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Undergraduate student perceptions of self managed group projects in communications education

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Abstract This article reports on student attitudes towards group projects. The questionnaire based research acknowledges industry expectations that today's graduates should possess a range of generic skills and attributes, such as an ability and preparedness to work in teams. I investigated the perceptions held by undergraduate students of self managed group projects. Results indicate that students are wary of being involved. Not surprisingly, students focus predominantly on the product and assessment of their projects, and much less on skill and attribute development. The findings suggest implications for undergraduate communications teaching in terms of establishing frameworks to foster development of teamwork skills instudents aiming to enter the professions.

Keywords: graduate attributes, teamwork skills, self managed group projects, assessment, student perceptions

Introduction

The use of group projects at tertiary level is a common practice. Studies have stressed the educational value of students learning together (Jacques 1991; Johnson, Johnson & Smith 1998). The practice of students learning in groups is not new, but the rationale for the increase in the use of the practice at tertiary level seems partly to do with acknowledging stakeholder expectations (BHERT 2002; Hunt, Kershaw & Bana 2003). The professions and industry organisations have indicated (Ceecez-Kecmanovic, Juchau, Kay & Wright 2002; DETYA 2000) that they expect today's graduates to possess a set of skills and attributes that can be transferred into the workplace.

In terms of Public Relations education, Anderson (1999, p. 122) has described these as essential "competencies". Walker (2000, p. 36) has focused on "ideal student outcomes" that Public Relations education should provide. Alexander (2004) has commented on the need for public relations course developers
to understand industry trends. Although his particular focus is on the use of technology, such sentiment could also be directed at educators creating authentic skills/attributes developmental experiences for undergraduates. Anderson (1999, p.21) points out, despite a focus by many on technology, “the future of business communication rests on the knowledge and skills of people”. The emphasis here is on the human being. The message is that functional skills are as important as technical skills.

Among the broad list of skills and attributes regarded as important by both external stakeholders and the universities themselves is the need for graduates to be able to communicate effectively and work together in teams (Neff, Walker, Smith & Creedon 1999; Nelson 2002). Despite differing interpretations of the terminology - ‘group’ and ‘team’ (Berge 1998; Johnson & Johnson 2003), many university subjects seem to now regard group projects as one valid means of preparing students for the ‘teamwork’ expected of them once they graduate.

This typically takes the form of students either randomly or by design being organised into groups of usually 4 - 6 members. The group is then required to work on a particular project, which may take the form of a particular problem solving exercise, completion of a written assignment, preparation and delivery of an oral presentation, research into a real world organisation, design of a communications program, or any of a range of tasks. By structuring learning so that students are expected to collaborate in groups, educators seem to believe that an environment in which people can learn - about content, about communicating with each other, about how to operate effectively together - will be created.

There is something to be said for this view, as the educational benefits of students learning together are claimed to be considerable (Bruffee 1993; Jacques 1991; Johnson, Johnson & Smith 1998). Marton and Saljo’s (1984) concept of ‘deep’ learning is often mentioned in the scholarship on human learning. Hounsell (1997) and Rossin & Hyland (2003) for example, argue that cooperative or collaborative learning is an effective means of encouraging the analysis and synthesis that is deep learning, rather than the rote learning of a more ‘surface’ level approach.

Peer collaboration on a learning task is seen as having a range of benefits - improved communication and interpersonal skills, developing teamwork skills, experiencing real life conflict and negotiation, encouraging students to take more responsibility for managing their own learning (Boud, Cohen & Sampson 1999).

The key to encouraging the ‘deeper’ approach to learning in groups is proper structure. Students need to be supported and guided through an experience which is different to the individual learning that most of them are used to. To throw groups of undergraduate students into a learning context where collaboration is so important, and expect them to manage it themselves so well that positive learning develops, is often an unreasonable expectation; even more so when
learning objectives are unclear to students, where the actual learning task could just as easily be completed individually, where there is limited advice and support available to students outside formal class time, and where assessment of learning does not suitably align with the group context.

Mackey and Phillips (1997) for example, have offered public relations educators a practical guide to conducting a team based crisis simulation game, for students to experience. At the top of their list of objectives for this “rehearsal and a test of rational learning” (Mackey & Phillips 1997, p. 145) is to give students experience of team building and team cooperation. Yet their ‘debriefing’ after the implementation of their simulation reveals a degree of disappointment.

The authors express concern that student groups approached the simulation as just another academic exercise, that “there seemed to be a misplaced policy of deliberate secrecy and competitiveness between groups” (p. 148), but interestingly also that “the object of the exercise was to expose students as much as possible to the real situation” (p. 148). Their disappointment that students lacked the “judgement” (p. 148) that a public relations person should possess highlights an important educational issue.

Undergraduates need to not only construct the technical knowledge required to enter the professions, but also need to be supported and guided in the development of their skills and attributes. Assuming that merely because students are required to work in groups at university that they will magically emerge as skilled graduates “able to function effectively in their initial professional position” (Walker 2000, p. 38) is risky. Students need direction, guidance and support as they navigate their way through their group learning experiences. It is from this support and guidance that we should expect students to be better able to hone such attributes as judgement.

Johnston and Zawawi (2000) talk of educators bedding down the relatively new discipline of Public Relations in Australian universities. As part of this bedding down process, I believe as much thought needs to be given to skill development as to the construction of knowledge in undergraduates. Proper management of group learning contexts by academic staff is required in order to create worthwhile group experiences for undergraduates.

It is pertinent that Johnson & Zawawi (2000, p. 108) observe “the fact that public relations courses and educators are sited in such disparate areas of universities has a significant impact on how that body of knowledge is taught and what emphases are provided”. The ‘emphases’ referred to here should include the need for public relations educators to establish and refine frameworks which encourage, guide and support the development of skills and attributes such as effective teamwork and positive collaboration in students. If the ‘emphasis’ by educators is on content at the expense of process, it is likely that undergraduates will be exposed to less than satisfactory group project experiences.
One common theme in the scholarship on group learning (Bourner, Hughes & Bourner 2001; Caspersz, Wu & Skene 2003; Gordon & Connor 2001; Hart & Stone 2001; Johnston & Miles 2004; Lizzio & Wilson 2005; Morris & Hayes 1997) is the wariness it can arouse in students.

Students comment on their unpleasant experiences of group projects in terms of carrying free riders, lack of direction from educators, difficulties organising group meetings outside class time, differing levels of motivation, a lack of availability of tutors when things go wrong, and most often, inequitable assessment practices. It is the wariness amongst many students towards group projects that will impact on the aim of giving students opportunities to try to develop worthwhile teamwork related skills and attributes.

If educators are to continue to organise subjects and courses to develop graduates with a good skill and attribute base, then a proper alignment between teaching and learning and assessment is important. As in any group situation, if there are members who feel unease, it is understandable that such unease could be reflected in students building resistance to working in groups. Possibly this resistance may be carried over after graduation into the workforce.

The research described in this paper was designed to investigate student perceptions of their group project experiences in public relations and business communication studies. Results tend to indicate that the sample of students who participated in this research expressed a similar range of responses to those discussed in the literature on group learning. Some found their group experiences positive. A significant number expressed reservations and strong antipathy. There are implications for communications educators in this, particularly with regards to the supportive frameworks and structures which are set up to guide students through their learning – more so their skill development than knowledge building.

**METHODOLOGY**

My research is located within an interpretivist framework. I adopted a phenomenological stance whereby I aimed to look at the issue of group learning through the eyes of the participant actors – the students in particular, the academic staff less so.

Within this framework, I employed a questionnaire survey of undergraduate students (n = 105). I also conducted semi-structured interviews with academic staff (n = 4) in order to set the student experiences in the context of what academic staff anticipated would be the outcomes of students learning in a small group context.

In analysing the collected data I adopted a modified analytic induction method. This allowed for the emergence of themes and patterns from the data, and
generalisations to be developed about student perceptions of, and experiences with, the group learning phenomenon.

There were limitations with the approach. It was necessary to limit collection of data from participating students to the final two weeks of semester. This limited the sample size somewhat, as classes were finishing up and students were preparing for the examination period. The sample size from the Arts Faculty (public relations) was only one third of the size of the Business and Law Faculty (business communication).

Due to time constraints, it was not possible to follow up this cohort for further data collection and analysis as a more 'pure' analytic induction method would involve.

Another limitation was that by using a questionnaire as a means of collecting data from participating students, responses by individuals were often only brief. Again, this modified the analytic induction approach in that there was no opportunity to arrange a secondary round of data clarification by an alternative means such as face to face interviews to expand on some themes emerging from the data.

**THE CONTEXT OF THE STUDY**

My research looked at how students who were studying at undergraduate level at Deakin University perceived their experiences of group project work. All students who participated in the questionnaire based research, were studying, or had studied, Public Relations units or a Business Communication unit. All participants had experience of group projects. During the second year of their course, those studying Public Relations were required as a group to analyse an organisation of their choice, and design a strategic 12 month public relations campaign for that organisation. Students studying Business Communication (second or third year) were required to collaborate in groups to present an oral presentation and a written proposal to ‘management’, both of which were required to demonstrate a persuasive communication approach to their given scenarios.

The one hundred and five students who agreed to participate demonstrated the following characteristics:

- 50.5% male
- 49.5% female
- 92.4% under the age of 25
- 7.6% were aged 25 or older
- 32.1% were studying at second year level
- 57.3% were studying at third year level
- 10.6% were studying at higher than third year level
- 86.5% were Australian residents
13.6% were non-Australian residents.

I also asked four academic staff to voluntarily participate in face to face interviews. Two lecturers from the Faculty of Business and Law agreed to be interviewed, as did two lecturers from the Faculty of Arts.

**Data Collection**

Students were asked to respond to a questionnaire, distributed and completed during their classes during the final two weeks of semester. The questionnaire to students included five sections. The first section collected demographic data. Sections B – E each focused on particular themes related to group project work.

These themes were:

a. student perceptions generally of group projects,

b. student perceptions of the practice of awarding a single grade to all group members,

c. student attitudes towards the use of self and peer assessment, and,

d. student perceptions of the likelihood and extent of plagiarism and/or collusion occurring in group projects.

The questionnaire consisted of 10 open ended questions, 12 Likert scale or simple rating scale responses, and 3 opportunities for students to comment on any aspect they chose relevant to group projects.

I used a semi-structured interview approach with the academic staff, with eleven questions based on the themes covered in the questionnaire distributed to students. During the interviews, I did not inform academic staff of the patterns and themes beginning to emerge from my analysis of the student questionnaire data.

**RESULTS**

This paper focuses primarily on Section B of the questionnaire, which investigated student attitudes in general to group projects.

The following two open ended questions began the questionnaire to students. They were designed to find out how students perceived group project work generally:

Q1. What aspect(s) of working in a group to complete a group project do you enjoy most?

Q2. What aspect(s) of working in a group to complete a group project do you enjoy least?

The responses to these two questions were analysed and reanalysed, using a coding
Undergraduate student perceptions

process from which concepts and categories emerged. Students commented that group projects allowed them to learn skills from each other, to share ideas and to motivate each other. From a more pragmatic viewpoint, students saw benefits such as allowing for sharing of the workload through division of labour, which can lead to a better quality final product. A recurring comment was that groups can create an environment in which valued socialising could occur, new friends could be made and collaborative learning is promoted.

On the other hand, student perceptions of the negatives of group project work ranged from a dislike of having to ‘carry’ less able students and of the ‘free rider’ benefiting from the group effort. Students commented on their unease with the conflict that can arise over personality and creative differences, and a lack of understanding of how to deal with such conflict. Almost as a counterpoint to the perceived positives of sharing the workload, many comments were made regarding the practical aspects of group projects – difficulties arranging group meeting time outside class, individuals not attending group meetings, individuals being left with the project editing tasks, group established deadlines missed by some individuals, pressures imposed by the time demands of other Units being concurrently studied.

Students were then asked by means of a closed question (Q3. Do you prefer to work on projects: Alone, In a group, Neutral?) for their specific preference for completing projects for assessment. Responses are summarised in Table 1.

**TABLE 1**
(Question 3 ~ Do you prefer to work on projects: Alone, In a group, Neutral?)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preference</th>
<th>Arts Faculty</th>
<th>Business &amp; Law Faculty</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n %</td>
<td>n %</td>
<td>n %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALONE</td>
<td>9 37.5</td>
<td>39 47.6</td>
<td>48 45.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GROUP</td>
<td>5 20.6</td>
<td>6 8.4</td>
<td>11 10.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEUTRAL</td>
<td>10 41.7</td>
<td>36 44</td>
<td>46 43.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>24 100</td>
<td>81 100</td>
<td>105 100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Responses to this question revealed some differences between Faculties. Overall, approximately 11% of students responded with a definite preference for working on projects in groups, with approximately 46% indicating a preference
for working individually. It is significant that approximately 44% of students elected to remain neutral on this point.

Academic staff were asked Q2. In general terms, what in your opinion do most students think of having to work in groups to complete projects? Staff commented that most students by second and third year at university accept it; they can be a little wary at the beginning but warm to the task as they feel more at ease with each other; and many students recognise that a better product is possible if they team together.

As an acknowledgement of the belief by educators that group learning is useful in promoting the development of 'transferable' skills, students were then presented with a list of potential learning objectives that may apply to group projects. This question was designed to ask students to rank in importance to them this list of objectives. The list offered to students represented a mix of broadly termed 'product' focused or 'skill/attribute' type objectives, although these two categories were not directly identified within the question.

Responses to this question were analysed by means of identifying which objectives were rated most highly most often. Results of response rankings are summarised in Table 2.

**TABLE 2**

(Question 4 ~ Please rank these in order of importance to you)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Objective</th>
<th>Total Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>50</td>
<td>Produce a good group project</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51</td>
<td>Receive a good mark for the group effort</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52</td>
<td>Learn from other group members</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53</td>
<td>Improve teamwork skills</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54</td>
<td>Assist other students in the group.</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55</td>
<td>Receive acknowledgement for your own contribution to the group project</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56</td>
<td>Reflect on how your group went about completing the group project</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>57</td>
<td>Improve your interpersonal skills</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>58</td>
<td>Improve your critical thinking skills</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>59</td>
<td>Tolerance of the ideas of others</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Both Faculties’ results indicated that the majority of students believed that it was most important that they received a good grade for their group project. Both Faculty responses also indicated that it was important to individual students that a good project is produced by the group. Yet it is also apparent that students rated learning from others and improvement of teamwork, interpersonal and critical thinking skills as important. But interestingly, students rated the more ‘cooperative/collaborative’ objectives such as tolerance and assistance of other students, and thinking about the group processes as less important.

As well as the quality of the group product, indications are that students do see that group projects are important in helping them develop useful skills. Staff all expressed the view that they believed that students definitely focused on the product of group learning. However, one staff member commented that students become aware through their group experience that they need to team together in order to construct a good product. This may well be a result of the nature of the particular project task which educators required student groups to complete.

Students were then asked to reflect upon one particular group project experience they had been through. They were asked to respond to the following two questions:

Q5. At the beginning of the project my attitude was...

Q6. At the completion of the project my attitude was...

When asked for their attitude at the beginning of the project, students made a range of positive, neutral and negative comments. Comments were about previous experiences – good and bad – with group work, about assessment (positive and negative), about being motivated to produce a good assignment, about being wary of their team mates and the topic, and many pragmatic comments referring to time management issues, having no choice but to do it, hoping everyone contributes and let’s just get it done. There were a handful of completely negative comments typified by the response “not another group project”.

Using the responses to Questions 5 and 6, I established five specific categories of attitude ‘shift’, which are included in Tables 3 and 4. I wanted to establish a picture of changes in the way individual students responded firstly to Question 5 (At the beginning of the project my attitude was…) and then to Question 6 (At the completion of the project my attitude was…). To achieve this, I re-read all student responses to Questions 5 and 6 and allocated each student’s responses to one of the five categories. Tables 3 and 4 display the percentages of students who fell into each category.
### TABLE 3
(ARTS FACULTY ~ COMPARING INDIVIDUAL RESPONSES TO QUESTION 5 & QUESTION 6)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive – Still Positive</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive to Less Positive</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>33.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral – Still Neutral</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative to Less Negative</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>37.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative – Still Negative</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>24</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### TABLE 4
(BUSINESS & LAW FACULTY ~ COMPARING INDIVIDUAL RESPONSES TO QUESTION 5 & QUESTION 6)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive – Still Positive</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive to Less Positive</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>29.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral – Still Neutral</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>31.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative to Less Negative</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>25.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative – Still Negative</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>74</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NB: 7 students did not respond to both Questions 5 and 6.

Responses from Arts Faculty students indicated that 38% of them believed their own negative attitude had improved by the completion of their group project. Yet 33% indicated that their initial positive attitude had lessened. Of interest is the fact that no Arts students began that particular group project with a negative attitude. A small percentage of Business and Law students began and remained negative, whilst 26% admitted a lessening of their own negativity. Alternatively, 30% believed that they became less positive by the end of this particular group experience.
Academic staff who were interviewed generally believed that most students begin group projects warily but tend to 'warm to their task' as they begin to norm and perform. This belief doesn’t necessarily align with the percentage of students who fit into the 'Positive to Less Positive' category for both Faculties (33.4% in the Arts Faculty; 29.7% in the Business and Law Faculty).

It would be worthwhile investigating more specifically the actual elements of a specific single group experience that can cause an individual student to express either increased or decreased levels of satisfaction. Such an investigation would need to involve:

- the perceptions of students on how well the specific project was designed, explained, supported and guided by educators,
- the actual nature of the task set for the group to complete,
- how membership of the group was actually decided (random or student self selected).

Such swings in satisfaction levels by students have implications for how well group projects are designed, explained and supported by educators.

[Note: Some questions used in the questionnaire for this research were adapted from Bourner et al (2001) and Garvin et al (1995) ]

**DISCUSSION**

The main focus of this research was on undergraduate students’ perceptions of group project work. The principal theme of the original questionnaire survey centred on how students regarded being assessed as a group and receiving a common grade for their project. This central theme was supplemented by an analysis of student perceptions of group projects in general, of student judgements of their confidence and competence in participating in some form of peer assessment role, and, the extent to which students perceived group projects as creating opportunities for plagiarism and particularly collusion to occur. The discussion in this paper focuses on student perceptions generally of group projects, with acknowledgement of the significant role that a sound teaching-learning-assessment alignment plays in student attitudes.

The findings indicate that students do see benefits in working in groups to complete projects. Results indicate that students’ thinking on group projects falls into three main categories – learning opportunities, practical workload management issues, and socialising opportunities. This tends to reflect a good fit with studies reviewed in the literature. For example, Morris and Hayes (1997) and Hart and Stone (2001) report on students indicating they see the learning opportunities of group work, but are also concerned with how practical logistical issues can have a negative impact.
Alternatively, students also perceive that group projects can go wrong. Students identify practical management issues, personality conflicts, 'carrying' less able students, free riders, a lack of knowledge of how teams should operate and a loss of individuality as factors which can derail group projects. Again, there is discussion of similar findings in other studies (e.g. Bourner et al. 2001; Webb 1995).

Whilst the responses by students involved in my research indicate that they recognise that there are both good and bad aspects of group work, when asked quite specifically for their personal preference – group work or individual work – their response is enlightening.

Of the 105 students surveyed, 46% indicated a definite preference for working on an assignment as an individual. Comparatively, 11% expressed a definite preference for working in a group. It must be noted that a significant number of students (44%) held a neutral view. These responses indicate to me that even acknowledging the significant 'neutral' response, most students would prefer not to be involved in group projects if they had the choice. Yet it is the perception of academic staff involved in this research that students resist group projects initially, but this resistance fades. Perhaps a key issue here is choice, or lack of it. This situation has implications for the way staff communicate their rationale for group projects, and their management of the process they expect students to follow.

The responses by students who participated in this research indicate signposts as to why many of them appear to be wary of being involved in group projects. The common themes include:

- unequal contributions, carrying less able and committed students, free riders, having to rely on others, lack of assessment of individual contributions
- lack of knowledge and ability to deal with peer interaction and conflict in the group
- loss of individuality, pressure to conform, high status students, feelings of inferiority
- management of group meetings, timetlines, editing tasks, communications.

There may be issues contributing to students' responses, such as the timing of the survey of students late in semester, when most were just completing certain group projects, the experience of which may have 'coloured' some responses. It was also a time when pressure to prepare for end of semester exams was building. However, the wariness issue needs to be explored more deeply, with consideration of several issues:

- the particular nature of group task which has been set, as some tasks lend themselves more readily to collaboration than others,
whether students self select team members or whether educators randomly appoint members,

the extent to which students feel competent at managing their group learning themselves,

whether students feel they need more support structures in place to deal with the negative issues when they arise.

It may also be an issue that my research focused on students at second year level or above. Both Bourner et al. (2001) and Garvin and Butcher (1995) focused on first year undergraduate students (University of Brighton, England and Queen’s University, Belfast Northern Ireland), and both studies found that group projects motivated and challenged students and produced positive outcomes. This suggests the need for further research into the suitability and nature of group project work for different levels at university.

Barfield’s (2003) study of student perceptions of the group experience at the University of Central Florida, reports similar findings to my study. Barfield’s (2003) analysis of across faculty questionnaire responses and classroom discussions, indicates that students initially approach group projects with a mix of excitement, enthusiasm, ambivalence and anxiety. But the more group experiences they are exposed to, it seems that only anxiety and ambivalence dominate their thinking. There are certainly elements of ‘anxiety and ambivalence’ in the responses of second, third and higher year students involved in my study. This suggests the potential for there to be a change of perception of group work by students between first year and later years of study.

My feeling from analysing responses from students is that there seems to be a general acceptance by students, despite a significant desire to work alone, that they will be required to participate in group projects at some stage. Certainly, many student responses in the questionnaire survey reflected a pragmatic ‘Let’s just get it done’ type attitude. Of course, the same response could well apply to individual student assignments. But the issue remains – this pragmatic attitude must have an impact on student awareness of the range of potential benefits of group learning which have been identified in the literature, as well as on the desired outcomes of teachers.

Public Relations (Arts Faculty) academic staff interviewed for this study indicated that a significant reason why they use group projects is that they are a valuable means of responding to ‘industry’ type expectations that graduates be competent in working in team based settings. Staff see a group project as a valid means of helping students develop team related skills. In seeking to determine whether students in my study perceived this to be so, my study indicates that students can and do see this potential. Yet the wariness is still apparent.
By students highlighting the particular objectives of good product and good marks, we are permitted a glimpse into factors underlying student wariness of group projects, especially an expressed preference for working individually on assignments. It is understandable how students perceive assessment as having such a big impact on their learning. Since students rate good grades and a good final product as high objective priorities, you would assume that the way group projects are assessed would influence their perceptions of group work. The view of academic staff regarding a better quality product from groups to some extent assists with our understanding of this particular student outlook. But interpretation of student responses does need to acknowledge that assessment practice at undergraduate level has traditionally focused on assessing the product of individually submitted learning (Leach, Neutze & Zepke. 2001; Ramsden 1992; Toohey 1996), but now increasingly submitted in group format.

Whilst on the surface it may seem straightforward enough to transplant project tasks from the traditional individual student into groups of students, the same cannot be said for how this learning context is managed and assessed. Whilst it may seem easy enough to assess the product of a collaborative effort, it is not justifiable to then claim that skill development is also being validly assessed. Skills are developed in the individual. Groups produce an assessable project.

In my opinion, this has implications for teaching, particularly in terms of how well and how thoroughly teaching staff explain the potential skills and attribute development benefits of group projects, and how well students are ‘taught’ the means by which they are able to benefit from, and reflect on, the whole group learning experience. If an assessment design focuses on quality of a collaborative product and ignores contribution and skill development in individual members of the group, we will continue to see unnecessary levels of wariness amongst students when required to work in groups.

If teaching practice is adjusted so as to encourage more group projects, it is also important that learning and assessment practice is adjusted, so that students might profit from the broad range of learning benefits to be gained from collaborative work, not just an enhanced product. Students groups will always generate a product. Usually, students will be given ‘instructions’ as to what should be included in that product. Educators will assess that product. Yet the same educators are expecting students to learn how to work in teams, with often little in the way of ‘instructions’ and support and guidance. And little in the way of a valid assessment practice.

The scaffolding which is put in place to guide construction of the final product needs to also be in place to support the growth of skills and attributes such as ability and willingness to work in a team. And this includes an assessment practice which accommodates individual development within a group project environment.
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273-289.


