project implementation and more specifically its impact on the smooth team operation and interpersonal relations of its members, as well as the factors that influence communication among cooperating team members, can be outlined as follows:

<sup>4</sup> The students feel comfortable to discuss within the context of a team, when they do not fear criticism by others (Green, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> We have been assisting the professor (of Primary Education Department of Democritus University of Thrace) Eleni Taratori since 1996 in the application of microteaching and the implementation of the project method.

a) **Regarding the negative communicational behaviours that took place during team member meetings and in the framework of their discussions**, the research subjects reported that these (behaviours) have relatively often disorientated members from the team goals (Mean=2.395) and disorganized them (Mean=2.338). However, they did not cause problems to team coherence (Mean=1.985) nor did they negatively influence interpersonal relations (Mean=1.916). Moreover, communication procedures that lasted long but were devoid of target do not appear to have influenced team members as they claim to have been slightly (50.2%) to not at all led to communicational exhaustion. In researching the sample response in relation to demographic variables from the application of independent samples t test, it emerges that men become more communicationally exhausted (Mean=2.76) compared to women (Mean=2.4). The difference of means is statistically significant ( $t=2.2$   $p=0.31$ ). It appears that women are more enduring in situations where the conversation has diverted from its purpose whereas men in the same circumstance consider this a waste of time.

b) **As far as hampering the communicational procedure is concerned**, by studying the replies to questions (6-21) that concern **the factors that hampered communication among cooperating team members**, we observe from the fluctuation of means that the students “incriminate” more a) member disposition (Mean=2.702), b) lack of information (Mean=2.543) and c) reduced interest of members on the topic under discussion (Mean=2.461). Next come factors such as: the wrong choice of time when the meeting takes place (Mean=2.322), interpersonal relations (Mean=2.224), lack of clear goals (Mean=2.212) and adequate argumentation (Mean=2.204). Problems such as the meeting venue, noise that might exist, the number and the culture of members, hasty conclusions, prejudice, oversensitivity of certain team members or reduced reliability of the speaker appear to be of least importance to them. Particularly with regard to the two first reasons, that of “member disposition” and of “lack of information of every member regarding the discussion topic”, after checking the means through the dependent samples t test, what has emerged is a statistically significant difference ( $t=2.545$   $p=0.012$ ).

Focusing on **speaker mistakes that lead to the hampering of the communicational procedure**, the students that participated in our research consider most important the ones that concern specific habits of the speaker such as a) being ironic, ridiculing and characterizing their interlocutor (Mean=3.652), b) negatively criticizing (Mean=3.58) and c) commanding (Mean=3.52). Next come habits such as: addressing the interlocutor in an interrogating manner (Mean=3.324), disregarding interlocutor emotions (Mean=3.236), hasty and arbitrary interpretation of facts or data (Mean=3.184), exaggerated praise and thoughtless reward (Mean=3.144). Students appear to incriminate least of all the interruption of the speaker in order to remark him/her on the consequences of his/her words or actions (Mean=2.728). A statistically significant difference in means was marked between the mistake that concerns the “habit of the speaker to address ironically the audience” and the habit of the speaker to “pose interrogating-like questions to their interlocutor” ( $t=5.906$   $p<0.001$ ).

### **Conclusions – Discussion**

In conclusion, the future educators that participated in our research, have worked as a team to plan and implement the project that they had undertaken. However, in order to have cooperation within the team, there has to be essential and effective communication among its members. To what extent was communication among them unhampered? Which were the negative factors that hindered it? The future educators that worked in the framework of the implementation of this project reported that sometimes lack of information was an obstacle to their unhampered communication in the team. Within a team, every member is considered to be a source of information, and he/she may not only provide but also ask for information from the other members (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011: 264). One would, therefore, expect all team members to care and contribute equally to the “depositing” of information for the implementation of their project. Unfortunately, such a thing - as our research participants point out - was not true in their case. As it has been pointed out in other research results (Green, 1998), only 1/3 of the team participated passionately in the project they had undertaken to implement by providing ideas and information. The rest of the participants started gradually to provide information, after the first ideas had been put to the table. However, how important is information for the effective implementation of a project? The information that team members provide during the project implementation contributes to everyone’s partaking in common knowledge and reflecting upon it.

Even information that is not connected to the team discussion, can be added to the total team knowledge<sup>6</sup>, without necessarily being linked to prior ideas or knowledge, and can contribute to the promotion of team tasks (Remedios, Clarke, & Hawthorne, 2008: 13). It should, therefore, be insured that – during a project implementation – all collaborating members have received, in good time<sup>7</sup>, information relevant to their project (Butt, Naaranoja, & Savolainen, 2016: 1582). The future educators that participated in our research reported also that decreased interest of members on the topic under discussion was to blame for the difficulty of communication among them. When one of the team members is talking, some others may be losing their interest in what he/she has to say and may form a new backstage discussion pole with other team members. To avoid such uncomfortable situations, it is advisable for teams to establish from the beginning rules that discourage competitive discussions (Remedios, Clarke, & Hawthorne, 2008: 10). Moreover, the speaker should make sure that he/she attracts the interest of his/her audience and should avoid practices that may lead to hindrance of the communicational procedure. Such practices, as participants of our research point out, include: a speaker addressing his/her interlocutor using irony and ridiculing, commanding him/her, ignoring his/her emotions etc.

In conclusion, we would like to stress the fact that the future educators that participated in our research reported that, during the implementation of the project they had undertaken, they cooperated harmoniously with their fellow team members. Problems that may have arisen for various reasons such as lack of information, decreased interest of members for the topic under discussion, bad disposition of members or inappropriate behavior on behalf of the speaker, may have –for a while –disorientated the members from the team goals - or even disorganized them - however, they did not break team cohesion nor did they influence negatively their interpersonal relations.

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<sup>6</sup> A research by Moti & Barzilai (2004: 50) clearly displays that, while implementing a project, participants quite often face a big volume of information. Information overload can be the cause of problems in interpersonal or inner-organizational communications (Zavlanos, 2002)

<sup>7</sup> Dissemination of information among them can be achieved not only during their meetings and their discussions, but also through electronic mail or handouts towards all team members.

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