157 From "group work" to "teamwork": students' perception and lecturer's reflections.

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Research Domains

Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

Abstract

The aim of our study is to understand students' perceptions of the transferable skills in group assessment. The quantitative results of a survey of over 60 student responses in an optional final year economics module indicate that, overall, students benefitted from the assessment in terms of learning from other group members and developing interpersonal skills; while differences in work ethics within the group was reported as the most significant challenge by a quarter of the respondents. The free text comments analysis shows that free-riding and communications issues are the most frustrating concerns. In line with the literature, e.g. Johnson & Johnson (2009), we conclude that the experience is beneficial for most students, but may leave some others behind. We suggest that providing specific resources for efficient group work and focusing on "teamwork" as a term will help students to better acknowledge and reflect on the transferable skills they gain.

Full paper

Small group work learning and assessments, by a large consensus in the literature (e.g. Gaudet et al., 2010; Johnson & Johnson, 2009), yield a number of significant benefits for students. One of the ways to conceptualise these benefits is to understand the process of the collaborative learning and the effects it has on a range of different factors (Lavy, 2017), from time management skills to motivation (Jones & Issroff, 2005). These transferrable skills imbided during the process of group work, have long-term and employability impacts (Mutch, 1998; Riebe et al., 2010). Soft skills, such as interpersonal skills, communication, and teamwork, are particularly relevant for the constantly changing work environment (Succi and Canovi, 2020) and are in high demand by employers (Asefer and Abidin, 2021).

While these benefits have been documented, not all participants perceive groupwork as being supportive and secure (Rom & Mikulincer, 2003); trust, respect, and peer-support are extremely important for the success of any group (Lavy, 2017; Bradley et al., 2013; Pfaff & Huddelston, 2003). Thus, while group work projects help foster some crucial soft skills, imperative for employment, students' perception, and ability to articulate these skills is the crucial first step on this journey (see also Succi and Canovi, 2020; Burke et al., 2005).

Our main aim is to examine students' perception of their groupwork experience. To do so, we have conducted a survey in an optional final year policy-oriented Economics module, with a 20% group policy report assignment, where students were able to form their own groups (or randomly allocated, if they failed to do so). While students were able to explore their creativity by choosing between three broad topics, they were given a precise timeline (Fig 1), template structure and other guidance. Students had previous exposure to groupwork assessments and the usual support from the teaching team.

The survey asked respondents to both provide their evaluations on various aspects of the project on a scale of 1(lowest) to 10(highest). It also gave them the opportunity to provide free text comments. It is useful to note that the survey was conducted after the grades were released, so that immediate challenges wouldn't influence the answers given.

The first part of the survey offers unambiguous results: 80% of respondents considered that they worked together effectively and 72% affirmed that all group members were involved most of the time; almost half of respondents indicated that learning from other group members was the main benefit; while improved interpersonal teamworking and communication skills were acknowledged only in a shared second position. The highest-ranking challenge was the "difference in work ethics".

Additionally, almost a third of respondents provided a free-text comment. Unsurprisingly for optional open comments, the majority focused on the challenges and the drawbacks of the groupwork ; however, a few have acknowledged the benefits as well (Fig 2 for the full map). The students highlighted effective teamwork and enjoyment of working together, underlining that they have learned from other group members, gaining new perspectives and knowledge. The drawbacks focused on the free-riding issue, which can be linked to the low "work ethics" score in the quantitative part of the questionnaire. The fairness of group formation was raised as an issue, particularly when communication problems have occurred, which resulted in perceived unfair workload and drop in the quality of the project.

The results of both quantitative and qualitative parts of the question suggest that, in line with the literature (e.g. Johnson & Johnson, 2009), the experience is beneficial for students and that, importantly, they perceive it as such. However, it is also clear that at least without additional prompting and reflection, students do not perceive their groupwork assessment as a direct help in development of transferable and teamworking skills, which means that they may not be easily ready to articulate this in an interview setting. More importantly, they may not also take appropriate time to consciously reflect on their experiences and learn for the future.

This leads us to our recommendations and conclusions: we need to both provide more explicit as well as articulate support in team-working skills, when a group work assessment is introduced in a module. This could include specific materials on communication and conflict resolution. Articulating these skills explicitly and shifting the terminology from group work to "team work" is likely to prompt students to reflect on the transferable skills they are gaining and help them present these skills to employers.
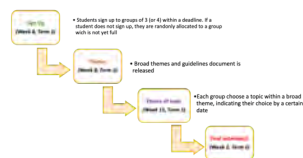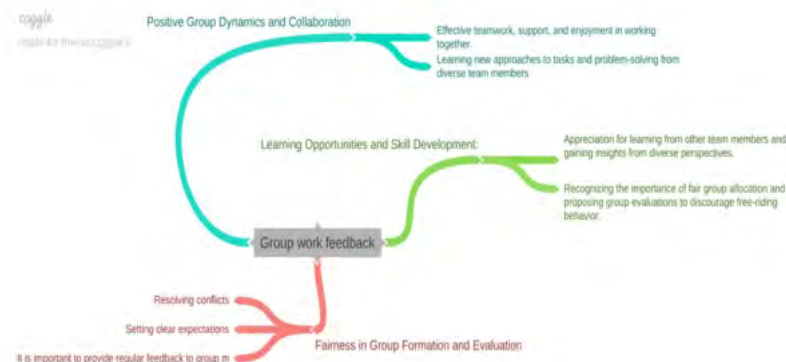
Fig 1: Assessment Timeline

Fig 2: Free text comments map

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