

Is group work a useful bridging tool for students crossing the boundary to employment? (0027)

Jane Southall, Rebecca Lees
Kingston University - London, UK

Introduction

The aim of this small scale, exploratory study is to analyse the perceptions of business students as to the importance of group work carried out within higher education (HE) on employability. Intended as a pilot, a qualitative study was carried out. The implications of the results on teaching practice are discussed.

Background

All universities must ensure that graduates have both strong disciplinary knowledge and a broad range of other skills and competencies (Willetts, 2013 cited by Furnell & Scott, 2015). Many students see a degree as enabling them to secure well paid and meaningful employment (Molesworth, Nixon & Scullion, 2009).

HE providers regularly use group work to develop employability as group working is an essential employer requirement (Lowden *et al.*, 2011) due to the increasing complexity of work and globalisation, leading to the rise in the use of IT.

Boundary crossing and bridging tools

The move from student to employee is a boundary-crossing process (Bonamy, Charlier & Saunders, 2001; Griffiths & Guile, 2003; Konkola *et al.*, 2007; Tsui & Law, 2007; Ackerman & Baker, 2012); where an individual moves from one environment or activity system to another (Saunders, 2006).

Boundary crossing is often problematic (Tsui and Law, 2007) and requires support (Bonham, Charlie & Saunders, 2001). Boundary objects facilitate this and act as a bridge across two domains as they develop and maintain coherence across communities (Bonham, Charlie & Saunders, 2001).

The skillset developed during group work within HE, when reconstructed within employment, could fulfil such a bridging tool function, but do students appreciate this?

Methodology

Questionnaires and interviews were used with two subject groups. Recent graduate opinion ($n=5$) determined whether group work supports employment, or whether it had little impact or relevance to workplace practices. This gave a point of reference against which to compare current student opinion ($n=39$). This was used to determine the extent to which those seeking employment (in the near or more distant future) considered group work as having the ability to act as a bridge between study and employment.

Findings

Both groups held both positive and negative attitudes regarding group work at university. Positive opinions concerned transferable skills and knowledge development such as negotiation, time management, planning and communication. Negative opinions were almost exclusively rooted in a particular academic example and related to academic performance. Little consideration of other negative aspects of group work were considered, except where opinion was that group work was unnecessary and was not representative of workplace practices.

Discussion and conclusions

Both groups were able to see group work as generating a set of socially constructed interpersonal skills that were relevant for employment (Baskin, Barker and Woods, 2005), as well as a set of embodied knowledge resources developed through the act of doing the group work (Blacker, 1995). They also appreciated the need to demonstrate group work skills for securing employment (Hamlyn-Harris *et al.*, 2006) equipping them with a form of employability currency.

The negative aspects of group work mirrored key concerns from previous research, as current students thought the process was unrealistic and did not replicate the workplace (Baskin, Barker and Woods, 2005). They held strong objections about credit bearing group work when groups do not work cohesively (Burdett, 2007). Although some current students understood the positive aspects of dealing with conflict, they were in the minority.

Recent graduates are able to conceive of group work providing a skillset to use when dealing with unfamiliar workplace situations. This skillset is generated from tacit learning opportunities (by doing the group work) and is socially constructed (by doing it with others) (Blacker, 1995). Reflection enabled the re-situating of learning and application of it in the workplace, thus it took on the role of a boundary object and provided support (Bonamy, Charlier & Saunders, 2001). Having experienced both positive and negative outcomes meant that they had practice prior to experiencing group work in an unfamiliar workplace (Baskin, 2005). The skillset permitted 'provisional stability' (Saunders, 2006) and the recent graduates felt capable of operating independently since they were able to draw on past experiences to help them.

Few of the current students were able see group work in this light and the majority viewed the experiences as a set of explicit knowledge resources, prioritising their exchange value over use value.

Implications for practice and next steps

Despite the small scale of this study, it can be suggested that the skillset developed through group work at university does have the capacity to be used as a bridging tool between education and employment, but that few current students perceive it as having this function. Initiatives that support the development of current students' awareness of how these skills can be carried through to securing employment and their long-term transferability to the workplace should be considered. This supports the conclusion made by Furnell & Scott (2015) that appropriate, timely and repeated signposting of the significance of key skills to students is vital.

The skillset developed predominantly comprised skills developed from positive group work experiences; few current students could associate the beneficial experiences that arose from negative aspects of group work such as conflict. Interventions that enable current students to reflect fully on both positive *and* negative aspects of group work, as well as being more explicit about how each aspect can be used in a workplace situation, need to be developed and utilised as early as the first year of HE study. These would be beneficial both for the learning experience itself *and* for the development of the skillset that may provide some support and stability when crossing the divide into employment.

References

Ackerman, S. F., & Baker, A. (2011). 'Boundary Crossing and Boundary Objects.' *Review of Educational Research*, 81(2), pp.132-169.

Baskin, C., Barker, M., & Woods, P. (2005). 'When group work leaves the classroom does group skills development also go out the window?' *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 36(1), pp.19 – 31.

- Blacker, F. (1995). 'Knowledge, Knowledge Work and Organizations: An Overview and Interpretation'. *Organization Studies*, (6), pp.1021-1046.
- Bonamy, J., Charlier, B., & Saunders, M. (2001) "Bridging Tools" for change: evaluating a collaborative learning network.' *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, 17(3) pp. 295-305
- Burdett, J. (2007). 'Degrees of separation — balancing intervention and independence in group work assignments.' *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 34(1), pp.55-71
- Furnell, J. & Scott, G. (2015) 'Are we all on the same page? Teacher, graduate and student perceptions of the importance of skills thought to enhance employability.' *Journal of learning and development in Higher Education*. Issue 8, pp.1 - 10
- Griffiths, T. & Guile, D. (2003) 'A Connective Model of Learning: the implications for work process knowledge', *European Education Research Journal*, 2(1), pp.56-73
- Hamlyn-Harris, J. H., Hurst, B. J., Baggo, K. V., & Bayley, A. J. (2006). 'Predictors of Team Work Satisfaction'. *Journal of Information Technology Education*, 5, pp. 299-315.
- Konkola, R., Tuomi-Gröhn, T., Lambert, P., & Ludvigsen, S. (2007). 'Promoting learning and transfer between school and workplace'. *Journal of Education and Work*, 20(3), pp.211-228.
- Lowden, K., Hall, S., Elliott, D., Lewin, J. (2011) *Employers perceptions of the employability of skills of new graduates*. Edge Foundation: London
- Molesworth, M., Nixon E. and Scullion R. (2009) 'Having, being and higher education: the marketization of the university and the transformation of the student into consumer' *Teaching in Higher Education* Vol. 14, No. 3, June 2009, pp.277- 287
- Saunders, M. (2006). 'From "organisms" to "boundaries": the uneven development of theory narratives in education, learning and work connections'. *Journal of Education and Work*, 19(1), pp.1-27.
- Tsui, A. B. M., & Law, D. Y. K. (2007). 'Learning as boundary-crossing in school–university partnership'. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 23(8), pp.1289-1301.