

Groupwork

What

Learning or assessment of students in groups (or 'teams').

Why

Getting students to learn in groups is widely practiced in higher education as a means of developing a variety of skills including communication, time management, leadership, intercultural understanding, peer learning and, of course, teamwork. In professional and other practice-based subjects groupwork is sometimes used as part of teaching that seeks to simulate work-based scenarios. When it is well organised groupwork can enable students to effectively pool their talents to tackle more ambitious and exciting projects.

How

Students are frequently broken into groups as part of classroom activities and increasingly as part of assessed learning. Here it is important to consider the way the group is structured, how it is encouraged to work and learn, and the way in which feedback from the group may be gathered and assessed.

In **forming** groups of students the following considerations may be relevant:

- The mix of a group on the basis of student personality. Here, Belbin's (1981) team roles (e.g. 'plant', 'shaper', 'completer finisher') represent clusters of behaviour that are needed to make a team a success. Exercises are available that allow students to self-evaluate their preferred team role. Tutors could then allocate students to groups on the basis of balancing individuals with a range of different preferred behaviours.
- The mix of the group on the basis of academic ability (if known). This is an important consideration if there is a desire to create teams of roughly equal levels of ability.
- The mix of the group on the basis of cultural background. This would increase students' inter-cultural understanding and could be evaluated as part of the assessment of group work.
- Giving groups clear tasks including guidance of the assessment of group work where this is applicable.

Group work can be ineffective or disappointing when students simply 'free form' on the basis of friendship without receiving sufficiently detailed or clear information about their task.

In getting groups to **work effectively** some of the following considerations may be relevant:

- Giving groups a set of ground rules setting out your expectations of students.
- Allocating roles to group members (e.g. chair, scribe, time keeper, reporter back) to ensure that a group runs efficiently.
- Building groups via 'snowballing' or pyramiding. This involves getting students to engage in a task or discussion as individuals, then pairs, and then as groups of four or more. This is designed to create opportunities for everyone (not just dominant individuals) to contribute to discussion and build understanding through comparing ideas.
- Applying a range of active learning (see Briefing Note 9) techniques that encourage interactive learning in groups.
- Establishing an online discussion forum to encourage communication and sharing of ideas within and between groups, as appropriate.
- Asking groups to keep records of meetings.

In getting students to **report back** some of the following considerations may be relevant:

- The allocation of a single group member as a 'reporter back' from each group in whole class feedback.
- The use of oral presentations by each group commonly used as part of the assessment of a group task.
- The use of 'cross-overs'. Here students report back to each other rather than the whole class. This is achieved by remixing groups so that each member becomes part of a new group. Findings/ideas are then shared in the new group.
- The use of poster tours whereby each group produces a poster, which may then be viewed (and possibly peer-assessed) by other students. This can prove a less time consuming option in assessing group work than asking each group to make an oral presentation.

In **assessing** groupwork some of the following considerations may be relevant:

- **Fairness and 'free-riding'**

Groupwork assessment often allocates a single grade to all members of the group. This is often justified on the basis of reflecting the 'reality' of work-based environments where individuals must take responsibility for learning as part of a team. However, it needs to be born in mind that in the workplace groups are often composed of individuals with different levels of seniority while groups of students are, by contrast, peers. This means that it can be difficult for a student group to exercise control over lazy or uncooperative group members. If the result of group work is a single grade for the group, no matter how much or how little anyone has contributed, students can sometimes feel this is unfair. There is a concern that some students are given a 'free ride' by more conscientious or able group members. Students still receive an individual degree at the end of their university studies, not a 'group' degree and potentially a student's overall degree result can be adversely affected by a poor grade that does not reflect their true ability.

- **Assessing individual contributions to group work**

It is possible to assess groupwork in ways that take account of these concerns. Brown and Knight (1994) suggest a number of strategies focused as much on the *process* (i.e. evaluating how the group has worked together) as on the *product* (e.g. a report or presentation). Among the strategies they suggest are the following:

- 1 All students receive the same grade, but it should represent a small percentage of the total assessment for the course.
- 2 Award a group grade and include a question related to this topic in a subsequent examination to allow for individual responses.
- 3 Design a group assignment with sub-tasks, each of which is awarded a grade. Students identify in the final product which sub-task each individual member completed.
- 4 Award a group grade for the 'product' – for example, 17/20. Assume there are 5 members in the group. Multiply the 17 by 5 to get a total of 85 marks available. Students then negotiate, based on established criteria, the distribution of the 85 marks, stipulating that no individual can receive more than 20/20.
- 5 Award a group grade for 'product' and 'process' – for example 16/20 for product, so that each individual student receives 16, and make an extra 10 marks available for process. Students negotiate what percentage of the extra 10 marks each student deserves.

Selected references

Belbin, M. (1981). *Management teams*. London: Heinemann.

Brown, S., & Knight, P. (1994). *Assessing learners in higher education*. London: Kogan Page.

Further advice and guidance is available from the Academic Development Consultancy service (acdev@port.ac.uk)
