

## Background of *Dysfunctional Groups!*

I think every teacher has found that some student-groups work well, and that other student-groups devolve quickly into a nightmare. Besides being counterproductive to learning, nightmare groups are not fun for the group members or for the teacher. In 2001/2 I kept observational records of students' behaviors that were counterproductive to their learning-groups.

Here are some observations: 1. The dysfunctional groups usually had only one student that was hindering everyone else's learning. 2. Most dysfunctional members had common tendencies; I found only 8 or 9 of different dysfunctional behaviors, which I later gave specific names. 3. Often the dysfunctional group members could not understand how their behavior were detrimental; consequently 4) when I stepped in to help, emotions were often so high that I had little impact on change.

It seemed to me that by merely increasing the students' awareness to the consequences of negative behaviors, I would not need to intervene as often.

To teach the awareness of problem behaviors, I had my students put on skits with one group-member displaying the dysfunctional behavior. The class was to guess the dysfunctional behavior by name. I had the following character names on the white board: A) Shy Guy/Gal, B) Dominator, C) Verbal Copy Machine, D) Social Butterfly, E) Race Car, F) Negatron, G) Poker, H) Interrupter, I) Ego-kid. (I did not come up with names "Shy Guy/Gal" or "Negatron." Ego-kid is actually new as of 2002/3. And newer ones were added since.)

After the skits, and during the year, I saw fewer incidents of dysfunctional behaviors, but what surprised me was a new group behavior: self-correction. Instead of groups getting frustrated with a hindering member -- where I would need to step in to help solve the problem -- I heard dialogs like this:

"Stop being a race car!"

"I'm not a race car."

"Yeah? How come you're on problem number 5 and we're on 3?"

"Oh, sorry."

I could not be happier. The year before, I would have had to talk to the racing student, and (in this case) he most likely would have been hurt when he learned that running ahead was not a good thing to do. He/she probably would have countered that it was a good thing to do in previous classes, etc. Imagine the time needed for that discussion.

I also saw a student -- who really did want to help his group-mate -- take a calculator out of his neighbor's hands to show her how to do something, but he stopped himself and said, "Whoops! I'm dominating!" and gave the calculator back. He then explained which buttons to push as she did the calculator operations.

It seems that naming dysfunctional behavior more powerful than I expected.

## Tips on Implementing *Dysfunctional Groups!*

There are probably many ways to teach the vocabulary that allows students to recognize and prevent dysfunctional group behaviors, but I found skits with class participation fun and powerful. Here are some thoughts on maximizing the effectiveness of this lesson.

**Timing:** I had my students perform the skits by the second week of school; after they have worked in their groups long enough to feel comfortable putting on a skit. Also, they had worked through enough of the text to know its expectations and approaches to learning.

**Precautions:** Before the students performed their skits, I warned the class not to worry too much if their skits faltered. Since the learning about dysfunctional behavior was the purpose of the lesson, I let them know that if they needed help during the skit, I would help them out. This pre-warning helped with the quality of the skits in two ways. 1) If the skit was going poorly, the students did not feel like they had failed when I needed to stepped in and become an acting group member. And 2) By them knowing that the important point was learning the problem behaviors and not the skit itself, they relaxed a bit and did a better job.

These skits require a prop, a story problem for the group to “solve” as they are trying to display the dysfunctional behavior. Sometimes students felt they needed to solve the story problem too. Remind them that the story problem is merely a prop.

**Class Participation:** Before the students put on their skits, I wrote the names of the the dysfunctional characters on the white board. Later, after each skit the rest of the class voted on “who” the dysfunctional character was (“Dominator, Negatron, etc.). This was a good lead-in to a class discussion on the problem and how to solve it.

**Handouts:** Each group member needs a copy of the same Scenario Page (A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, or I depending on your class size and needs). And each group should have a different scenario from other groups. Also, each group member needs a story problem to use as a prop. Since students do not write on these pages, a class set is all that is needed. Different color paper for each different Scenario helps in organization.

**Using Scenario Handouts:** The Scenario handouts have four sections. Last year, (which was the first year I had students perform the skits), we approached the lesson as follows: As a class students, we read *Part I* together. The students read and followed the directions of *Part II* in their groups.

**Following Up:** *Part III* (not on the handouts) is a class discussion. After the class voted on who the dysfunctional character was for a given skit, we would discuss the motivation behind the behavior and the solution to the problem. For example, after a skit with the “Negatron,” I would point out that the motivation was often fear of failing: “Negatrons are often afraid to look foolish, so they degrade the work to a point where failure doesn’t matter.” We then come up with three ways to attempt to make the group effective. And lastly, I point out that group members that attempt to make the group effective will not lose points in the grading process.

**Props:** Last year, students used a copy of a logic problem to use as a prop. It does not matter what the problem is, just as long as the problem has some reading and some math so the students have time to “misbehave.”

# Prop for Your Skit

Whitmore, Draft 2003/4

Directions: Use this Logic problem as a prop for your skit. You do not need to solve the problem, unless by attempting to do so, it helps you perform your skit. For your skit, you should have a student read aloud the following “problem,” or as a group try to solve the “problem.” Either way, the prop gives your group the setting for your skit.

## The Music Logic Problem to “Solve.”

Five students each play different instruments in their self-formed band. John, Jane, Jenn, Joe, and Jill play the electric flute, bass clarinet, alto sax, percussion, and guitar. As a group, identify which instrument each friend plays.

- a) Jane is friends with the percussionist, but can't abide by the flutist.
- b) The flutist lives downstairs from Joe, and down the block from Jenn
- c) Jill's friend plays bass clarinet.
- d) John plays the guitar, but wants to play the bass clarinet
- e) Jenn hates banging on things and wont. She doesn't like play the sax either.
- f) Jill and the percussionist are getting along.

Your group should use the grid below to eliminate possibilities. Use an “X” for a band member who you know doesn't play a specific instrument and a “O” for a band member who you know does play a specific instrument.

## Group Problem and Solving (A): **Shy Guy/Gal Scenario**

Whitmore, Draft 2003/4

### Part I: The Situation

Each group will put on a skit of problem solving within the group. Each group gets a different group-problem to solve. After your skit, the other groups will guess what your group problem was, so don't tell other groups about your problem.

Each group is also given a Logic Problem to use as part of the skit. You do not need to do this problem: The real assignment is the skit, not the props (Logic Problem). But, if your group finds it easier to actually try to solve the Logic Problem, go for it.

### Part II: The Skit Act I

Select a group member to be a "problem" in your group. He or she will play the role of **Shy Guy/Gal**. No other group has this problem.

Your Problem Member must act in a convincing way. He/she should drain the group of its power and this negative behavior should be apparent, but it should not be overly exaggerated or silly. If it is silly, nobody will see the relevance. If it is too subtle, nobody will see your problem.

#### *The Problem*

Shy Guy/Gal does not talk during the group discussion. Shy Guys/Gals merely listen and write answers, but do not participate with the group's discussions. They are often withdrawn and may even work completely by themselves, but would never, ever draw attention to themselves. The Shy Guy/Gal is a more subtle problem than the other problems and easily missed, it may be a good idea to animate your other members' discussion just a little.

Decide on who is playing the Problem Member, and practice your skit.

## Group Problem and Solving (B): **Dominator Scenario**

Whitmore, Draft 2003/4

### Part I: The Situation

Each group will perform a skit about a problem that involves a group member. Each group gets a different group-problem to solve. After your skit, the other groups will guess what your group's problem was; so, don't tell other groups about your problem.

Each group is also given a Logic Problem to use as part of the skit. You do not need to do this problem: The real assignment is the skit, not the props (Logic Problem). But, if your group finds it easier to actually try to solve the Logic Problem, go for it.

### Part II: The Skit Act I

Select a group member to be a "problem" in your group. He or she will play the role of **Dominator**. No other group has this problem.

Your Problem Member must act in a convincing way. He/she should drain the group of its power and this negative behavior should be apparent, but it should not be overly exaggerated or silly. If it is silly, nobody will see the relevance. If it is too subtle, nobody will see your problem.

#### *The Problem*

The Dominator does not allow others to participate in the group. This can be done by being bossy, cutting others off, or answering questions before others have a chance. This is often not a subtle problem, so don't let your skit get silly. Make it as real as possible. For example, have your dominator take the pencil out of a members hand to "teach" or "explain" -- but not grab it.

The most common problem of dominators is with calculators. Be sure your dominator takes a calculator from a neighbor's hands to show him/her how to use the calculator. (Your props don't lend themselves to calculator use, so maybe somebody could ask a question that plausibly could require a calculator. For example, somebody could lament, "How many possible answers does this problem have?")

Dominators don't usually mean to be disruptive. They often aren't aware of their behavior; even after being told to back off!

Decide on who is playing the Problem Member, and practice your skit.

## Group Problem and Solving (C): Verbal Copy Machine Scenario

Whitmore, Draft 2003/4

### Part I: The Situation

Each group will perform a skit about a problem that involves a group member. Each group gets a different group-problem to solve. After your skit, the other groups will guess what your group's problem was; so, don't tell other groups about your problem.

Each group is also given a Logic Problem to use as part of the skit. You do not need to do this problem: The real assignment is the skit, not the props (Logic Problem). But, if your group finds it easier to actually try to solve the Logic Problem, go for it.

### Part II: The Skit Act I

Select a group member to be a "problem" in your group. He or she will play the role of **Verbal Copy Machine**. No other group has this problem.

Your Problem Member must act in a convincing way. He/she should drain the group of its power and this negative behavior should be apparent, but it should not be overly exaggerated or silly. If it is silly, nobody will see the relevance. If it is too subtle, nobody will see your problem.

#### *The Problem*

The Verbal Copy Machine is not shy. Verbal Copy Machines look like they are participating; but they do not contribute. They merely write down what the group discusses. It isn't copying by looking at another's paper; it's verbal copying! (And no learning.)

This is a very subtle problem so you may need to exaggerate a little. If asked what he/she thinks, a Verbal Copy Machine will say, "I don't know. What do you think?" Or sometimes, they'll deflect the question from one student to the next; for example, Student A asks the Verbal Copy Machine a question, and the Verbal Copy Machine says, "I don't know Student A; Student B, what did you get?" Other common questions include "What did you get for this question?" and, "So, what did we decide on?"

Decide on who is playing the Problem Member, and practice your skit.

## Group Problem and Solving (D): **Social Butt-erfly Scenario**

Whitmore, Draft 2003/4

### Part I: The Situation

Each group will perform a skit about a problem that involves a group member. Each group gets a different group-problem to solve. After your skit, the other groups will guess what your group's problem was; so, don't tell other groups about your problem.

Each group is also given a Logic Problem to use as part of the skit. You do not need to do this problem: The real assignment is the skit, not the props (Logic Problem). But, if your group finds it easier to actually try to solve the Logic Problem, go for it.

### Part II: The Skit Act I

Select a group member to be a "problem" in your group. He or she will play the role of **Social Butt-erfly**. No other group has this problem.

Your Problem Member must act in a convincing way. He/she should drain the group of its power and this negative behavior should be apparent, but it should not be overly exaggerated or silly. If it is silly, nobody will see the relevance. If it is too subtle, nobody will see your problem.

#### *The Problem*

The Social Butt-erfly does not want to work, and he/she wants company in this desire. Social Butt-erflies talk about anything but the assignment. They find a topic that will interest other members and engage them in this topic. (It may not even matter to the Butt-erfly that the topic of conversation doesn't interest him/her; what matters is not having to work and not being alone in not working.)

A good Butt-erfly works in a subtle manner. Have the butterfly get one member of task then another, but always have somebody try to get back to work. Your group may go in and out of math, and slowly dissolve to completely off-task. Whoever plays the butt-erfly role should listen to the groups math-discussions and find a natural place to guide it off task. For example, if the prop-problem talks about musical instruments, the butt-erfy could say, "did you ever get your guitar fixed?" This would be especially effective if somebody in your group plays the guitar! As the Butt-erfly and his/her victim are talking, the rest of the group should keep trying to get back on task. Make it flow naturally.

Decide on who is playing the Problem Member, and practice your skit.

## Group Problem and Solving (E): Race Car Scenario

Whitmore, Draft 2003/4

### Part I: The Situation

Each group will perform a skit about a problem that involves a group member. Each group gets a different group-problem to solve. After your skit, the other groups will guess what your group's problem was; so, don't tell other groups about your problem.

Each group is also given a Logic Problem to use as part of the skit. You do not need to do this problem: The real assignment is the skit, not the props (Logic Problem). But, if your group finds it easier to actually try to solve the Logic Problem, go for it.

### Part II: The Skit Act I

Select a group member to be a "problem" in your group. He or she will play the role of **Race Car**. No other group has this problem.

Your Problem Member must act in a convincing way. He/she should drain the group of its power and this negative behavior should be apparent, but it should not be overly exaggerated or silly. If it is silly, nobody will see the relevance. If it is too subtle, nobody will see your problem.

#### *The Problem*

The Race Car does not wait for his/her group. Race Cars think that they can get more done by working by themselves. What makes Race Cars difficult is that in most cases, they can get more done by going on ahead. But, at a cost. They finish first, but they miss much of the learning. (They get the delivery truck to the shipping docks, but all the goods flew out of the truck!) Not only do they earn a shallow understanding of the math, they often frustrate the rest of the group by having somebody sitting there racing ahead and not sharing.

Race Cars are easy to see if you are in the group, but they are not so easy to spot if you are outside the group. You may need to exaggerate this a little (but don't over do it!). Maybe have a few members say exasperatedly, "What number on you on? Will you wait?" Or maybe have the Race Car complain that the group goes too slow.

Decide on who is playing the Problem Member, and practice your skit.



## Group Problem and Solving (F): Negatron Scenario

Whitmore, Draft 2003/4

### Part I: The Situation

Each group will perform a skit about a problem that involves a group member. Each group gets a different group-problem to solve. After your skit, the other groups will guess what your group's problem was; so, don't tell other groups about your problem.

Each group is also given a Logic Problem to use as part of the skit. You do not need to do this problem: The real assignment is the skit, not the props (Logic Problem). But, if your group finds it easier to actually try to solve the Logic Problem, go for it.

### Part II: The Skit Act I

Select a group member to be a "problem" in your group. He or she will play the role of **Negatron**. No other group has this problem.

Your Problem Member must act in a convincing way. He/she should drain the group of its power and this negative behavior should be apparent, but it should not be overly exaggerated or silly. If it is silly, nobody will see the relevance. If it is too subtle, nobody will see your problem.

#### *The Problem*

The Negatron is always negative. Everything is "stupid." Negatrons are negative for a variety of reasons: Scared or insecure, habit, thinks it's cool, etc. Your Negatron should have in his/her mind the reason for being negative. Remember, it's not typically because of a "bad day." Negatrons are usually negative as a defense mechanism. A Negatron may think, "If I put something down, it won't matter if I do poorly." Or, "If I'm negative, I'm cool: It's all below me!"

Negatrons can make the discussions uncomfortable and the group experience unpleasant; your group members should show social discomfort.

Decide on who is playing the Problem Member, and practice your skit.

## Group Problem and Solving (G): **Poker Scenario**

Whitmore, Draft 2003/4

### Part I: The Situation

Each group will perform a skit about a problem that involves a group member. Each group gets a different group-problem to solve. After your skit, the other groups will guess what your group's problem was; so, don't tell other groups about your problem.

Each group is also given a Logic Problem to use as part of the skit. You do not need to do this problem: The real assignment is the skit, not the props (Logic Problem). But, if your group finds it easier to actually try to solve the Logic Problem, go for it.

### Part II: The Skit Act I

Select a group member to be a "problem" in your group. He or she will play the role of **Poker**. No other group has this problem.

Your Problem Member must act in a convincing way. He/she should drain the group of its power and this negative behavior should be apparent, but it should not be overly exaggerated or silly. If it is silly, nobody will see the relevance. If it is too subtle, nobody will see your problem.

#### *The Problem*

The Poker loves attention. Pokers poke their neighbors. They get into their neighbors' notebooks and things. They reach way over and grab other's stuff. This problem is easy to exaggerate, so be careful. Pokers are irritating. They may even poke verbally, but when they do, it is very, very subtle: Just to irritate, but not to call attention from the teacher! (They don't need to put down their neighbors; they could just repeat the same phrase over and over again. It's not the words, it's the repetition that is irritating.)

Decide on who is playing the Problem Member, and practice your skit.

## Group Problem and Solving (H): **Interrupter Scenario**

Whitmore, Draft 2003/4

### Part I: The Situation

Each group will put on a skit of problem solving within the group. Each group gets a different group-problem to solve. After your skit, the other groups will guess what your group problem was, so don't tell other groups about your problem.

Each group is also given a Logic Problem to use as part of the skit. You do not need to do this problem: The real assignment is the skit, not the props (Logic Problem). But, if your group finds it easier to actually try to solve the Logic Problem, go for it.

### Part II: The Skit Act I

Select a group member to be a "problem" in your group. He or she will play the role of **Interrupter**. No other group has this problem.

Your Problem Member must act in a convincing way. He/she should drain the group of its power and this negative behavior should be apparent, but it should not be overly exaggerated or silly. If it is silly, nobody will see the relevance. If it is too subtle, nobody will see your problem.

#### *The Problem*

The Interrupter wants to share. But, Interrupters don't let others finish. However, they do let them start. This is easy to exaggerate, so be careful. The interrupter does not grab other peoples stuff; they are very good talkers.

Decide on who is playing the Problem Member, and practice your skit.

## Group Problem and Solving (I): Ego-Kid Scenario

Whitmore, Draft 2003/4

### Part I: The Situation

Each group will perform a skit about a problem that involves a group member. Each group gets a different group-problem to solve. After your skit, the other groups will guess what your group's problem was; so, don't tell other groups about your problem.

Each group is also given a Logic Problem to use as part of the skit. You do not need to do this problem: The real assignment is the skit, not the props (Logic Problem). But, if your group finds it easier to actually try to solve the Logic Problem, go for it.

### Part II: The Skit Act I

Select a group member to be a "problem" in your group. He or she will play the role of **Ego-Kid**. No other group has this problem.

Your Problem Member must act in a convincing way. He/she should drain the group of its power and this negative behavior should be apparent, but it should not be overly exaggerated or silly. If it is silly, nobody will see the relevance. If it is too subtle, nobody will see your problem.

#### *The Problem*

The Ego-Kid wants to share. But, Ego-kids want to share how wonderful they are. Ego-kids show their stuff in many ways: 1) Some Ego-kids merely brag. "I so much faster at this than you guys." "I don't know why we are doing this math, I find it so easy." "What's taking you so long?" "This is easy!" "I got a 100%, what did you get?" 2) On the other hand, some Ego-kids are more subtle: Some make jokes about how good they are. They actually use the same words as the simple braggart, but it is said in a manner that is often light and funny. Ego-kids that try the humorous approach are often successful the first time they employ the lighthearted approach; but, after time, hearing how wonderful somebody is will get old, not matter how lighthearted it is!

Decide on who is playing the Problem Member, and practice your skit.

## Group Problem and Solving (J): Saboteur Scenario

Whitmore, Draft 2003/4

### Part I: The Situation

Each group will perform a skit about a problem that involves a group member. Each group gets a different group-problem to solve. After your skit, the other groups will guess what your group's problem was; so, don't tell other groups about your problem.

Each group is also given a Logic Problem to use as part of the skit. You do not need to do this problem: The real assignment is the skit, not the props (Logic Problem). But, if your group finds it easier to actually try to solve the Logic Problem, go for it.

### Part II: The Skit Act I

Select a group member to be a "problem" in your group. He or she will play the role **Saboteur**. No other group has this problem.

Your Problem Member must act in a convincing way. He/she should drain the group of its power and this negative behavior should be apparent, but it should not be overly exaggerated or silly. If it is silly, nobody will see the relevance. If it is too subtle, nobody will see your problem.

#### *The Problem*

The Saboteur wants all of the group to suffer. If he/she isn't understanding the material, no one will!! He/she will intentionally stall in group discussion, or ignore input from teammates. The efforts of the saboteur is not overt; he/she doesn't grab pencils, or say negative things. In fact, he/she does not want to have any thing put on him/her. The Saboteur just wants the group to suffer in frustration.

Decide on who is playing the Problem Member, and practice your skit.

## Group Problem and Solving (K): **Insensitron Scenario**

Whitmore, Draft 2003/4

### Part I: The Situation

Each group will perform a skit about a problem that involves a group member. Each group gets a different group-problem to solve. After your skit, the other groups will guess what your group's problem was; so, don't tell other groups about your problem.

Each group is also given a Logic Problem to use as part of the skit. You do not need to do this problem: The real assignment is the skit, not the props (Logic Problem). But, if your group finds it easier to actually try to solve the Logic Problem, go for it.

### Part II: The Skit Act I

Select a group member to be a "problem" in your group. He or she will play the role of **Insensitron**. No other group has this problem.

Your Problem Member must act in a convincing way. He/she should drain the group of its power and this negative behavior should be apparent, but it should not be overly exaggerated or silly. If it is silly, nobody will see the relevance. If it is too subtle, nobody will see your problem.

#### *The Problem*

The Insensitron is just insensitive. He/she doesn't mean to be rude, just unaware. He or she may say things that irk others, but then doesn't understand why everyone is upset. In fact, the insensitron may even think others are against him. Why? He/she doesn't understand that his/her insensitive behavior is what is causing the others to respond so negatively. Your Insensitron needs to be insensitive, then offended when others slight him/her.

Decide on who is playing the Problem Member, and practice your skit.