
Part 1 – Group work

Introduction

Recent changes in Higher Education have brought about a cultural shift and led to a review of and reflection about pedagogy (Harvey et al 2002). Part of this reflection centres on the move towards widening participation, and the issues involved in accommodating greater numbers, and a greater diversity of students into universities. Ever increasing class sizes, modular frameworks, lifelong learning and an emphasis on skills development have been underpinned by the introduction of student-centred learning and an increasing use of group work as a learning vehicle to deliver the educational experience. The use of groups and teams in the workplace has led employers as well as academics to recognise group work as a key skill. It is, therefore, vital that prospective employees acquire the skills of group work early in their academic lives and this is why it is increasingly being used as a vehicle to promote learning in university courses.

An improved knowledge of group work will enable students to be more effective during their studies and, subsequently, in organisational life. Groups are the 'building blocks' of organisations; employees have to work with other people on projects to complete tasks; they must deal with diversity to enable them to carry out their duties. The overwhelming reason for the use of groups in organisations is that they improve performance and that is why students need to understand the intricacies of group work. Thus, the more experienced students become in the skills of group work, the more effective and efficient they will be in organisations of the future. As a consequence, it is incumbent upon universities to develop group work skills in students. Group work is regularly used as an assessment vehicle but, while students get plenty of experience of working in groups, it is less common for them to receive instruction in how to benefit from group work. Probably because of the pressures to deliver subject content, students are, in many cases, left to develop group skills without any explicit guidance on their development. Tutors frequently hope that other tutors will develop the requisite skills in students or students are assumed to acquire the skills by a process akin to osmosis. Harvey et al (2002) put this quite succinctly when he says:

A widely used pedagogic device to develop employability skills is group working. However, this is frequently unsupported and students are often grouped together and merely told to work as a team. (30)

Notwithstanding Harvey's criticism, tutors who build up knowledge of and expertise in using group work can utilise it effectively to encourage students to collaborate and improve the learning experience.

For those academics who have yet to take the step of using group work with students, this paper will provide guidelines and pointers to make the experience more rewarding, more effective and less traumatic than it might otherwise be. It outlines various aspects of group work to which the inexperienced tutor will need to be alert; it also describes the

experience of the author with various undergraduate and postgraduate groups at university.

Why use groups?

Groups are a fact of organisational life. It is virtually impossible to escape group work in almost any facet of life and higher education is no exception. An advantage for tutors is the opportunity to use group work to encourage and enable students to take responsibility, thus enhancing the ability to complete a task and deal with the issues involved in the process. In a group learning environment, the members can learn to respect individual members' abilities, to accept differences, diversity and differing involvement and work together to enhance each other's contributions.

There are many reasons for using group work with students, some of which are positive and others less so. The argument for group work is very seductive, as suggested by some of the reasons put forward for adopting it as a teaching method:

- ❖ the output of the group is usually more than the sum of individual effort;
- ❖ group efforts at problem-solving are more effective than individual efforts;
- ❖ more ideas are generated;
- ❖ interpersonal and group working skills are developed;
- ❖ collaboration leads to effective performance;
- ❖ knowledge and learning are shared;
- ❖ it develops workplace skills.

The academic setting provides students with the opportunity to develop skills which ultimately can be transferred to the workplace. The learning environment can be structured so that it is non-threatening and students can experiment with different types of behaviour. This will enable them to understand the various elements of group work and to recognise that organisational problems are relatively complex and not amenable to right or wrong answers. Group work permits students to work collaboratively and deal with more complicated problems than any individual could do on his/her own. A major benefit of group work, which students will experience and tutors can observe, is group synergy, where the output of the group effort is more than the sum of the individual input. Team sports are a frequently quoted example of this phenomenon when the underdog team wins against all expectations – they win because they are able to accomplish much more than either they or the opposition expected.

Working in groups provides students with the opportunity to discuss and refine their understanding of complex issues, solve problems, apply their knowledge, practise skills, and reflect about feelings and what has been learned. They may feel more engaged with the process of learning, rather than being a passive recipient of the tutor's 'wisdom' and this perception can promote participation, exploration and analysis of ideas.

Tutor role

The tutor often has a directive role in higher education, providing the topic for discussion or the activity for the seminar. He/she may provide information to the students in the form of lectures or handouts, or small group tutorials. On the other hand the tutor's role in group work can be much more facilitative, encouraging students to take responsibility for their own learning and providing a framework within which the students take control and manage the learning experience. Group learning can be organised around student-centred activities rather than being tutor-centred, and students can be encouraged to help each other to seek out the information required instead of looking to the tutor for answers. The tutor can choose different roles in a group learning situation, for example, by acting as facilitator rather than the provider of knowledge; or by providing the scenario and letting the students work out the details.

The tutor may take a minimal role so that the relationships are negotiated among group members, and management of the group remains as much as possible the responsibility of the students. The tutor can increase enthusiasm and interest by encouraging the active exchange of ideas between group members.

Tutors may find a less formal atmosphere advantageous as it facilitates the process of getting to know the students rather than formal classes, in which students present papers or lead seminars. The informality can encourage a flexible approach which promotes enjoyment and risk taking which, in turn, enhances learning. Also, the tutor is able to provide formative feedback and encourage the students to do the same for their peers. From the tutor's point of view, there is also the added attraction that group work is a mechanism to deal with the increasing number of students and the assessment load.

Psychological contract

Osland et al (2001) identifies the psychological contract which is embodied in learning situations. She points out that students and tutors bring expectations to the learning process and if both state their expectations, any re-negotiation of the psychological contract can take place speedily which will facilitate productive learning and a positive group atmosphere.

In a group work setting, students can be encouraged to identify any problems and issues and to set ground rules to be followed during the activities. If students engaged in group work can be encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning, focus on the task in hand and deal with the process issues that develop, this will help to develop a psychological contract between the students and the tutor which is much more powerful than any control mechanism that the tutor could introduce.

Self-selecting or tutor selected groups

There are advantages and disadvantages with both tutor-selected and self-selected groups. Students frequently sit with friends, so it is good experience

for them to work with others in a larger group. In self-selecting groups, students can find working with friends beneficial, but this may also have drawbacks if, for example, the friends do not have the same intentions as far as grade aspirations, participation or contribution are concerned.

If the tutor opts for self-selecting groups, he/she will have to deal with the issue of those students who are not chosen and are always left out of the groups. The tutor has to decide into which group to allocate these students or which group must be coerced into accepting the student who is left out. If the tutor opts to select the groups him/herself, a number of mechanisms can be used to form the groups. For instance, if six groups are required, simply count from one to six round the students. All the ones are one group, twos the next group and so on. This has the effect of mixing students from different parts of the room.

If the group is not self-selecting, roles should be allocated randomly – do not be tempted to give 'better' students the best roles. Sometimes there are surprising results – on one occasion on the basis of serendipity we put together a group of all those who were absent on the morning of the allocation of roles. Subsequently it became clear that these were the usually recalcitrant students, but their results at the end of the year demonstrated that they had worked hard and achieved a good result. This does not always happen though, and colleagues have recounted stories of the 'group from Hell' when this strategy has been used!

What happens when groups are formed

A growing body of the literature which underpins and validates the use of group work attempts to explain what happens when people work together in groups, and this will be outlined and applied in the case study presented in this paper. This section will provide a brief overview of some of the most useful research in this area.

Groups in the workplace are usually formed on the basis of completing a task or project in a formal way but, within this framework, informal aspects develop to influence group members. This is mirrored in the academic environment, as groups normally have a task to complete and the tutor may formally form the group. However, as well as completing the task, the group needs to take cognisance of the process elements – the softer, 'people' skills.

At first, it may be quite difficult to deal with group working, which can be more demanding of the student and presents a challenge to the tutor, who has to relinquish some of the control of the situation. Group work usually requires a more active approach from the student towards learning. The traditional didactic approach can be comforting to both tutor and student with authority residing unquestionably with the tutor.

Group roles

Regrettably, not all groups work well together or succeed at the set task, but for as long as group work is a major element of working with other students in higher education it is important that the tutor gives careful consideration to composition of the group.

If the group is not formed on the basis of chance, a very useful framework for tutors to use is that of Dr R. Meredith Belbin (1981, 1993). Belbin carried out research to determine effective team performance and puts forward a team model of nine different roles which, if present, will lead to successful performance. The tutor can administer Belbin's self-perception inventory, which will identify which of the team roles each group member displays naturally, could adopt, or should avoid. As well as being a mechanism to allocate roles to students, this model can also be used as part of the assessment process. Students can be asked to test the efficacy of the model in respect of how their group actually performed. The roles are set out below:

The Co-ordinator

The co-ordinator organises and controls the team. He/she guides the team by clarifying the situation and encouraging the members to achieve the set objectives. The coordinator is self-controlled, a good communicator, commands respect and inspires enthusiasm, summarising the situation for the team.

The Shaper

The shaper encourages the team to action. He/she is dynamic and dominant and makes things happen, uniting disparate ideas and using enthusiasm to persuade others to follow. The shaper can be intolerant, impulsive and arrogant.

The Implementer

The implementer is practical and hard working. He/she tends to like clear objectives but can be inflexible and does not like unproven ideas. The implementer is efficient and good at organising because of a disciplined approach.

The Monitor Evaluator

The monitor evaluator evaluates ideas and suggestions. He/she brings critical thinking and objective analysis which prevents the group behaving hastily. The monitor evaluator tends to be rather tactless, but displays good judgement and is rarely wrong, preventing the team from taking excessive risks.

The Plant

The plant mainly generates ideas that are left for others to nourish. This imaginative and innovative individual may be impractical and can make careless mistakes, so needs careful handling by the team.

The Resource Investigator

The resource investigator develops contacts and negotiates with outsiders. He/she is likeable, enthusiastic and brings in new ideas from elsewhere. The resource investigator can seem to be over-enthusiastic to others and sometimes

does not deliver on promises made but escapes criticism by using charm and good communication skills.

The Team Worker

The team worker fosters team spirit. He/she is perceptive and trusting, promoting harmony, but not contributing much to the team task. The team worker can appear to be indecisive and is missed more than any other team member if he/she is absent.

The Completer

The completer ensures that deadlines are met. He/she is orderly and conscientious and worries about successful completion of the task. The completer is a perfectionist, dislikes casualness and can lower the morale of some of the team members.

The Specialist

The specialist is a later addition to the original eight roles. The specialist contributes technical skills on a narrow front, providing expertise. This individual is self-motivated and professional in outlook.

According to Belbin the team will be less effective if it is deficient in a team role, or has too many of the same role. The simplicity of the model makes it attractive both to tutor and to students. It is comparatively straightforward to explain to students and, coupled with the video 'Building the Perfect Team', relatively easy for the students to understand and apply. As part of the assessment, students can be asked to consider the various roles evident in their group and the impact this has had on performance.

There are few criticisms of Belbin's model, apart from Furnham et al (1993) on the basis of the psychometric properties of the self-perception inventory. In fact, it has strong support (Senior 1997, Fisher et al 1998, Fisher et al 2000, White 1999) and, therefore, if used with caution, it can form the basis of the 'perfect team', or an instrument to diagnose the deficiencies in a group. The general support for the model gives it a lot of face validity with students. Interestingly, many organisations use Belbin team-role theory as part of staff development programmes, and it is likely that students will encounter this model in the workplace. Many post-graduate students have already encountered the model and are, therefore, usually receptive to its use.

Developmental Stages of Groups

All groups go through certain stages of development as they work together (Tuckman 1965, Tuckman & Jensen 1977). These stages cannot be avoided, speeded up or ignored and the composition of the group will accelerate or inhibit its development. If the tutor selects the groups, a consequence may be that some group members may not wish to be in the group at all. They may be hostile to the other group members or the set task, which may affect the outcome. On the other hand, there will be occasions when the group is self-selecting

and students may choose to work with friends, with all its attendant benefits and difficulties.

Initially, four stages were articulated by Tuckman (1965) and a fifth stage was later added by Tuckman and Jensen (1977). Briefly, these stages are:

- ❖ forming – the getting to know you stage; uncertainty and anxiety are evident and group members are unsure of their role, who the leader is and what the goals of the group are; trust is low and individuals will not take risks;
- ❖ storming – the stage when conflict appears and individual group members will test the boundaries of acceptable behaviour, possibly challenging for leadership or attempting to gain power; it is in this stage that sub-groups develop; many groups do not get beyond the storming stage;
- ❖ norming – occurs when the group develops behavioural and performance norms;
- ❖ performing – this stage is reached when the group accepts differences and gets on with completing the task and achieving the goals;
- ❖ adjourning – once the task is completed and the goals are achieved the group may have to deal with issues of parting or loss if it is disbanded.

If the tutor constructs groups to work together on a particular task during one class period, then clearly the group will have to move through the stages very quickly. If, on the other hand, the group has to work together over a longer period, such as a semester or the academic year, the group may take a long time to go through the conflict stage. Frequently, students do not recognise conflict or do not wish to acknowledge it, even though it may be evident for a considerable period of time as students attempt to gain power for themselves or their sub-group. If conflict remains unresolved, it will continue to hinder the efficiency and effectiveness of the group.

Once a group has been formed and has embarked upon completing the task, it will go through the various stages of development. These can either be identified by the tutor or, preferably, the group members can be asked to report the stage that the group had advanced to in an assessment or plenary session. Many students tend to be optimistic about the stage the group has reached and the tutor has to question them closely to encourage thoughtful exploration of the situation.

Like Belbin's model, Tuckman's model appeals to both tutor and students as it is well articulated in many textbooks and its simplicity aids application, and the alliteration makes it easy to remember. However, it is less clear what precipitates the group moving from one stage to another. If groups have several weeks or months to complete a task then there is time to go through the various stages but if the task has to be completed in a few hours, it becomes debatable whether there is sufficient time for the group to move quickly through the stages.

Groupthink

If students are asked to comment on the group process, it is likely that most will claim to be successful and cohesive. In some cases, this proves to be true, to the extent that there is evidence of Groupthink. This is one of the major difficulties encountered by a 'performing', successful and cohesive group. Groupthink was identified by Janis (1972), and is characterised by:

- ❖ an illusion of invulnerability – the group overemphasises strengths and disregards weaknesses;
- ❖ assumptions of morality – the group believes its means are morally just and unchallenged decision-making occurs;
- ❖ collective rationalisation – information is ignored that may cause the group to re-evaluate decisions;
- ❖ stereotyping of opponents – competitor groups are perceived as weak or incompetent and therefore underestimated;
- ❖ illusions of unanimity – silent group members are assumed to agree and, therefore, the group believes all are in total agreement;
- ❖ self censorship – a questioning stance from group members is stifled;
- ❖ peer pressure – direct pressure is put on dissenters to change their view;
- ❖ mindguards – self-appointed group members try to shield the group from adverse information.

Groupthink can be a very powerful influence on any group, whether this is in the workplace or educational arena. It leads inevitably to under-performance and poor decision-making. A tutor can often identify Groupthink as a contributor to poor performance; however, students are usually reluctant to recognise the influence of Groupthink and put poor performance down to other factors such as those in the external environment. This tends to be an example of attribution theory: when the students attribute the cause of the poor performance to factors outside their control. Rollinson (2002) offers a more detailed explanation of attribution theory.

There are other major studies which demonstrate how individuals will defer to authority and obey, despite their better judgement (Milgram 1965). The tutor should be aware that the power/authority vested in the tutor role may mean that students obey unquestioningly. This leads to groups and individuals doing only what is specifically asked of them and no more. Individuals also conform to group pressure and the tutor should recognise that this may affect the performance of the group, either negatively or positively (Asch 1951).

Learning in groups

One of the most influential theorists writing about experiential learning has been David Kolb (see Osland et al 2001). Kolb's learning cycle (Fig. 1) offers a useful framework for understanding learning. He argues that learning does not consist of discrete, self-contained elements but is a continuous process. Add this to the group dynamic and the tutor has a powerful tool for facilitating learning in an educational setting.

Kolb's model tends to neglect the role played by feelings in the learning situation, though he does suggest that groups should consider how they felt at certain points in group exercises. He does acknowledge that the tutor will influence the group and that negotiation should take place to ensure that expectations are met. Kolb suggests it is useful to develop a learning community in the classroom and, to facilitate this, students should complete a learning styles questionnaire. Once this has been completed, tutor and students should negotiate what each will contribute to the learning experience and what each party expects to take from it. This is not dissimilar to Rogers' (1969, 1983) work in which he suggests a learning contract is agreed between tutor and student. For those new to group work, a learning contract is a useful tool as it encourages students to accept responsibility in the learning situation.

It can be quite a culture change for students to have to take responsibility for their own learning in a group setting, especially if other tutors use traditional approaches. In this situation, resistance can occur from the students in moving to new ways of working because the traditional approach offers a 'comfort blanket'.

Whilst Kolb's model is useful, it does not explicitly identify the perspectives of the student and the tutor and a more comprehensive learning model is set out below. This includes both the learner's and the tutor's perspective in the learning process and also incorporates the affective, intellectual and behavioural domains.

There is an affective component in all learning, in addition to intellectual development, knowledge acquisition and exploration. How the students engage in the learning process and their feelings about the situation will influence their approach to the task or subject. The interplay between these factors has a major bearing on the student and tutor experience, and the reciprocal nature of the relationship should not be ignored. The students will inevitably improve their subject knowledge in the learning situation and it is likely that the tutor

will enhance his/her learning about the facilitative process, gaining experience about what works well and what works less well.

Kolb has developed a diagnostic instrument which identifies four different learning styles and it can be helpful for students to be aware of their own learning style as this may provide an indicator of the types of activities they will enjoy and those which may best be avoided. Tutors frequently find this information valuable too. (See Osland, 2001 for details)

Kolb suggests making a visual representation of the students' learning styles. If the classroom is divided into quadrants, the individual student can sit in the quadrant which corresponds to their perceived learning style, whether this is converger, diverger, assimilator or accommodator (see Osland 2001 or Payne & Whittaker 2000 for further details about the different learning styles). The tutor can ask the students to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the learning style in that quadrant before giving out the description of each learning style. (See Osland et al 2001 for the learning styles questionnaire and descriptions). The tutor can draw out the commonalities between the students' definition of the learning style and Kolb's definition. The combination of learning styles can also be an indicator to the tutor of the likely semester/year ahead. If, for example, the class is predominantly made up of 'Convergers' this is likely to cause both the class and the tutor some difficulties - Convergers solve the wrong problem, make hasty decisions, lack focus and have scattered thoughts (Osland et al 2001)! An excess of any one of the other learning styles will bring with it advantages and disadvantages for the tutor and for the students. A skewed distribution of learning styles in the classroom can alert the tutor to what type of activities are likely to work best with that group of students and may give an early indication of the response likely from students.

Honey and Mumford (1986) have adapted Kolb's work and identified slightly different learning styles

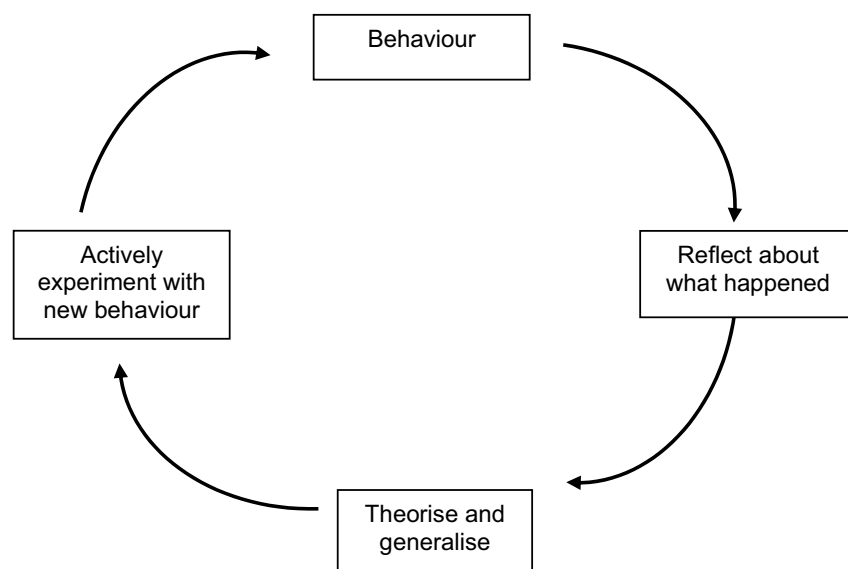


Figure 1: Experiential Learning: based on Kolb

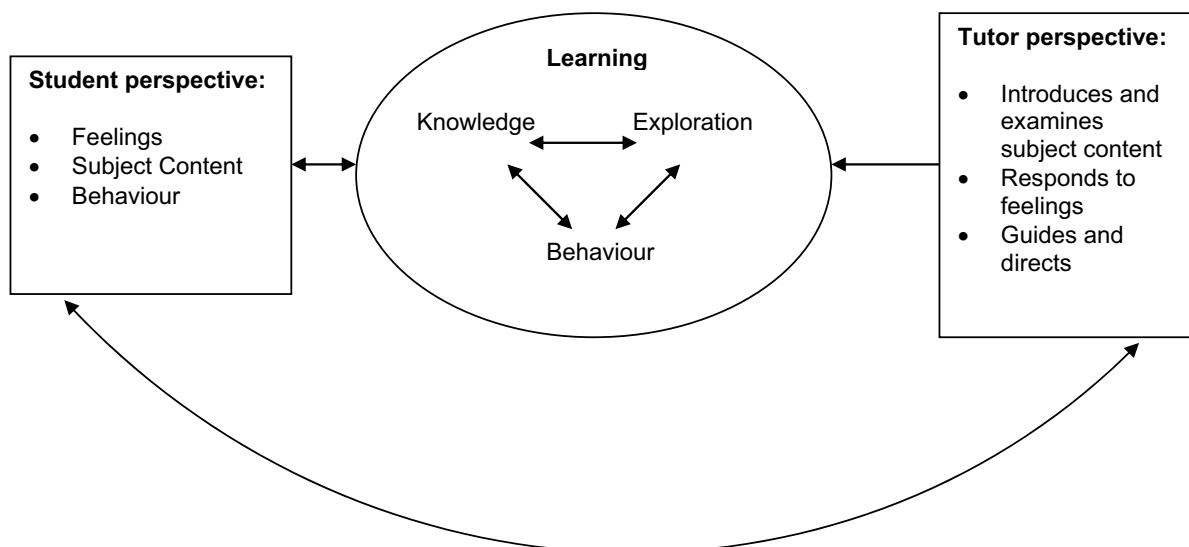


Figure 2: Learning: student/Tutor perspective

and some tutors may prefer to use this work (Honey 1992). There is also an electronic version of another learning styles instrument by Soloman and Felder at <http://www.ncsu.edu/felder-public/ILSdir/ilsweb.html> which some students and tutors may prefer to use, because there is more information available electronically. The downside to this instrument, though, is that it has not been validated to the same extent as Kolb's work or the adaptation by Honey and Mumford.

Different types of learning groups

It is possible for the tutor to use a range of different learning groups, some of which are set out below.

- ❖ Discussion groups – members can be provided with questions for which a group response is required. This usually works well with postgraduate students but undergraduates may need encouragement initially to discuss and critique models and theories.
- ❖ Role plays – the group might be asked to role play a situation. Role play works well with both postgraduate and undergraduate students. It is often necessary, though, to draw out the learning points or to have a plenary session in which these are explored.
- ❖ Experiential activities – the group can be asked to perform a task and to reflect on the process as well as the task completion. Most students respond positively to experiential activities which should cover the cognitive, behavioural, affective, skills and knowledge components.
- ❖ Simulations – can provide 'real' experience without the risks. Simulations can provide powerful learning experiences and are well received by most students. The advantage of simulations is that the students own the experience, have to make decisions and deal with the consequences. The tutor can observe and assess the experience and hold a plenary debriefing session to facilitate learning.

- ❖ Presentations – group presentations can provide a effective learning experience (see Payne & Whittaker (2000) for a checklist of criteria to evaluate a presentation).

Each of these has advantages and disadvantages and over the course of time it is likely that students will experience all of the above. Tutors may find that they prefer one approach and stick with it. However tutors can gain a great deal from trying out the different approaches.

Issues to consider when using group work

When contemplating group work a number of issues need to be taken into account.

- ❖ Small group work can be more costly in terms of tutor input.
- ❖ Some tutors find teaching groups difficult as regards the management of both the process and the development of subject knowledge.
- ❖ The noise level may increase considerably and it can be a great temptation to try to control this but it is often a necessary part of the learning process.
- ❖ Group work requires tutors to be facilitators rather than to use a didactic approach which many tutors (and students) find comfortable. Tutors need to develop skills to deal with groups. Tutors using group work have to learn to trust students to manage themselves as it is not possible to retain the same level of control as in a didactic situation.
- ❖ Diverse groups ensure that disparate knowledge and experience contribute to the learning process. The different viewpoints will also contribute to planning and problem solving. It is useful to choose activities that have 'group goals' and 'individual

accountability' which are made clear at the start of the learning experience.

- ❖ What should the role of the tutor be? – For example, this can be to circulate around the groups listening to the discussion but without interfering or taking control back from the group. Beware of students requesting information and then expecting the tutor to take over and direct proceedings. However, it may be necessary to intervene sensitively if the group has gone off at a tangent and is not likely to complete the set task.
- ❖ Planning is very important – it is wise for the tutor to plan carefully beforehand, provide briefing notes and then let the student groups complete the task on their own initiative. The tutor has to be organised and ensure that all material is available at appropriate times and in sufficient quantity.
- ❖ If assessment is part of the process, will it be the individual or the whole group that is assessed? Who will assess – tutor or peers, or both?

There are differences in approach needed if the tutor sees the group only a small number of times, as opposed to a one semester or two semester module. Initially, time involvement may be greater than for other approaches but the potential benefits can far outweigh any preliminary investment of time.

Group size

The size of the group is an important variable and will influence the behaviour and feelings of individual members. Whether students work in small or larger groups will affect the dynamic of the group and this is something the tutor needs to bear in mind when deciding on the size of the groups for the activities.

If the total group is large, then it is essential to split the students into manageable groups, for example about five or six members in each small group, unless the task calls for more than this. An experienced tutor can use a large group to make specific learning points, but in most cases small groups work best. Tasks which use increasingly larger sized groups can enable the students to experience for themselves the issues of participation, communication, the need for planning and organisation. In the early stages of using groups the tutor may have to draw out the learning points in a plenary session at the end of the activity, or ask the students to report back on their learning.

Physical setting

The physical setting is also an important variable in group work. A large, tiered lecture theatre is less suitable for group work than a room with easily moved furniture. It is much more conducive to group work if students can sit around tables working on the task at hand. It may also be necessary to return the furniture to its original configuration after the group work session is over. Some institutions prefer to have tables/chairs in neat rows, and a room organised to facilitate group work may not please the next lecturer to use the room!

Group atmosphere

The tutor needs to give some thought to the kind of atmosphere to be engendered in learning groups. The group atmosphere can be fostered by clearly outlining the objectives of the group work at the outset. If students are aware that they are expected to take risks, expose weaknesses, practise skills and share experiences, this will require the tutor to create a non-threatening environment with an ambience of trust, support and respect within the group, so that co-operation develops between the members.

The task may be collaborative or competitive, in which case the atmosphere will differ. Most students prefer a friendly and pleasant atmosphere, though there will be some who like to play devil's advocate and be confrontational. It may be that for some activities it is necessary to ask students to be in conflict or deal with hostility and unpleasant feelings in a role play, as this is a valuable learning experience. Some students may be asked to challenge the views of others, be deliberately antagonistic, contentious or provocative, or to be nurturing, or to adopt a role which looks after others in a less advantageous situation. Alternatively, some could be asked to be involved, interested, enthusiastic, apathetic or to introduce fun or humour into the group interaction, depending on the learning outcomes for the session. The learning outcomes for the activity will determine the atmosphere that the tutor attempts to generate.

Participation of group members

Both tutor and students are concerned about participation in group work. If the assessment method allocates equal grades to all students, then clearly more or less equal participation is desirable. It is a perennial issue for tutors using groups to facilitate learning that they ensure equal participation. The group task should encourage and ensure participation and involvement. In some cases, peer assessment might be used to attempt to bring about equal contribution. Peer assessment is one way to permit students to differentiate between the contribution levels of their peers. See Brown (1998) for a discussion of peer assessment. Alternatively, if students are expected to contribute in class, the tutor can give a participation mark, although it is wise to link this to the quality of the contribution as there are some students who contribute quantity, but not quality!

In other group learning activities the tutor can provide a range of questions to encourage participation. In certain situations the tutor may need to rethink the task to and develop skills to:

- ❖ change disinterest and lack of motivation into involvement, possibly by changing the activities or introducing a very contemporary topic;
- ❖ deal with conflict constructively; many students will not acknowledge that there is conflict in the group, especially if the activity is assessed;
- ❖ encourage the low contributors to engage with both the task and the group process; low contribution can be associated with low motivation, low self-confidence, lack of skills etc;

- ❖ deal with those students who attempt to control and dominate proceedings by interjecting and asking others in the group to comment.

It is also possible, with appropriate and careful planning, to structure the group learning experience so that the group itself has to deal with the situations identified and any emergent issues.

On the other hand, the tutor may feel obliged to start the discussion and never stop! It takes time and effort to develop the skills to encourage students to participate and to guide discussion appropriately without dominating proceedings, whilst at the same time dealing sensitively with an inappropriate contribution. Group work can feel quite threatening for the tutor who is not in control in quite the same way as in a lecture theatre. It also takes time to acquire the skills to bring in the quiet members of the group and to ensure that they have the opportunity to contribute while keeping the dominant members quiet. Providing feedback about inappropriate contributions also requires sensitivity because it is important not to put a student off contributing in future when they have done more research or their input is relevant. Tutors need to develop a 'thick skin,' especially when silences occur; it is essential to be able to remain silent and give the students chance to gather their thoughts. It can be very tempting for a tutor faced with silence to try to fill the gap and, rather than allowing the students to explore the situation, the tutor ends up giving another mini-lecture.

Group observers

In order to develop group work skills in students, it can be useful to have observers who observe both the task and process elements which occur, but students will need to be provided with observer checklists.

The following are useful pointers that an observer can be briefed to identify.

- ❖ Communication patterns – who talks to whom? Is one person the hub of the interactions or does the communication flow through several individuals?
- ❖ Non-verbal communication – are group members showing interest/disinterest through body language?
- ❖ Level of conflict – is the group harmonious or more inclined towards disagreements? What behaviours signify this?
- ❖ Contribution – is participation more or less equal? Or do some individuals hardly contribute but, when they do, the quality of their contribution is far greater and more influential than someone who contributes a great deal?
- ❖ Leadership – is the leader chosen by the group? Does s/he simply emerge or is the leader not evident? Is leadership shared between the group members?
- ❖ Levels of interest – are group members interested in or indifferent to the activity?
- ❖ Power and influence – who holds the power/influence in the group? Is it an individual or sub-group(s)?

- ❖ Decision making – how are decisions made?
- ❖ Task behaviour – does the group keep focused on the task, or does one individual keep the group on target?
- ❖ Roles – what roles do individuals play? Is it possible to identify Belbin's nine team roles in the group? Do members exhibit aspects of Belbin's team roles?
- ❖ What stage of development is the group at? What behaviours indicate this?

Group structure

The tutor will need to consider whether to impose certain structural characteristics on the group, such as:

- ❖ roles;
- ❖ hierarchy;
- ❖ procedures;
- ❖ rules;
- ❖ particular tasks for individual students;
- ❖ the way the group operates when making decisions;
- ❖ who reports to whom.

Inevitably, some type of group structure will arise spontaneously because most students feel more at ease with a framework that provides certain guidelines. Even with a structure determined by the tutor, informal aspects of structure will emerge, perhaps a leader who is not the nominated leader. The informal structure may become apparent as the group develops, but some of the informal aspects will not be evident to the tutor.

Group norms

During the time the group works together, certain patterns of behaviour and relationships will occur which are not formally agreed but are shared psychologically by the members of the group. The group may not be aware of these patterns at a conscious level but, nevertheless, they will influence each student. These patterns of behaviour, or norms, are unwritten, informal guidelines which group members accept, often without realising it. The tutor needs to be aware that norms will operate that he/she cannot identify. However, other norms will be clearly evident. These norms may encourage everyone to work extremely diligently to produce high quality work in pursuit of high grades or, alternatively, the norms may be that all group members do as little work as possible. Irrespective of whether it is possible to identify them immediately, group norms will exist and those who do not conform to them will face sanctions from the group.

Status

Status is another aspect which always exists in groups, and it will affect how the members behave towards each other. Status relationships can determine a group member's standing in particular groups. Students may accept a group member having higher status because he or she has access to expert knowledge or information that the group needs. It is also possible that the tutor may allocate roles which confer status. Alternatively, one of the various models which utilises the concept of roles

may be used to define the team. This in itself may confer status on particular individuals in the group. Tutors can experiment with this aspect of group work, in that it is possible to allocate a high status role to a group member who is a low contributor. This is not without risks, as this person may indeed rise to the occasion, but this isn't always the case, resulting in an activity that is less successful than it might be.

Decision-making

The decision-making framework is an area that tutors should contemplate when using group work. The following are suggestions which may be considered.

- ❖ What type of decision-making is permitted?
- ❖ Will the group members be able to make autocratic decisions without considering the effects on the other members in the group?
- ❖ Will the group be asked to ensure that consensus decision-making takes place, where all participants can accept and support the decision made?
- ❖ Will decisions be by majority vote?
- ❖ What strategy is in place for group members who disagree with the decision – is it permissible for them to be ignored, coerced, over-ruled?
- ❖ How much bargaining, negotiation or compromise will be allowed between the group members and between individual group members and the tutor – what are the effects on the group?

Leadership

The tutor may designate one person as the leader of the group, but the officially appointed leader may, in fact, not fulfil that role and an informal leader may emerge to control activities. The tutor has to bear in mind that there may be leadership struggles which influence how the group works. The leader may not adequately structure the debate or provide adequate control, thus allowing discussions to ramble aimlessly. The leader may be dysfunctional in ensuring effectiveness and efficiency in the functioning of the group and the tutor should think carefully about this element.

Assessment of group work

There are a number of activities which can be used to assess groups, such as presentations (in various formats), group reports, group discussions, individual judgement of the group process, contribution to the group task and so on. The tutor has to decide if he/she will be the sole judge of the work, or if there will be an element of peer assessment. The tutor has to grapple with the thorny issue of fairness and equity of marking, especially if there are variable contributions, whether this is quality or quantity. It is important that, if the assessment is to be group-based, the tutor thinks this through carefully before embarking on it. For example, if the assessment is in the form of group presentations, these have to be scheduled – whether this be in tutorial time, some other time or during the examination period.

A large cohort of students may present tutors with difficulties in dealing physically with all the group assessments, as well as ensuring that suitable rooms, equipment and staff/students are available at an appropriate time. There is also the issue that

the tutor(s) may become fatigued and the ability to make rational judgements become increasingly difficult.

The tutor also has to decide:

- ❖ whether to attempt to assess the group process and how this can be done, or if the only assessment will be what can be observed;
- ❖ whether to use written assessment or presentations – which could be video recorded for feedback purposes and sent to an external examiner;
- ❖ whether feedback will be restricted to the subject knowledge and content or include elements such as visual aids, delivery – verbal and non-verbal, timing, ability to deal with questions etc;
- ❖ how feedback will be given – verbally, written qualitative or pro-forma;
- ❖ at what point it will take place – at the end of the period of study, continuously, at specified intervals.

Whatever is decided, the tutor must ensure that the learning outcomes specified are assessed and it is good practice to provide assessment criteria for students. This enables students to make informed choices and also provides the tutor with the basis for feedback.

E-learning environment

It is now possible to use e-learning environments to support group learning. For example, the learning styles questionnaires can be accessed via the internet or an in-house intranet, and students can be directed towards such material and asked to use it to develop the group. E-learning platforms such as Blackboard and WebCT are now in use and tutors may wish to give careful consideration to using one of these to facilitate group work. The advantage for students of the e-learning platforms is that they do not necessarily have to meet face-to-face all the time. As increasing numbers of students have part-time employment, this can prove an attractive proposition for completing the task. It is possible to have discussion threads which can be assessed. Similarly, it is possible to ask students to upload onto the e-learning platform draft copies of their assignment for other students to critique as part of the assessment. It is rather more difficult to use an e-learning environment if the process elements of group work form part of the assessment, but students could be asked to meet to discuss the group process and post the results of their deliberations on the e-learning platform. In the early stages of development of an e-learning environment, tutors usually require staff development and/or technical support to develop the resource.

Potential problems of group work

There are, of course, always potential problems and difficulties of working with groups in an educational setting. It is quite usual for students to dislike some aspects of group work. They may feel frustrated because less effective group members are diluting individual effort. Alternatively, there may be uncomfortable peer pressure to work harder or to meet deadlines etc. It is important for students to experi-

ence and deal with these types of behaviours and to work through associated feelings as part of the learning experience. Tutors also experience difficulties with group work and some of the most frequently experienced ones are detailed below.

- ❖ How to prompt discussion when the group members seem unwilling to discuss the topic – this may require the tutor to rephrase questions because the students may not understand, or it may be necessary to probe or prompt the students. The tutor may need (or decide) to be provocative, taking an extreme stance to provoke a response from students.
- ❖ What to do to encourage participation – assessment can include an element not only of participation but also for quality of participation, or peer assessment can be introduced.
- ❖ How to deal with conflict – especially if this is between particular individuals or sub-groups. The tutor will need to develop conflict-handling skills to deal with some situations. (see Whetten, Cameron & Woods (2001) for a discussion of conflict-handling skills). In other cases, the scenario provided to students may require that they deal with conflict as part of the learning process.
- ❖ How to ensure that the group meets objectives and completes the task – whether these are set by the tutor or by the group.
- ❖ How to deal with ‘problem’ people – for example the joker, or someone who is continually disruptive in some way or another.
- ❖ Managing the time – whether the tutor or the students manage the time available. The tutor may also need to develop strategies to deal with the situation if the group finishes earlier than planned or the task takes much longer than expected. This varies because of the individuals in the group and an activity that is completed quickly in one group can take much longer in another.
- ❖ Lack of motivation of group members – this may be something that the tutor has to deal with, or it might be part of the group process which the members need to address.
- ❖ Insufficient or inappropriate space for groups to meet – some teaching accommodation is not suitable for group work and the tutor may need to make a special request for a room large enough for students to participate in a particular activity, as well as ensuring that appropriate furniture and equipment is available.

In designing or choosing activities for groups it is essential to consider both the task and process elements of group work. Frequently, attention is focused on the task and the process issues are neglected. When facilitating group work it is important to ensure that students do not focus on the task and overlook the process elements. If the focus is totally on the task this is likely to lead to conflict, misunderstandings and possibly leadership battles which will mean that the group is less effective than it might be and, in extreme cases, may mean that the task is not completed.

Group process, or dynamic, is commonly overlooked even though it can be a key cause of unsuccessful group working. It is important, therefore, that students are sensitised to group processes so that they

learn to deal with difficulties that occur and are able to deal with them effectively.

Closure of a group work session

Towards the end of a group work session, the tutor may ask students to summarise discussions and present the results to the total group, or he/she may choose to provide a summary of main points him/herself. It is a good idea to draw ideas together at the end of the session or topic, summarising the learning points, possibly linking them back to the learning outcomes for the session, as this provides a sense of closure for the students. If the students are asked to summarise, it is useful if the tutor provides a précis of the main points on a flip chart or acetate. However, the downside to this is that some students may think that no further exploration of the topic is necessary. It can, therefore, be a valuable strategy not to bring closure to a session, so that the students continue to debate or think about the issues raised in the classroom and the wider implications and applications.

In a group learning environment students come to understand that the skills practised and perspectives gained are those which are used in the business world. It becomes evident that there is a dependency and interdependency on peers as they work and learn together and as each student becomes increasingly autonomous, articulate and more socially and intellectually mature. It is these aspects which make group work so rewarding in the classroom and worth all the effort and thought that is a necessary precursor to a successful student learning experience.

Part 2: A Case Study

An example of group work in practice

Group work is a major focus of two modules which form part of the second year Business Studies degree at Leeds Business School, Leeds Metropolitan University. Approximately 160 students study the modules during each academic year and each module is worth 15 credit points which is composed of 150 hours of student study – class contact, directed study and independent study.

One of the main issues in a modular framework is that students tend to see subjects in boxes, and these modules encourage ‘thinking outside the box’ so that an appreciation of the intricacies of business is gained. The modules use a business simulation to develop group and employability skills. Jones (1997) argues that business simulations can be an effective way of enabling students to experience the business world, as they are able to provide a valuable experiential learning environment. Students are able to make mistakes, apply theoretical knowledge and practice skills in a ‘real’ situation without the attendant risks experienced in the workplace.

The modules draw on a number of disciplines, such as finance, marketing, production and human resources, which provide students with an opportunity to understand the complexities and inter-relationships of business. Students have to research into the European motor industry, discuss company results in their group, determine strategy for their company, make decisions about their company against critical deadlines and deal with operational issues in a context of ill-defined problems, uncertainty and risk. A hasty decision may have unintended consequences, such as strikes, large stock holding costs and so on and such errors of judgment enable students to learn experientially about the complexities of business.

At the same time the students develop behavioural skills essential for competent performance in the workplace of the 21st century, rather than merely learning facts related to a particular subject. These include:

- ❖ learning;
- ❖ group work;
- ❖ employability skills;
- ❖ leadership;
- ❖ communication;
- ❖ decision making and problem-solving;
- ❖ meeting skills.

The skills are developed in a context of business which it is argued is more effective than a discrete ‘bolt on’ module (Harvey et al 2002).

Students also learn to deal with the emotional aspects of groups and are advised that the feelings they experience are real, whether this is anger, pleasure, sympathy, dislike or happiness and that the individual and/or group will have to deal with this affective aspect of group work.

Delivery of the modules

The two modules are integrated in their delivery and use a number of teaching methods, including:

- a) Signpost lectures during the year to introduce students to:
 - ❖ the approach adopted by the modules;
 - ❖ group work;
 - ❖ career planning;
 - ❖ reflection;
 - ❖ business planning and analysis;
 - ❖ annual general meetings.
- b) Guest lectures:
 - ❖ the business simulation producers lecture about the motor industry and answer any technical questions from the students;
 - ❖ the Senior Business Learning advisor lectures about sources of information related to the motor industry;
 - ❖ there are guest lectures about employability skills;
 - ❖ a bank, a firm of lawyers and Business Link lecture about business plans, legal aspects of running a business and general business issues.
- c) An e-learning environment is provided to support students. There is access to:
 - ❖ electronic versions of the module documentation;
 - ❖ external links to web sites providing information on the motor industry, team working etc.;
 - ❖ a multiple choice test to check understanding of the simulation;
 - ❖ communication tools – the most important of these is the group page: group members are able to contact each other off-site, exchange ideas, set up meetings and upload electronic documents; tutors are able to view the group’s work and track progress from the minutes and agenda of the weekly board meetings; there are also facilities for discussion groups and a virtual classroom, which permits the exchange of drawings as well as text;
 - ❖ announcements/notices so that tutors can indicate changes to the programme etc.;
 - ❖ PowerPoint presentations – including some of the guest lectures;
 - ❖ computer assisted learning through the LMU Intranet site ‘Skills for Learning’, which contains information about group working, meetings, problem solving and employability skills as well as other areas to help students with study.

An e-learning environment can add considerably to independent learning and group work, but it has to be harnessed to enhance the learning experience and not become an end itself.

Group formation

Belbin’s team role theory (1981, 1993) and its accompanying Interplace software are used by tutors to put students into groups for the duration of the modules. At the first tutorial, students complete Belbin’s Team Role Inventory and in a later lecture are introduced to the model, and subsequently watch the video Building the Perfect Team. The Interplace software is used to provide a Self-perception profile, a Character profile and a Counselling profile for each student. The tutor forms

the groups and a Team Role Combinations report is provided, from which each group is asked to identify any deficiencies and develop strategies to deal with them.

The groups are selected by the tutor to ensure that students are put into groups who have not worked together before to ensure that the groups undertake the modules from the same starting point. Group membership remains constant throughout the year, with the exception of students who withdraw from the course.

A number of sessions are provided (lectures and tutorials) about group work, which builds on work that the students have completed in level one about individual differences, group development, power and conflict in groups. The sessions include information about:

- ❖ what makes a group effective;
- ❖ balancing task and process;
- ❖ individual characteristics.

In an associated module taught by the same tutor, students are provided with information about:

- ❖ individual decision-making;
- ❖ group decision-making;
- ❖ political actors;

which further develops students' understanding of the inter-relatedness of business.

Completing the task

Once the groups have been formed, students have to work together to make decisions about their company. Early in the modules, a psychological contract develops between students within a group, creating peer pressure to attend sessions because contribution and attendance is expected. Students will usually exchange mobile phone numbers and if a group member is absent or late another member will ring to discover the cause, or possibly to get their student colleague out of bed!

Students must work on many tasks without losing sight of the overall objective of the group. As well as focusing on the work to be done, decisions to be made, organising and running the board meetings, the group has to deal with many process issues. There may be interactions and conflict within the group; liking, friendship and belonging; power; status; and also deeper issues such as inclusion, personality, history (Reddy 1994). In addition to dealing with the process issues, groups have to ensure that tasks are scheduled and dealt with during their meetings.

Assessment used in the modules

Students are assessed in the modules using a combination of individual and group performance. Students have to produce an individual assignment based on the principles of reflective practice, which have a long history in education. (Schon 1983, 1987; Moon 1999). Students use various theories and models introduced in the lectures, such as those of Tuckman (1965, 1977), Janis (1972), Luft and Ingham (1970) which develop self- and group-

awareness. The purpose of the reflection is to encourage group members to analyse both individual and group processes so that it is possible for continuous improvement to take place.

The modules also use two group assessments, which are to write a business plan during the first semester, for which students receive a group mark; the second, in semester two, is to prepare and present an Annual General Meeting for their company. The second assessment also includes peer assessment, which is used to differentiate the grades for individual students. Peer assessment may seem to be a solution to a perpetual problem of group work – the variable contribution from students. However, while peer assessment may bring a resolution to differing contribution syndrome, it is not without its own difficulties and the modules have experimented with peer assessment over a number of years. Brown (1998) provides a more detailed description of contributions to the peer assessment debate.

Students rarely comment about 'free riders', instead using the peer assessment to distinguish between those who have worked hard and those who have not. Each group has to submit a document signed by all to indicate how the marks for the AGM will be allocated, and from this, individual marks can move up or down according to the weight assigned by the group through peer assessment.

The student evaluations of the modules are very positive in quantitative and qualitative terms, and, as can be seen from the case study, the tutors make good use of the approach outlined in the first part of the paper.

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