Exploring the Typical Features and Structure of an Argumentative Essay with a Simple Example

Key Guide:
- Bold facing of text is used to highlight the words which indicate the topic of a sentence.
- Underlining is used to highlight words whose function is to indicate the logical connection between ideas to the reader.
- Italics is used for emphasis and would be used even in unannotated text.

Diversity: Help or Hindrance to Group Performance?

*Context or background which provides the **motivation** for discussing the issue or question addressed by the essay.*

In an increasingly complex and competitive business world, how is a company to generate the creative ideas needed for ongoing success? Many managers believe that forming teams with cross-functional diversity is the answer (Sethi et al., 2002), and this is becoming increasingly common (Mu & Gnyawali, 2003). However, while diversity in group membership *may* lead to the diversity of ideas needed for innovative problem solving, it is argued here that that managers need to be aware that there are many ways that diversity can in fact hinder team performance, though there are strategies that both teams and their managers can use to reduce the potential negatives and enhance the potential positives.

__Thesis statement__: the overall claim that will be defended with evidence and reasoning in the body of the essay.

A good thesis implies a structure. In this case, that there will be:
- *explanations of the ways that different types of diversity can negatively impact team performance*
- *followed by an explanation of the strategies teams and their managers can use to reduce these negatives and enhance positives.*

__Analysis__ is important for top marks. In this case, analysis means breaking down *the broad concept of diversity to consider the possibly differing ways that different types of diversity might affect group performance.*

Aside from the cross-functional diversity, **many other types of diversity** can have effects on team performance and **some of these types of diversity can have inherently negative effects**. For example, any negative stereotyping by group members resulting from diversity in terms of gender, age or ethnicity will reduce team social cohesion and hence group performance (Fiske & Neuberg, 1990, as cited in Harrison et al., 2002) because a certain amount of social cohesion has been found to be correlated with effective group performance (Harrison et al., 2002). Other aspects of diversity, such as in attitudes towards the group's tasks, in values, and in time management styles, can also negatively affect group social cohesion and hence group performance (Fiske & Neuberg, 1990, as cited in Harrison et al., 2002).

*Paragraph starts with a **topic sentence** which introduces the topic of the paragraph. In this case the topic is announced as a claim (words in bold face) which supports the thesis.*

*This is the **evidence** and **reasoning** which supports the claim being made in this paragraph. Note that the evidence is not simply* described*; "because" and "hence" indicate that a* reason *is being given and that a* conclusion *from the presented evidence is being drawn.*

The sorts of diversity that are most likely to be beneficial to group performance, such as diversity in relevant knowledge, experience and skills (Harrison et al., 2002), **can unfortunately *also* cause problems for group performance**. Having *too many* diverse views and opinions to coordinate can, for example, cause cognitive overload amongst group members and so impede its decision making processes (Mu & Gnyawali, 2003; Sethi et al., 2002). This is especially likely to be a problem when the team has a limited amount of time to complete its tasks (Mu & Gnyawali, 2003). The cross-functional diversity mentioned above can also cause problems if group members have difficulty understanding and coordinating the differing world views and values of group members from different functional areas (Colbeck et al., 2000 and Gallos, 1989, as cited in Mu & Gnyawali, 2003).

__Topic sentence__: again in the form of a sub-claim.

Note the use of concrete examples ("such as") to help the reader understand what the writer means by "the sorts of diversity that are most likely to be beneficial to group performance".

*Note again how the writer has not simply said, for example, that "having too many ideas can be a problem", but has also **explained** why having too many ideas can be a problem. This is necessary for the reader to* understand *the **argument** being made.*

Given all the above-mentioned problems associated with diversity, **are there strategies that a team and its managers can implement to reduce the potential negatives and enhance the potential positives**? Regarding cognitive overload, evidently a team needs to be given an adequate amount of time to complete its task. Scheduling frequent collaboration can also be used to build social cohesion and overcome the potential negative impacts of stereotypes (Harrison et al., 2002) provided "team psychological safety" is fostered in the group (Mu & Gnyawali, 2003). And since *too much* social cohesion can cause teams to avoid the robust debate needed to generate the best thinking in order to protect social relationships, management encouragement of the group to be "venturesome" in its work can also be helpful (Sethi et al., 2002).

In conclusion, it appears that if managers wish to create especially effective teams, they should seek to *minimise* diversity in terms of task and time management values, while looking to *maximise* differences in relevant knowledge and skills. They should further aim to foster as much collaboration as possible so as to develop team social cohesion, have rules about interactions which foster team psychological safety, and encourage the team to be venturesome. Unless these things are done, managers will likely find diversity more a hindrance than a help for group performance.

References

Harrison, D. A., Price, K. H., Gavin, J. H., & Florey, A. T. (2002). Time, teams, and task performance: changing effects of surface- and deep-level diversity on group functioning. *Academy of Management Journal*, *45*(5), 1029-1045.

Mu, S., & Gnyawali, D. R. (2003). Developing synergistic knowledge in student groups. *The Journal of Higher Education*, *74*(6), 689-711.

Sethi, R., Smith, D. C., & Park, C. W. (2002). How to kill a team's creativity. *Harvard Business Review*, *80*(8), 16-17.

Essay Structure

Students often ask if their essay has "a good structure". One way of assessing this for yourself is to list the question(s) each paragraph answers and asking yourself if that list is:

a) in a logical order (e.g. problem identification → solutions for the identified problems; terms are defined *before* you start discussing them in earnest);

b) comprehensive (e.g. answers all the questions an interested reader would have and covers all important points of view);

c) doesn't include anything irrelevant to the overall argument.

Such a list can be created after writing during the editing phase, or before you start writing in the researching and planning stages.

For this essay, the question structure is:

1. <u>Why</u> is diversity and group performance of interest and <u>what</u> will be claimed in relation to the common belief that cross-functional diversity aids innovative problem solving?

2. <u>What</u> types of diversity tend to have an *inherently negative* effect on group performance and <u>why</u> is that the case?

3. <u>Why</u> can the sorts of diversity which are *supposed* to aid group creativity also be inimical to good group performance?

4. <u>What</u> can teams and their managers do to overcome the potentially negative effects on group performance?

5. What is the final "takeaway message" about diversity and group performance?

If you go back to the essay's thesis, you will notice that this structure flows out of that thesis: the body provides the evidence and reasoning which supports the thesis.