

Teaching Tips/Notes



Hive Mind: Using a Social Media Metaphor to Create Cognitive Presence

Introduction

How do we get students to turn off their smart phones and be cognitively present in the classroom? One technique is to use online concepts—such as the hive mind—to structure offline settings. The Hive Mind refers to the collective knowledge, resources, and ability of a group. On social media, for example, a person looking for recommendations about a great podcast for their upcoming vacation might post to Facebook, “Help me, hive mind! I need recommendations!” (See, for example, Koh, 2014). The term hive mind predates social media and references the complex group communications of honey bees (Seeley, 1995); however, most students are familiar with and associate it with social media. In the classroom, the hive mind metaphor can be used to encourage classroom interaction, peer-to-peer learning, and to elucidate core themes.

This teaching tip will first describe the project for which I use the concept of hive mind—the Nonprofit Market Research project. Next, it will describe the procedures of “Hive Mind Day” in the classroom. Finally, it will conclude by describing the benefits of process for the students. While the context here is nonprofit management, this process would translate well in many other subject matters.

Procedure: Nonprofit Market Research

“Hive Mind Days” occur four times during a semester-long market research project as part of a course in nonprofit management fundamentals. The goals of this project are to a) demonstrate variation within the nonprofit sector, b) elucidate course concepts, and c) develop students’ critical thinking skills. Students work in teams of four to analyze four nonprofit organizations of their choosing. Students first individually choose an organization they would like to study (with some parameters) and, then, I form teams of four based on the nonprofit subsector (e.g., arts and culture, health, education, human services, etc.). The individual-level choice increases students’ interest in the topic (Patall et al., 2010) and, presumably, the subsector-level grouping increases students’ interest in team members because of the shared interests.

The project includes four assignments: board governance and leadership, human resource and staffing, revenue, and finances. Each assignment has two parts. First, students individually collect data about their organization from publicly-available tax forms and websites and, then, answer questions about why the data is the way it is. For example, for the finance assignment, the students must identify how much income is received from donations, program services, or other sources and, then, reflect on why that particular organization might have that particular income breakdown. Second, teams compile data from the four organizations and identify patterns and variation. For example, the team may identify a pattern that larger organizations tended to have more program service income, or that all their organizations from a specific subsector had a similar percentage of income from donations.

Hive Mind Days occur after the students have completed an individual assignment but before the team completes their group assignment. On those days, students are encouraged to bring laptops to class (or to share with their peers). They are instructed to work in teams to complete their team assignment. That is, they must look at the data from all four organizations and, with targeted prompt questions, identify patterns and variation.

When teams run into patterns and variation that do not make sense, they raise their hand and I walk over to them. Assuming the question is something that would benefit from a Hive Mind approach, I ask the entire class to stop what they are doing and “hive mind” the problem. The team describes the data and asks the class for help explaining what is going on. Table 1 lists a few examples of the sorts of questions and answers that are exchanged on Hive Mind Days.

Table 1. Sample Hive Mind Conversations

Common Team Questions	Potential Hive Mind Answers
One of our organizations has expenses that are greater than income. That seems like a bad idea. Why would they do that?	Perhaps they had extra money from last year they were saving to spend this year? Are they building a new building or starting a new program?
One of our organizations has 25 board members. That seems like too many. Why would they do that?	Do they have a strong committee structure? Is it a prestigious board? Maybe they are all “rubber stampers” who pay money but do not contribute?
One of our organizations has no volunteers. That does not make sense. Why would they do that?	Did they forget to fill in that box on the tax form? What is their mission? Is it the type of thing that would be better executed by a paid professional?

Assessment: The Benefits of a Hive Mind

Hive Mind Days have pedagogical and practical benefits. First, it provides a structured way for students to practice soliciting feedback, an invaluable professional and personal skill. Second, it facilitates the emergence of core course concepts and themes that cut across many groups, thus making learning time efficient. Third, it facilitates the emergence of idiosyncratic examples that otherwise would only be explored by one group. Fourth, it challenges the traditional dynamic of teacher-as-impartor-of-wisdom. In this scenario, learning is driven by students’ questions and curiosity. The fifth and final benefit of Hive Mind Days is that it is fun. Students enjoy focusing on their self-chosen area but also being a part of a larger process. Hive Mind Days are buzzing with energy, curiosity, ideas, and, ultimately, cognitive presence.

Literature Cited

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