Developing Group Learning Through Assessment

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Abstract: This case study documents an innovative approach to assessment designed to encourage students to focus on the process of collaboration. It shifts student attention from focusing almost exclusively on performance and outcomes to attitudes which begin to value co-operation and group dynamics.

Keywords: future learning, "difficult" group participants, salient point, unproductive disharmony.

Introduction

In so doing, the intention was not only that students might develop and acquire important collaborative skills such as communication, negotiation, self-initiative, resourcefulness and conflict management, but that their ultimate performance grade might consequently be improved when such characteristics were manifest, observed and part of the assessment process. Although collaboration is often the context of learning within the performing arts, it is rarely a focus of it, due to an almost universal emphasis on individual task objectives and performance.

1.Perhaps unsurprisingly, our research also revealed that students frequently felt that this emphasis on outcomes was 'unfair' as it did not differentiate between group members who contributed positively and those who were 'passengers', or, worse, may have had a generally negative influence on the group.

2.Tutors were often aware of their students' grievance that individual effort and input into group work was not formally recognised, but seemed unable to remedy the situation. This was due either to rigid assessment regulations or, more frequently, to a perceived scarcity of appropriate and fair methods to allocate credit for the processes of group-work-assessed tasks. Where we encountered evidence of tutors applying sound pedagogical theories of learning in teams with successful results (Boud, 1995; Bourner *et al*., 2001; Brown and Glasner, 1999; Gibbs, 1995; Jaques, 2001; Janis, 1972; Johnson and Johnson, 1994), this was seldom made explicit to students and rarely accrued academic credit.

In short, comments expressed by students indicated that they often felt ill preparedto work in groups. Furthermore, when they were expected to work collaborativelywithout a tutor being present (a frequent occurrence in performing arts), manyexpressed frustration at the time wasted through arguments and general poor management of the group and the consequent need to seek tutor intervention. The challenge to us then was:

• could we devise assessment methods to assess group processes (as well as outcomes);• could the assessment differentiate between individual and group contribution;• could the assessment act as sufficient motivation to improve students' generalability to work as effective group members.

METHODS

After participating in a problem-based learning (PBL) workshop (described later), group participants are asked to rate the following against a mark of 1–5:

• how well the group achieved its task as stated;

• how well you think you contributed to achieve the group task;

• how well the group functioned as a group;

• how well you think you performed as a group member.

Any scale may be used; however, simplicity is recommended to avoid potential confusion leading to discussion about scoring rather than performance. Grading can be further compared and refined by asking participants to give a mark of 1–5 for individual contribution to 'group task' and 'group maintenance' for each of their peers. Group maintenance may include relevant aspects of group dynamics such as how well each individual:

• listened to others;

• extrapolated salient points from muddled contributions;

• enabled shy members to contribute; or

• applied a technique for dealing with unproductive disharmony within the group.

Allocating individual grades for each group member can be time consuming if all the marks are subsequently shared and full discussion of the variances is allowed. However, peer grading offers further scope for refining students' judgement-based learning in and from groups providing that the facilitator ensures the focus of discussion is on feedback, designed specifically to enhance learning. The assessment proved to work particularly well when two or three participants volunteer (or are selected) to stand outside the group and observe the process, make notes and provide feedback at the end. Participants may be asked to listen to *all* feedback from the observers before being allowed to comment on or justify their behaviour. Utilising this model to peer assess group processes has several advantages. First, it enables the observers to devote their full and undivided attention to the group dynamics. Second, it allows observers to be more objective because they have no vested interest in the task outcome. Third, it offers a model in which students practise giving and receiving feedback as two distinct processes, thus allowing for momentary reflection, before engaging in a dialogue about what may or may not have been intended (Bryan and Green, 2003: 316–25). If the group or the tutor is relatively new to self- and peer assessment *per se*, or to the idea of assessing group participation, it can be helpful to leave the whole criteria setting and grading process until the end of a session, *after* feedback has been given and discussed fully. If criteria setting is delayed, it should be emphasised that this is not normal good practice (i.e., to impose assessment criteria after the event) but that it is for a particular reason: namely, to raise questions about how participants might have behaved differently, had they known they would be assessed on their collaborative performance. Delaying the discussion about assessment criteria until after the exercise can also demonstrate the importance of matching the mode of assessment to the particular task. Sufficient time must be allowed for participants to share their feelings as well as their perceptions of assessing and being assessed. Thus a commonly owned and shared mode of assessment may be developed for subsequent workshops where it is proposed to assess the collaborative process as well as the outcome. The pedagogic benefits for requiring students to assess group maintenance as well as group task are summed up by these two student comments:I was one of the ones who said how unfair it is not to get marked on how well we work together in our group projects but I had no idea how difficult it is todo it properly. I have learned so much from watching our group and having to articulate the grades I gave. (Second-year Drama student) It's weird how at the beginning we gave very different marks for how well we thought we had worked in the group but after discussing it [group dynamics and different roles] we sort of more or less agreed. Our group work has definitely improved as we now know what things to do if it is going badly. (First-year English/Drama student)The following student comment echoes research (Lapham and Webster, 1999) which shows that by engaging collaboratively in the assessment process studentsgain a group identity, thereby further enhancing the potential learning in groups.I notice a real difference working with people who have had to think aboutand argue how they should be assessed in their group. It's like we have alreadydone quite a lot of ice breaking and can get stuck straight in with our projects.(Second-year Drama student) The assessment criteria may be decided by the tutor and explained at the start of the workshop. Alternatively, it might be more appropriate to involve the students in the process of devising their own assessment criteria, thereby also clarifying the objectives of the session. Another advantage of involving students in setting their own assessment criteria is that the students learn to determine what is or is not important in the exercise and consequently how to allocate the weighting of marks.

At first I couldn't see the point of deciding our own assessment criteria buthaving done so now on three separate occasions, I realise how it helped thewhole group think and agree what was most important and should therefore carry most marks. (PGCE Drama student) Everyone knows the rules if you have to set the assessment together so we don't waste time arguing when we're working without the tutor. (First-year Jazz student) The last comment not only sums up student views frequently expressed in our trials but provides a counter-argument to the commonly voiced lecturers' lament that involving students in devising assessment criteria is too time consuming. While it is true that generating assessment criteria collaboratively takes time at the outset, our experience shows that in group work it ultimately *saves* time otherwise frequently spent arguing about fairness of individual effort and contribution to the whole. Agreeing assessment criteria collaboratively helps establish clear rules for how the group will function. When students are expected to work in groups partially unsupervised by the tutor, as is increasingly the case, it would seem that time spent discussing and agreeing assessment criteria is time extremely well spent.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This innovation sought to focus attention on the process of collaboration by adopting a PBL approach utilising group dynamics. Our consortium of nine colleagues from six higher education institutions (HEIs)4 agreed to work collaboratively as an action research group adopting a PBL approach whenever possible. We recognised that by 'problematising' the assessment of

group practice and working collaboratively towards potential 'solutions' we would experience for ourselves the inherent paradoxes expressed by students of having to work collaboratively in what is often a competitive environment. We also recognised an opportunity for our own professional development through adopting a collaborative PBL approach: namely, that we might enhance our own critical, reflective and communication skills and other well-documented qualities associated with PBL and professional development (Boud and Feletti, 1997).

The nine tutors introduced various methods of self- and peer assessment of group work with twelve selected groups of students on diverse performing arts courses. With the students' consent, this was initially introduced as a 'trial' where the marks generated would not contribute to the summative assessment of the module. However, it was explained to them that should the assessment prove to be practical, fair and transparent, appropriate changes to the module assessment might be considered. The self- and peer assessment focused on both group dynamics andthe task in hand. Tutors agreed to select sessions in which some form of groupPBL would anyway be taking place because there was a need to have some clearlydefined 'problem' which could generate a number of more or less effective solutions capable of assessment. The selected sessions were called 'workshops' and included traditional seminar groups (tutor plus up to thirty students) and tutor-facilitated rehearsals for first- and second-year student productions. In this initial stage 185 students were involved in nine workshops, each utilising diverse materials adopting a clearly defined PBL approach. Data was gathered using a version of the Delphi technique whereby information was collected from all thoseparticipating and then analysed and fed back to the whole group. Further discussion in the light of feedback refined the data which then informed development of the assessment method and identified the need for specific supporting learning materials. This cyclical approach for gathering and analysing student opinions seemed particularly appropriate as it served two purposes. First, it contributed to the development of reflective dialogue and autonomous learning habits as advocated by Brockbank and McGill (2000: 132); and second, it fed directly into the action research cycle of all nine tutors within the consortium. The cyclical process thus enabled students to:

• develop an awareness of group dynamics (in the assessment and in the subsequent discussions);

• acquire appropriate language of assessment with which to articulate with their peers;

• begin to understand the sort of discourse of exam boards (and thereby appreciate the complexities and problems associated with rigour and fairness);

• engage actively in the design of their own assessment;

• identify their own individual and collective deficiencies; and consequently

• articulate quite specific needs for the improvement of their performance as group participants.

The Delphi method for reaching consensus as applied in the workshops also acted as a vehicle for students to make valuable contributions to curricular alignment of teaching, learning and assessment in group work. The consortium functioned and progressed as an action research group (McGill and Beaty, 1992), developing and trialling its assessment innovations both internally and externally (Bryan, 2004a: 52–64).

Collaboratively we developed practical approaches and materials which would support the areas of weakness the students (and staff) had identified by engaging in the assessment. These approaches included:

• how to apply basic group dynamic theory in differing contexts;

• how to give and receive feedback so it would contribute to future learning;

• how to deal with 'difficult' group participants;

• how to assess individual and group contributions to both task and process.All materials are available in easily downloadable form from the project websiteat <http://assessing-groupwork.ulst.ac.uk>. Further trialling was conducted using the revised and developed methods of assessment supported by targeted learning materials. Forty-six of the original students and an additional ninety-two 'new' students participated in at least one workshop (in some cases up to three) in which the innovative assessment was employed, making a total of 138 students representing five tutor groups. In one of the five groups, the self- and peer-generated assessment grades were tutor moderated and contributed to the module's final assessment. This had been made possible by a minor amendment to the course assessment structure which was internally agreed and approved by the external examiner.

This assessment innovation, as argued here and supported by student and staff feedback, has demonstrated a positive shift of attention to include the collaborative process. It has been successfully applied in diverse situations, thereby demonstrating its flexibility. It offers a simple yet effective grading system which recognises individual contribution to both task achievement and the collaborative process. In so doing, it reframes assessment as being central to creative and pedagogic practices in group work. Qualitative data such as module evaluation by tutors and annual subject monitoring reports within the six consortium institutions indicate that there has been a perceived improvement in the quality of student group work. This is reinforced by staff (350) and student (roughly 700) feedback across twelve institutions where participants actively engaged in some form of assessed PBL workshop. Nowhere did we encounter real opposition to the proposition that students need to learn about group dynamics to take control of their own group learning environment and that *assessing* group skills is key to achieving this. The most frequently expressed reservation was about the difficulty of finding time within an already crowded curriculum to include the assessment of group processes. Participants were reassured and sometimes surprised how feasible this could be once they had participated in an assessed PBL workshop. A particular advantage to them was the fact that the PBL workshop approach is infinitely flexible, allowing for almost any subject matter to be presented as 'the problem'.Two final staff comments illustrate the sort of shift in practice clearly broughtabout by the assessment intervention which is so difficult to quantify:I thoroughly enjoyed the workshop [Developing Effective Group Behaviour]and want to try it on my students, not because I'm a fan of peer assessmentbut because the workshop raised so many other critical issues that have beenbugging me lately.

Since the workshop over a year ago, a group of us have used various [Assessing Group Practice] materials to raise students' awareness of group dynamics. We are convinced that since we assess the group process the standard of work has improved but also that group work seems to be more fun with participants appearing to feel safe to take more risks.

CONCLUSION

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1. This paper is informed by field research and case studies conducted as part of a three year consortium project, Assessing Group Practice, funded by HEFCE's Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning. The consortium was formed in 2000 to research issues in the assessment of group work in HE performing arts and to identify, develop and share successful practice. The project was led by the Central School of Speech and Drama and also involved the Universities of Leeds, Salford and Ulster, Dartington College of Arts, and Goldsmiths College, University of London. The project was extended by a further six months to trial and evaluate materials with six CADISE institutions (Consortium of Art and Design Institutions in the Southeast of England). At the time of writing aproximately 700 staff and in excess of 1,000 students have engaged with Assessing Group Practice materials and approaches. Further details are available from the consortium website, <www.ulst.ac.uk/assessing-groupwork>.
2. In 2000–1 the Assessing Group Practice consortium interviewed a number of staff and students in our own institutions and conducted a questionnaire survey from thirty-six neighbouring institutions. In addition, 142 tutors in performance and creative arts departments in 61 UK institutions were contacted for information about courses in which group activity formed a major part. Although the response rate was lower than we had hoped (just under a third of the 142 tutors responded), there was considerable congruence in a variety of themes, many of which accorded with the experience of consortium members (Bryan, 2004b).

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