

7 Steps to: Using group work in your teaching

Overview

Group work promotes the development of a range of skills such as negotiation, communication, respect, empathy and collaboration, which are not always associated with more traditional forms of learning (Gibbs, 1995). It has many recognised benefits including allowing students to take increased levels of ownership and self-management of their learning (Johnson et al., 1991). The process of working in a group requires students to articulate and test their knowledge through discussions with peers (Williams, Beard, & Rymer, 1991). In this way it has wider benefits in terms of preparing students for the workplace, contributing to their social integration and sense of belonging, both identified as important to student well-being (Jaques, 2000).

However, most forms of teaching and assessment used in universities promote independent study and a focus on personal achievement; therefore students need to be encouraged to recognise these wider benefits and supported to engage effectively in group work (Gibbs, 2010). This is a significant issue as research has demonstrated that students' past experiences of group work strongly shape their future attitudes and willingness to participate with it over the longer term (Hillyard, Gillespie, & Littig, 2010). Consequently integrating group work requires careful planning and preparation, and tutors have a central role in promoting, managing and mediating students' group work experiences.

In designing group work it is important to consider the rationale for its use. For example, if the group work will result in an end product that will be assessed, a tutor may want to consider their role in terms of allocating members, monitoring progress and mediating logistics (Gibbs, 2010). Alternatively, if tutors are using group work as a low risk activity e.g. with first years to introduce them to the process of group work or socialise them with peers, they may want to leave students to manage the process. It is useful to be mindful of these considerations when reviewing the following guidance as this could shape the application and integration of group work in practice.

1. Set clear expectations for group work

Since group work requires students to draw on a broad range of skills, they benefit from being given time to consider practicalities, and to plan (Gibbs, 1995). Students should be introduced to practices such as developing ground rules (relating to personal and professional conduct), which outline the expectations for participation of group members and consider mechanisms / roles that underpin effective project management. In doing so they could be encouraged to reflect on what they bring to the group (academically and practically), or on past experiences of group work and how they could learn from these.

Practical pointer: In a taught session introduce students to the different stages of group work, and get them to develop strategies for working through these: familiarisation (with one another / the task), planning and preparation (identify expertise / tasks / build an action plan), implementation (management of the activity / keeping in touch) and completion (working toward the product / deadlines / editing).

2. Think carefully about group size and composition

Careful consideration should be given to group size, particularly in relation to the purpose of the work and the task assigned. Group size influences student engagement and getting this right engenders desired behaviours to minimise issues such as freeloading (Seethamraju & Borman, 2009). The optimal group size is cited as been between four and six people, as this allows students to develop a sense of identity and ownership (Kerr & Bruun, 1983). Determining whether group membership is allocated by a tutor, randomly allocated or self-selected depends on the purpose of the group work. Although research is unclear on the benefit of each approach (Huxham & Land, 2000; Seethamraju & Borman, 2009) with regards to student learning, tutors need to dedicate time for the preparation stages even if group members are known to one another.

Practical pointer: Using a range of approaches to group allocation on different occasions can be beneficial. Membership could be allocated based on: academic achievement / skill set – however, this requires tutors to have prior knowledge of the students; criteria such as age, discipline, or name. In determining the approach taken to allocating group membership consideration should be given to the purpose of the task and the academic stage.

3. Help manage the logistics of group work

Students have increasingly busy lives and it is common for them to be balancing a range of commitments alongside their studies, therefore finding time and space to work in can be perceived as challenging. This can lead students to complain about logistical issues that threaten to undermine group work (Hillyard et al., 2010). Tutors should consider how they can mitigate issues relating to communication, meeting up and accessing resources as they plan group work and introduce management strategies to students.

Practical pointer: Tutors could timetable classroom space for students to use; encourage students to set up email distribution lists, schedule a timetable of meeting dates, recommend technology which can be used for communication and conducting their work e.g. google.docs, dropbox, institutional wiki or discussion boards. If appropriate this may feed into the assessment of the group work.

References

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Resources:

- Learn Higher Making group work, work – a resource for students and staff <http://www.learnhigher.ac.uk/groupwork/>
- Leeds University's Group Work Resources – provides some practical students guides / activities for tutors to use <http://library.leeds.ac.uk/skills-group-work#activate-participation>
- Students could also assess *their skills* with respect to group work using online skills test such as this example from LearnHigher: <http://learnhigher.ac.uk/groupwork/audit/>

4. Encourage intercultural group work

International students embrace group work as an opportunity to interact directly with home students, yet the mixed responses of home students to intercultural groups can be a source of disappointment (Cotton et al., 2013; Volet & Ang, 1998). Students from many countries prefer to work in homogenous groups, but over the longer term intercultural group working has been recognised as more beneficial (Gibbs, 2010). Students may need to be prepared to mitigate some of the complexities of intercultural group settings e.g. perceived value of student contributions, respectful communication and the risk that non-native English speakers are disadvantaged. When introducing group work tutors should explain the importance of cross-cultural collaboration (Wisker, 2000).

Practical pointer: Design the group work to address a theme, topic or activity that is unfamiliar to all participants so that no individual is perceived as having the advantage or as Montgomery (2008) describes make all students 'equally unsure'; Encourage a structured approach to discussion to give all group members a chance to speak.

5. Design innovative group work activities

Most group work involves students working toward a task or end-product that has been designed as a group activity. However, a common frustration with group work is that these tasks can be poorly conceived, in that they do no challenge or require the collective effort of all group members, or are poorly articulated to students (Hillyard et al., 2010). Group work activities should be sufficient in size and complexity to require the collective knowledge and effort of all group members (Gibbs, 1995). Equally they should be authentic in relation to the intended learning outcomes and beneficial to student learning.

Practical pointer: Group work activities should address a complex problem or issue that requires them to work collaboratively and employ a range of skills (e.g. negotiation, project management, effective organisation) as well as draw on the breadth of academic knowledge the group possesses. Build terminology in the assessment brief / learning outcomes that encourage collaboration and group work (e.g. compile, collate, compare, discuss). External parties, e.g. employers, could be invited in to set 'real world' questions or projects.

6. Monitoring the groups' activities

For the students and the tutor it can be beneficial to integrate mechanisms of monitoring group work. This can make students aware of whose responsibility managing group work is and encourage them to consider explicitly how to manage group work, and for the tutor it can provide evidence of the group's activities. This evidence could subsequently be drawn upon in cases where a group has become dysfunctional or as part of the evidence used to assess group work. Mechanisms could include students creating a diary or schedule of meetings, recording minutes and action points that capture progress.

Practical pointer: Introduce and explore with students common roles taken on in meeting situations e.g. meeting chair / facilitator, record or note keeper, time-keeper and task manager, and how these are used to manage group projects. If appropriate these records may feed into the assessment of the group work. Include details in the module handbook that informs students of what to do if the group is not working well.

7. Managing assessed group work

The assessment of group work is a contentious issue that shapes the level of student engagement and determines the quality of that learning that takes place (Gibbs, 2010 (Lejk, Wyvill, & Farrow, 1997). This reflects the complexity of assessing group work; tutors need to consider whether they are assessing the product of group work, the process that has led to this product or both the product and the process (Gibbs, 2010). There is the potential to assess students' individual and / or collective contributions to the group work. Equally group work lends itself to a range of assessment mechanisms e.g. tutor, peer or self-assessment. The approach taken to assessing group work needs to be determined in relation to module learning outcomes and the tutors' rationale for using group work. For a detailed discussion of assessing group work, please see the Plymouth University Guidelines for Assessing Group Work.

Practical pointer: Introduce the format for assessment at the beginning of the module, outlining clearly the rationale for group work with respect to the mode of assessment. Ensure students know how marks will be allocated, and if a novel assessment methodology (e.g. posters / viva) is to be used give students the opportunity to rehearse through a formative feedback stage.

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