

Group Work Teaching

Quality Enhancement Department project, University of Derby, March - June 2010

Summary

Group work is rarely plain sailing even in well-planned, managed and supported projects but the lecturers agree on one thing - they would not want their students to miss out on the group work experience. Group work teaching is a complex task and the approaches taken depend on whether the output or the process is assessed; on conditions like student numbers and allocated teaching time; the amount of subject content that has to be covered alongside the project; the number of times it has been implemented; and whether solutions to common challenges like the free-rider issue have been found.

In an attempt to improve the students' experiences related to group work, the Quality Enhancement Department conducted a group work project to explore the teachers' experiences with group work and to develop recommendations from it. It emerged that group work teaching is too case specific to advocate a single right approach but there is a lot of good practice within the University of Derby lecturers could draw from.

The project was conducted between March and June 2010 and involved informal interviews with nine lecturers from various Schools (Technology, Law, Business, Education, Culture and Lifestyle) and the observation of three class presentations in three Schools (Technology, Law, Culture and Lifestyle). The interviews were guided by the questions outlined in appendix 1 and lecturers have been recruited in a snowballing fashion after the Quality Enhancement Manager provided a few initial contacts. The lecturers who took part did so voluntarily and I would like to thank them for taking the time out of their busy working days to share their experiences, reflect on their practice and for verifying the summary report which was circulated thereafter.

The report summarises the main points in five sections: group work formats; practical considerations, assessment practice; challenges and future support and each section is supplemented with a practitioners' voice box which captures some of the lecturers' comments. From this a list of recommendations was drawn up.

Group work formats

The length of the group work projects vary from a few weeks to up to a year and although group work teaching methods help distribute the workload more evenly throughout the academic year, they are generally considered to be equally time-consuming if the project is well-planned, managed and supported. A lot of preparatory work goes, for instance, into establishing contacts and settling agreements when external partners are involved.

Groups are formed both through self-selection and through teacher allocation and lecturers who have experimented with both group allocation methods, agree that the method should be chosen according to the circumstances rather than it being a case of one working better than the other.

Lecturers choose group work teaching methods for educational reasons i.e. exposing students to group dynamics in order to enhance their group work skills and/or for practical reasons i.e. for students to demonstrate their practical skills or for coping with large student numbers. The degree of importance attached to educational vis-à-vis practical considerations seems to vary along subject areas. Subject areas like for instance education where interpersonal and group skills are seminal to professional practice seem to attribute greater importance to the group process which reflects in the fact that they assess the process rather than the output. In contrast, subject areas like technology are more intent on students demonstrating their technical skills and are therefore assessing the output.

Practitioners' voice

- Odd rather than even group numbers facilitate the decision making process
- Self-selection has not skewed group performance
- Self-selection in classes with large numbers of international students leads to students grouping together according to nationalities
- A mixed approach to self-selection and teacher allocation worked well when students pair up and then the pairs are allocated into groups.
- Groups can be allocated based on interpersonal skills or subject knowledge
- Students accept either allocation method as long as the thinking behind it is made explicit

Practical considerations

Students are commonly provided subject knowledge before the group work project starts so that they are able to work on the set task. However, in terms of input on group processes lecturers are taking different stances. Some group work teaching is carefully coordinated at programme level so that students gradually build their group work skills as they move through the modules. In this case, third year students, for instance, are no longer provided with input on group processes as they are expected to have reached a stage where they can work independently on their group projects. But support sessions are still available for any difficulties the students might encounter and groups are required to submit regular progress reports so that the lecturer knows whether the students are on track or not.

Another case where no prior input on group processes is provided is when the teacher takes a constructivist approach. This lecturer believes that interpersonal processes are best understood through personal experience and less so through textbook teaching. This means that he deals with subject and group related issues as they emerge and he does so effectively by providing the time, the space and a platform for students to raise issues as they emerge.

Circumstances which allow only for limited support with group processes seem to coincide with large student numbers and with time constrictions related to the contact time being taken up largely by teaching subject knowledge. Large student numbers might even prevent the lecturer from knowing the individual students which makes it almost impossible to follow individual student's progress throughout a group project.

Practitioners' voice

- In hindsight I would make the task to students even clearer
- Regular progress reports are a good way of keeping track
- Giving concrete guidance on individual reflective reports increases quality
- Textbook teaching on group processes simply does not do the trick
- To master group work skills students need continuous support along the way

Assessment practice

Lecturers use an array of assessment methods depending on whether they are assessing the output or the process and on what skills they are assessing. Most commonly, lecturers are using a mixture of methods to assess both the output and the individual progress which is commonly assessed through reflective elements. Lecturers think that students get either similar or higher marks than they would have got in individual assignments and that weaker students are benefiting by getting better grades in group work. However, many students are worried about marks related to group work and this concern also reflects in group presentations.

Lecturers are aware that students get really nervous over group presentations and are using different methods to put students at ease. One lecturer has spent a considerable amount of time on presentation techniques which meant students felt confident about what they were doing and so felt more at ease. Other good practice included: explaining technical equipment at the outset; encouraging students at the outset of each presentation; positive and constructive feedback at the end of each presentation; peer assessment of fellow students as it distracts the students' attention from their own presentation; giving students individual feedback on their presentations; and making fellow students attend presentations as it takes away the attention from the examiners.

A few student comments captured during question time after their presentations are listed below and give a glimpse of how students experience group work.

Student comments:

"We had a tough time and were at each others' throats"

"We had communication issues, missed leadership and were on the whole quite disoriented"

"I didn't engage at first because I didn't take the module serious and just wanted to pass but then I realised that I had to pull my weight like everybody else"

"Some of us worked together before, we got on really well and had no issues at all"

"I didn't put in any effort but then I realised that I had to take it up a level to be fair with the others. So I made an effort to integrate with the others and put in some work"

"As a team leader I wouldn't assume things anymore and follow up emails with SMS and calls"

"The advice I would give to other students is to keep at it no matter what, allow others to take control and let others lead"

Practitioners' voice

- Allocating a group rather than an individual mark is a source of discontent
- Giving an individual mark in group work is challenging because it is difficult to judge who did what
- Assessing the output as opposed to the process diverts the students attention from the group process
- Groups who have had their share of difficulties seem to get more out of the process than others
- Having a representative from the external partner present at the group presentations really boosted the students' motivation.
- Video recordings of group presentations could be reviewed with students and used as a formative assessment tool
- Students seem to do better in presentations than in the written part

Challenges

Group work is rarely plain sailing and although one lecturer mentioned that the students are really enthusiastic about group work others have said that students do 'pull faces' when they are first introduced to the idea of working in groups. It seems that conflicts are innate to the group process, originating from the group formation processes; the marking processes; interpersonal factors; free-rider issues; and anxieties related to presentations. The practitioners' voices below give a snapshot of how different issues have been addressed by lecturers.

Regarding international students and students from diverse ethnic backgrounds, lecturers had not noticed any particular issue relating to these two student cohorts. Nevertheless, a few observations have been made and are worth mentioning. Students tend to split up by nationality if allocated through self-selection but this was not considered a problem and was even welcomed in some instances as it simplified the marking process where language competencies had to be taken into account. One lecturer observed that on the whole international students seemed keener but that they have different work ethics. What has caused some consternation in one project were prolonged bereavement periods for some students who as a result were perceived to be constantly absent from group work meetings. In another instance, it was noticed that all students from diverse ethnic backgrounds were absent from the Away-day where the group project was initiated but during the subsequent year 3/5 students from diverse ethnic backgrounds attended.

Practitioners' voice

- ❑ The free-rider issue is reduced in groups of three
- ❑ Allocating specific roles and responsibilities to students helps tackling the free-rider issue
- ❑ Some students did not manage to live up to their potential in their presentation
- ❑ One reason why our group work module works so well is that it has been continuously improved during the seven years it has been running.
- ❑ Finding the right external partner is crucial for making group projects work

Support

Lecturers have mentioned a few things that might assist group work teaching although some qualified them by saying that these were ideal world requests rather than anything they believed to be feasible. I will let the lecturers speak for themselves.

Lecturer comments

"Things are running pretty well, but perhaps a session on group work in the learning teaching and assessment forum would be helpful"

"A platform for lecturers to exchange group work practices would be helpful. I would love to hear what others have tried"

"Ideally I would like more time for my module so that there is time at the end to reflect on group work processes but under the current circumstances subject teaching demands will not allow for this."

"A booklet for students to give them some input on group processes might be helpful but how many of them would actually read such a booklet"

"Seven years ago when we run this module for the first time I would probably have asked for electronic tools to support the process but as we do have them now, I would probably ask for a larger budget allowance so that we could increase the current budget of £30.- each group is allocated. But I'm well aware that is not going to happen"

"At the moment it seems that I'm inventing everything from scratch so most of all I would like the learning, teaching and assessment platform to be up and running."

"It would be really nice if there was the time and opportunity for students to observe other groups while working so that they get an understanding of how people work and interact with each other; what messages body language sends and what impacts facial expressions might have. This would provide a good basis for reflection and discussion."

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