Assessment Matters: Group Work Assessment

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GROUP WORK

Group assessment is widely used across the University and has many intellectual and social benefits. At the same time, group assessment is one of the most challenging and contentious forms of assessment. The literature provides a range of ideas and strategies for maximizing the potential of group work and making it an equitable and enjoyable experience for students. Some of these ideas and strategies are outlined here, but group assessment will always raise issues of personal dynamics, accountability and equity. As teachers we need to be vigilant about these issues and set up systems and processes to manage them as well as possible.

BENEFITS & TYPICAL DIFFICULTIES

Why use group assessment?

There are a number of generic benefits potentially offered by group tasks. These include preparation for working in teams which is the norm in most workplaces and the pooling of a range of competencies, personalities and intellectual dispositions to achieve a better product. Furthermore, intellectual growth can be promoted through exposure to a range of perspectives. The literature also argues for the potential development of social skills through group work (Kriflik, 2007).

Group work is also the optimum assessment for some specific learning outcomes. These include team work, project management, the development of problem-solving abilities, the nurturing of communication attributes such as facilitation, feedback, negotiation and conflict management skills. Group work can also foster strategic and critical thinking. Many of these skills align well with the emphasis on graduate attributes (Boud, Cohen & Sampson, 1999).

Collective learning opportunities may be more appropriate for some groups of students than individual competitive methods (Boud, Cohen & Sampson, 1999).

Group learning potentially provides more opportunities for students to converse around their learning than many other classroom environments. Articulating their emerging understanding of an area can deepen students’ grasp of the subject (Boud, Cohen & Sampson, 1999).
Typical difficulties encountered in group assessment

Both students and academic teachers commonly report instances of group dysfunction or conflict. In some instances there are personality conflicts, but more frequently difficulties occur over feelings about unequal contribution to the group effort. Some students report that group members do not do their share of the work or fail to attend meetings or keep to deadlines. Other students complain that they are left with the task of pulling a piece of work together or writing up an entire group report.

Another common point of discussion is the formation of group membership, in terms of experience, culture, prior knowledge, and range of competencies.

A related concern expressed by both domestic and overseas students is managing cultural diversity in groups. Domestic students sometimes complain that group productivity is held back by those whose first language is not English, while overseas students often report inhospitality from their domestic counterparts and exclusion from participation in significant aspects of the group task.

Academic teachers also comment on all of these difficulties with group work and observe the problem that group work sometimes becomes a collection of individual pieces and defeats the goal of genuine collaboration and pooling of ideas.

Conversely, group learning instead of harnessing the unique insights of the participating students, can sometimes produce group think (Boud, Cohen & Sampson, 1999).

From a teacher’s perspective, two other perplexing questions are how to allocate marks to group tasks and how to manage the groups so as to ensure productive and a positive collaborative experience.
2. GOOD PRINCIPLES

Different strategies and approaches to managing group work will suit particular contexts, situations and group tasks. However, when introducing group work, a checklist of good general principles can inform the way you set up and manage the process. These principles are pertinent to most teaching and learning situations. When using group assessment consider:

• Ensuring that the group task aligns well with learning outcomes and is reinforced through other course learning approaches.

• Providing coaching in the skills and processes of group work.

• Providing formative opportunities to practise working in groups on smaller tasks.

• Encouraging students to reflect on group learning processes.

• Having ongoing conversations with student groups.

• Having well-defined process steps and systems for students to record their progress.

• Trying to ensure that nobody is isolated if the groups are culturally heterogeneous.

• Inviting the groups to use a process such as a SWOT analysis or Belbin's team roles to allocate responsibilities in the group.

• Requiring some preliminary individual component as a precursor to the group task.

• Providing detailed assessment criteria for the group task (Kriflik, 2007). If possible, invite students to give peer feedback on practice tasks using these criteria.

• Inviting groups to engage in regular reflection on group process using a checklist.

• Outlining a clear set of steps for managing difficulties that may arise.

• Breaking the group task into steps. Require documentation of and/or reflection on these steps. Provide formative feedback or use peer feedback processes to enhance the subsequent stages of the task.

• Incorporating peer assessment components to deepen reflection and engagement (Falchikov & Goldfinch, 2002).

• Allowing some in-class time for group work and conversing with the groups as they work.

• Setting up an online component for the group to report regularly on their processes and their progress on the task.

• Including an individual component such as a reflective journal or an individual report to improve individual accountability.

• Requiring equal participation from all group members in any oral component of group work.

• Giving a percentage of the marks for completion of the process steps.

• Including tasks that require evidence of individual contributions.
3. SOME STRATEGIES FOR GROUP FORMATION

There is no conclusive evidence about the best composition of groups, with arguments being voiced for a range of strategies. However, if managing diversity and intellectual complexity is a goal, heterogeneity is probably best and this is better workplace preparation. However, others argue for the potential productivity of groups based on friendship or compatibility.

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<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Advantages</th>
<th>Considerations</th>
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<td>student self-selection</td>
<td>students choose who to work with</td>
<td>students overlooked or rejected</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>inequity in skill distribution</td>
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<td>inequity in task distribution</td>
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<td>selective appointment</td>
<td>students have common goals</td>
<td>low achievers not exposed to high expectations</td>
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<td>groups formed on the</td>
<td>less pressure on low achievers</td>
<td>friends with shared aspirations may have difficulty</td>
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<td>basis of criteria, i.e.</td>
<td>students skills recognised and rewarded as</td>
<td>in accepting a newcomer</td>
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<td>mark aspirations,</td>
<td>being proficient</td>
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<td>meeting times,</td>
<td>appreciation of diversity required in group</td>
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<td>complementary skills,</td>
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<td>random selection</td>
<td>opportunity for students to learn from new</td>
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<td>opportunity to enhance communication skills</td>
<td>students resent lack of choice</td>
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Table 1: Group Selection Options
REFERENCES


Make a space at your place for teaching.