Students’ experience and perceptions of group assignments

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Abstract
The collection of student feedback is a central strategy to monitor the effectiveness of teaching and learning at educational institutions (Meyer 2010). This paper analyses the feedback and findings from a recent questionnaire survey of students’ experience and perceptions of group work at a UK university at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. The main objective of this study is to raise practical issues that teachers need to consider in designing and carrying out group assessments. This is aimed at overcoming the drawbacks, while amplifying the benefits, of group work, and improving students’ engagement and performance in this type of assessment.

The following are the key findings from analysis of the questionnaire replies:

• Group assignments were indeed valued by students. Respondents recognised the benefits of group assignments as well as the drawbacks.
• A wide variety of communication strategies had been involved between students for working on group assignments, as well as individual assignments when seeking input and support from peers.
• Students had developed a number of strategies for dealing with team members who did not ‘pull their weight’, and it was suggested that some of these could be formalised, such as requiring minutes to be taken of key meetings.

The research underpinned the utility of group assignments, and suggested a number of ways in which the potential drawbacks can be mitigated.

Keywords
Students, group assignment, questionnaire survey
Introduction
Group work at education institutions is now considered as one of the best approaches for developing students’ communication skills and acquiring knowledge. This agrees with the results from the study by Smith and Bath (Smith & Bath 2006), who revealed that interaction of members engaging in group assignments would develop generic skills, such as communication and critical thinking. Group work appears to offer teachers an effective way to engage students, to increase the complexity and challenge of the tasks that students gain experience of working on, to offer students the opportunity for collaborative working, and to offer the possibility of reduced marking loads (Gibbs 2009). The authors and their colleagues seem to have the view that students dislike group work. This study was undertaken to obtain evidence from students on their perceptions of group assignments and how they handle the problems associated with them.

This paper analyses the feedback and findings from a recent questionnaire survey of students’ experience and perceptions of group assignments at a UK university at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. The purpose of this study is to raise practical issues that teachers need to consider in designing and carrying out group assessment with a view to overcoming the drawbacks, and amplifying the benefits, of such work, and to improve students’ engagement and performance in these activities.

Literature Review
The benefits to students of group work have been demonstrated both in general (Johnson et al 1991) and in specific contexts. For example, Mello (1993) identifies major benefits of group work: (1) “students can gain an insight into group dynamics”; (2) “they can tackle a more comprehensive assignments”; (3) “interpersonal skills can be developed”; (4) “students are more exposed to others’ points of view”; and (5) “be more prepared for the commercial world”.

A comprehensive review on the implementation of small group learning within individual discipline areas also shows very positive impacts on student performance, marks, attitudes towards learning and persistence or retention (Gibbs 2009). For example Springer et al (Springer et al 1999) reviewed 383 studies and found evidence of “widespread implementation of small-group learning” at undergraduate level in the three disciplines studied. Problem based learning (PBL) also uses learning in groups and meta-analyses of studies comparing PBL with other pedagogies show consistent benefits to student learning processes and outcomes from PBL (Dochy et al 2003).

JISC (2008) recognises the benefit for academics/tutors in setting group work tasks in that these can significantly reduce [staff] workload. However, JISC also reports work by Kennedy (Kennedy 2006): “there is evidence to suggest that students undertaking such projects express concern about the way in which marks are awarded for outcomes produced by the group collaboratively”.

A review of relevant literature shows that there are studies on the general topics of group work and group assessment as discussed above. For example, there are case studies that were designed to address problems with the assessment of groups. However, there have been limited publications that have empirical evidence to inform the design decision of group assignments (Gibbs 2009). It is hoped that the outcomes of this study can contribute
to this.

**Research Methodology**

Based on literature review for this study and anecdotal evidence from students, a questionnaire was designed with a pilot study among a small group of students to test its validity. The questionnaire was modified in the light of comments from the pilot study. The survey was formerly carried out at the end of the academic year 2010/2011 among two groups of students. One group was Level 1 undergraduates, and the other was MSc students, at the Business School. Participation in the survey was voluntary.

In total, 140 questionnaires were distributed in the last class at the end of the second semester, and 106 were completed and returned of which 30 were by MSc students and 76 by Level-1 undergraduates. This represented an acceptably high return rate of 75%.

**Data Analysis and Findings**

This section presents the results from some of the key questions in the survey form.

**Q1:** What do you prefer, individual or group assignments? It is interesting to see that the preference between group and individual assignments is very close - 51% to 49%.

**Q2:** Which do you prefer when working on a group assignment - splitting up the work or working together? In terms of workload strategy for group work, the preference between “splitting up the work” and “working together” was exactly 50%: 50%. The preference for group/individual assignments and for splitting the work/working together are not independent at the 5% level: Students who prefer individual assignments prefer to split up the work; and students who prefer group assignments prefer to work together.

**Q3:** Which strategies do you use to encourage fair contribution from all members to a group assignment? For this question on this important issue, students were allowed to choose multiple answers. Analysis indicates that “share workload” stands out with a very high percentage of the total choices (39%), followed by “share ideas and information” (13%), “set deadlines” and “have meetings” (7% each), “use peer strength” and “encourage participation” (6% each). Surprisingly, “mutual agreement”, “better communication”, and “help each other” were not considered as key strategies for encouraging fair contributions.

**Q4:** How do you feel about contributing more than your fair share? We were very pleased to see that nearly 80% of the participants in the survey felt that they are happy to contribute more than their fair share to the group work with the explanations: “if this will improve the work and therefore the grade” (over 30%), or “because I feel I will learn more from this experience” or “if I can help other group members” (both over 20%). Some chose they “do not mind” (over 10%), and about 4% chose: “I don’t want to because it will increase my workload”. So it seems that if the students can see the benefit, they are generally happy to make a “more than fair share” contribution to the group assignment. However, one respondent commented: “Sometimes it is annoying when your group mates take it for granted and assume that no matter whether they contribute or not, you are going to do their part of work as well. This reduces your interest and concentration.”

**Q5:** Which communication tools do you use for group communication if you are not physically together? To this question, three choices were given – a. Tools provided by the university systems (e.g. tools on Blackboard, the University’s e-mail system); b. Other tools
(e.g. Facebook, MSN, Skype); c. Other (please specify). There were about one-third of the respondents for each of the three choices (34%, 32% and 34% respectively). When students were asked to specify “other” in the third choice “c”, 35% said “phone only”, 28% “phone and messaging”, 18% “messaging only” and 10% each went for “email only” and “email and other tools”.

Here it is worth noting that as high as 66% of the respondents use many social networking systems for collaborating on their group work that were not provided by the university. Q6: On a scale of 1 to 5, how do you feel about assignments which require you to work together but then submit individual work? Surprisingly, as high as a third of the respondents love/like working together but submitting individual work, while 39% do not seem to mind doing so, but nearly a quarter do not like the idea of working together but submitting individual work. Q7: Do you feel that you can learn more by doing group work and why? Three-quarters of the respondents feel that they can learn more by doing group work, while 16% do not agree, and 8% was not sure. Interestingly, 30% of respondents who prefer individual assignments felt that they can learn more by doing group work and give the reasons.

Q8: What skills do you feel you can develop when you work on a group assignment? To this question two skills stood out – “team work skills” and “communication skills” which add up to over 50% of the total responses. Other skills students developed by doing group assignments are: self-development, time management, academic development, leadership, interpersonal and inter-cultural communication.

Q9: What do you feel is the biggest benefit of working on group assignments? To this question the respondents gave various answers, including: use peer strength, share workload, more input, develop interpersonal and team work skills, learn from peers, and increase self-confidence. Some of the respondents gave details of the benefits of group work which can be categorized as: (a) good team-work skills, (b) shared workload and ideas, and improve grades.

The key benefits can perhaps be best summarised using one of the respondent’s comments: “Share information, share ideas, less workload, more input and ideas, more resources, help each other, more adaptable, more confident, can communicate with people of different culture, can exchange ideas, opportunity to understand and learn from others, become more knowledgeable, build up relationship and make new friends”.

Q10: What do you feel is the biggest drawback of working on group assignments? Of course the respondents also saw the drawbacks of working on group assignments. These included: uneven contribution, rely on others, poor commitment and attitude, poor time management, low ability and contribution.

Conclusions
A key finding from this study is that, contrary to tutors’ belief that students overwhelmingly dislike group assignments given, just over half of the respondents indicated that they prefer group assignments. Other key findings include:

The majority of the respondents feel that they can learn more by doing group work, especially in terms of the development of team work and communication skills.
A wide variety of communication strategies have been involved for working on group assignments, and also for individual assignments when seeking input and support from peers. This suggests that the university should also explore and facilitate the use of these systems. To encourage fair contribution and improve the team performance, students have developed a number of strategies: encourage participation, have group meetings, use peer strength, share ideas, share information, share workload, and set deadlines.

Students do see both benefits and drawbacks of group work. While the biggest benefits frequently mentioned are: use peer strength, share workload, more input, develop interpersonal and team work skills, learn from peers, and increase self-confidence, the biggest drawbacks are: uneven contribution, poor commitment, poor time management, and low ability and contribution.

It is recognised that the survey was conducted among students of one university only and it might have had biased results. However, as students generally have common characteristics it is believed that the findings from this study should be applicable to students groups of other education institutions. Further work would cover more detailed comparison between the perceptions of undergraduate and postgraduate students.

**References**


