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Citation:

Gorse, CAAM (2007) Engaging students in group work. *Assessment, Teaching & Learning Journal* (No.2.). pp 14 -19 - ?.

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Engaging students in group work

Christopher A. Gorse and Iain McKinney*

Participation in groups is an inescapable fact of life (Gouran, 1999) and educational provision has recognised the need for students to develop and explore their interpersonal skills. Consequently, most courses now create opportunities to promote these interpersonal skills through the social experiences generated by group work. However, the benefits gained from working in a group seem so evident that exercises are often undertaken without proper consideration of the potential consequences of internal dynamics and behaviours. Yet, student and facilitator awareness of the group and individual dynamic are important if the situation is to be used effectively. To gain maximum benefit from interpersonal work, consideration should be given to the advantages that can be embraced by working in a group, in isolation, in pairs (sometimes called dyads) and also the combination of group and individual work. If students are to gain more from group work then they should be encouraged to recognise the human behaviours that occur.

A series of exercises used to help students appreciate the dynamics associated with individual and group work were followed up by reflections from participants and facilitators. A general analysis of the data produced is presented here in the hope that it will encourage dialogue on the broader issues.

Introduction

Working in a group can be fun, stimulate creativity, help people relax, improve morale, and create relationships and bonds that would not have developed in more isolated environments. Some people are comfortable and enjoy listening and communicating in the small group settings. The feeling of being part of a group can be a satisfying experience if the group is effective; however, group work can invoke fear, generate boredom and make people dissatisfied and annoyed (McCroskey, 1997).

Placing individuals within a team can either reduce or increase their potential and it is difficult to imagine a situation where group behaviour does not influence the individual's behaviour (Meyers and Brashers, 1999). Before thrusting students into groups consideration should be given to the purpose of the work and the benefits that will be gained from the experience. At the same time as undertaking group exercises students can also study the dynamics and reflect on their experiences within the group. Hence, the group itself can be a learning tool, students recognising its characteristics, dynamics and consequent behaviours. To help explore the benefits of group work the strengths of working individually, in a dyad and even in isolation should be considered. Although some, such as Sutton (2006), suggest that comparisons between group and individual work are often pointless as the two situations are so different. Nonetheless, it is difficult to appreciate the benefits of group work when alternative ways of working are not considered.

Developing the Group

It is good to encourage thought about the group process and the way information is exchanged and ideas are developed. There are a number of obvious features of group interaction that affect the exchange of information. Meetings are normally conducted with one person talking and other members listening. So, with the exception of talking over

another member or where large groups degenerate into separate discussions, only one person can speak at a time (Emmitt and Gorse, 2007). Turn-taking within groups affects individual contributions; as group size increases the average contribution of the individual reduces (Bell, 2001). The ability of an individual to interact is affected by the structure of a group and behaviour of other members (Meyers and Brashers, 1999; Brown, 2000). Generally, group interaction, almost regardless of size is dominated by two or three members (Napier and Gershenfeld, 1989; Gorse, 2002). This means that some members have the ability to interrupt, gain the floor, hold other's attention and make their point, whilst others make minimal contributions. Such aspects of group behaviour have been termed 'production blocking' (Emmitt and Gorse, 2007). In large groups some members may spend so much time waiting for others to make their contribution only to find that they never gain an opportunity to talk. Some members simply forget their idea whilst waiting their turn. As the group size decreases, more members get an opportunity to interact and the potential for forgetting ideas is reduced. The smallest group is the dyad, the two person group. However, working in pairs does not have the same dynamics as groups of three members and greater (Emmitt and Gorse, 2003). The two person group can encourage interaction; however it can place considerable pressure on those involved, especially if interaction breaks down as there is nobody else to step in and break the silence (Emmitt and Gorse, 2003). The absence of a third party, who can listen in, intervene in difficult situations, help conversations along or generally add to the interaction makes quite a difference to the dynamics. Consideration needs to be given to the task and structure of the group.

Using groups simply to produce lists of ideas is not as effective as asking the same number of individuals to write down their thoughts on their own. Brainstorming in groups produces fewer ideas than that produced by the equivalent number of individuals working in isolation and then bringing those ideas together (Lamm and Trommsdorff, 1973). Furthermore, it has been suggested that, the quality of information produced is better if people are given time to work alone generating their thoughts than bringing their ideas to the group for discussion and, if necessary, evaluation (Fryer, et al. 2004).

To ensure that each individual gets an opportunity to contribute each person could write their ideas down and place them in the centre of the table with each idea being put forward to the group in turn. Alternatively the chairperson can ensure that each member has an equal amount of time to make their suggestion before the group goes into open discussion. Various rules and processes can be introduced to reduce dominance and suppression, although it is normal for productivity of groups to suffer slightly when behaviour controls are used (Gorse and Sanderson, 2007). Less eloquent or articulate members tend to take longer to express their ideas (McCroskey, 1997). Once interaction mechanisms are introduced the natural flow of the group is stifled; although there are significant benefits for those who do not normally contribute. To prevent members becoming frustrated with structured group exercises, facilitators should keep sessions short until members become familiar and skilled with the group processes.

Working in groups is not just about producing lists of ideas; they evaluate, build and develop them. Indeed, a solution to a problem may not have been possible without the potential for building on another person's suggestion. Multidisciplinary group tasks are often impossible without the contribution of a number of specialists with their relevant expertise. To ensure that expertise can be exchanged, group's skills may need to be developed.

Working with others allows people to gain knowledge and experience alternative views and beliefs. People interact, argue and interrupt differently and the time spent in groups helps members to confront, appreciate and accommodate such differences. Becoming aware and working with different behaviours helps develop interpersonal skills. Communication is often reciprocal, and the response to initial interaction has similarities and links to the message received (Kreps, 1989). The style and behaviour initiated may be different to that

normally used by the recipient. Recipients adjust their behaviour to suit the initial communication. Different communication styles are introduced and used to suit the group's individual characteristics. Working in different groups can help to develop a broader repertoire of communication styles and acts.

Group work helps facilitate and develop interpersonal skills. To stretch those skills further it is often necessary to work with students to make them aware of their behaviour. For example, those who dominate may not be aware that their contributions suppress others. The use of video recording of groups and self observation is an effective way of enabling individuals to recognise how their behaviour affects others (Gorse and Whitehead, 2002). Workshops that use video and other training tools can be used to develop participation and engagement skills.

There are a number of skills, which are rarely taught, that are important when attempting to make a contribution. The ability to interrupt and 'gain the floor' is a skill which many struggle with. Greater concentration on group behaviour, using video feedback, reflection and support from peers can be used to help, encourage and support contributions (Gorse, *et al.* 2006a, 2006b). Under controlled conditions, and with the emphasis on developing a more evenly balanced distribution, those previously reluctant contributors can be helped to make effective contributions and develop the ability to interject and make their point. With assistance, a person's confidence to engage in groups can be improved. Those who previously dominated interaction can be encouraged to support others, provide cues for others to speak, send encouraging signals, offer help, ask questions and generally create opportunities for engagement.

A few members of the group may be reluctant to interact (McCroskey, 1997). While some members are socially gifted, others have inhibitions, are fearful of interaction and may be reluctant interactors. Even those who have the skills necessary to interact in a group may suffer from 'evaluation apprehension' when deciding whether their idea is appropriate. Fear of criticism, being mocked, ignored or accused of stupidity is real. Even the thought that others may view an idea negatively may prevent contribution. When thought is given to an idea, before it is voiced, individuals prejudge their own ideas and introduce a level of self censorship. Those that 'speak before they think' do not introduce the same level of evaluation into their interaction. Interestingly, during one-to-one, face-to-face, continuous interaction, we do tend to speak before we think, as conscious processing is too slow to produce continuous conversation (LeDoux, 1998). However, in group situations, while waiting for a turn time can be devoted to thinking about contributions, though an unfortunate consequence of thinking too much is that individuals may start to evaluate their ideas and choose not to make the contribution. The larger the group gets the more time individuals have to wait and the potential level of evaluation and apprehension increases. Where evaluation apprehension is a problem the dyad can be used or small subgroups introduced. Small groups can be beneficial; however they do have their own drawbacks. The polarised effect that a dyad has on messages can increase their intensity, and with no other members to soften any potential areas of conflict, dyads should be used with care. The dyad does not offer anywhere to hide, those lacking in social skills are exposed. The intense interpersonal nature of dyads can be daunting for some individuals. Interaction skills may need to be developed before thrusting students into a dyad.

The issues associated with group work are wide and varied. There are tools, techniques and processes that can be used to develop group skills. When designing group projects, thought should be given to the learning outcomes and which type of group process and experiences are best suited to the objectives. Further resources to help facilitators and students develop group work are available on the Assessment, Learning and Teaching resource web site ([leedsmet.ac.uk /ALTre-source](http://leedsmet.ac.uk/ALTre-source)).

Conclusion

Group work and individual work are fundamentally different. People behave differently in groups and their thoughts, attitudes and beliefs are affected. Group interaction can inspire, add creativity, provoke thought and manifest feelings that would not occur when working alone. Equally members can suppress, block and ignore members, again creating thoughts and feelings that would not occur when working alone. Group work can be scary; individuals may dread the thought of working with others, especially when the potentially detrimental dynamics of the group exercise are ignored by those facilitating the session. To help students recognise and work with interpersonal skills, situations can be created to allow people to experience the benefits and limitations of individual and group work; conditions can be controlled, recorded and reflected on. Use of electronic media, turn-taking cards, equal participation controls, limiting individual contribution, monitoring and recording potential conflict and supportive behaviour can help develop interpersonal skills that would otherwise be missed in the group experience. Before using group work consideration should be given to all aspects of group behaviour and the effect the group process will have on the information generated as well as those generating it.

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