

Small group work: dodging potential pitfalls to reach the pedagogic possibilities

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Abstract

Small group work is a common learning format in higher education; whilst numerous positive learning outcomes are associated with this approach, there are also pitfalls scattered along the way that can undermine the entire process. This Viewpoint paper arose out of my experiences of teaching a small group work module. It discusses new strategies I have employed to nurture communication and interaction within the student groups, and considerations I took when constructing them. My challenge was to build a positive socio-cultural context for learning to take place within, as the learning environment can exert considerable influence on the experiences students have whilst working cooperatively with their peers.

Keywords

small group work; learning context; student interaction; student experience

This Viewpoint paper arose from my experiences teaching a Level 5 module with assessed small group work. The 2017-18 academic year was my third as the Module Leader, and each time I have approached it with trepidation. Of course, the start of every module creates some sense of apprehension, but it is particularly acute for this one due to the additional dimensions of unpredictability created by overseeing twenty to twenty-five groups within the cohort, allocating students into these groups, and in particular the potential lack – or adversarial nature – of interactions within them.

My small group teaching occupies six weeks of the students' first semester. This is an urban design module, in which the students redesign a small part of Liverpool's city centre. The scale and complexity of the tasks involved in urban design are such that working in groups is a highly appropriate format. However, whilst recognising the value of this approach, commentary from students has also identified some problematic aspects associated with small group work. Rather than changing the format or content of learning, I sought instead to address some of the root causes of pitfalls with this approach.

Piaget's theories about the merits of peer learning, and of cooperation between participants underpinned by a sense of mutual respect, have significant relevance to the desired nature of interactions between students in small group work. On reflection, a key issue centred around the examination of trust, democracy and dynamics within the group setting. This physical and psychological landscape in which students are interacting and cooperating within their groups I conceptualise here as the *socio-cultural learning context*.

Background

Students working in small groups on their coursework can be found across many different disciplines, and in all levels of higher education. It is an approach which can facilitate numerous positive learning experiences. Some of these are closely intertwined with students' learning in the context of the group task, such as: tackling problems larger in scale and complexity than they would individually, elaboration of known content, and deepening critical discourse through debate within the group (Biggs, 2003; Gibbs, 2009). Others are more tacit – yet valuable – and relate to students' broader skills development, such as: learning to work cooperatively, and to communicate and delegate as part of a team; small group work can also improve students' social and academic integration and thus retention (Pauli et al., 2008). However, there are numerous pitfalls that can be encountered along the way, which may undermine the entire process and result in a challenging or detrimental experience for students; these include: lack of group commitment, disparate contributions by group members, reluctance to attend and engage in group meetings, unequal task allocation, hijacking by dominant group members, and fear of negative impact on grades (ibid.). Most of these concerns have at some point been voiced by students about my small group module.

There are very few careers that do not require working as part of a team, and this is frequently used as part of the rationale for including small group work within a curriculum. Out in the workplace, such teams may include members who don't have an affinity to work together, or who perceive imbalances with workload; however, more often than not, setting aside such personal and professional differences to complete the task is accepted as part of the job. The diplomacy and communication skills required in such situations might be perceived as one of the tacit learning experiences for students involved in small group learning. However, that logic starts to falter when we consider that employees are being paid to undertake that task, whereas students are paying for their higher education experience, and that group coursework may – albeit in small measure – impact upon the outcome of their degree. A study by the Higher Education Academy (HEA, 2014) suggests that whilst group work is often sold to students on its benefits and relevance to their future careers, they will prioritise more here-and-now considerations over those upon which they don't see an immediate return. Seen in that light, the importance of ensuring that small group work is very carefully and supportively managed to avoid the pitfalls of intra-group conflict becomes much clearer.

Before constructing my intervention with the Level 5 module, a review of literature on students' positive and negative experiences of small group work revealed some salient considerations. Research by Willis et al. (2002) found that students conceptualised a good group in terms of: how they interact with each other, and how they discuss and work through a problem. In comparison, Pauli et al. (2008) identified four parameters within which students' negative experiences of small group learning can be conceptualised: lack of group commitment, task disorganisation, storming (interactional difficulties and interpersonal conflicts), and fractionation of the group. Mills and Alexander (2013) suggest that the dynamics and structure of small groups is very much contingent on social and cultural context, and that a student's sense of belonging within a group is essential to its effective functioning.

It thus became clear that my careful and deliberate construction of the socio-cultural context for learning to take place within was of paramount importance, and that this would be defined to a significant extent by the nature and quality of interaction dynamics within the student groups.

Constructing socio-cultural learning context and group dynamics

Drawing upon ideas I gleaned from a recent conference (Handley and Dunlop, 2017), new strategies were implemented during the 2017-18 academic year. My challenge was to nurture a positive social and cultural context for the small group learning, which would address the source of potential problems before they arose. To achieve this, my new strategies formalised and reinforced the means through which group members would interact with each other, whilst trying to mitigate against the potential for task disorganisation, interactional difficulties, and fractionation.

I added a new section to the project brief – the foundation document of reference, which describes what the students are expected to do during the module. Headed “Important Notes on Group Work Etiquette”, this explicitly set out several points that students were expected to agree between each other during the group’s first meeting, and which were to be put down in writing:

- Establish communication routes: email addresses, phone numbers, social media groups, document exchanges, etc.
- Discuss and agree on group meetings: what time, what location, and on what days students in the group would regularly meet outside of studio days, during self-directed study time.
- Discuss and agree allocation of tasks: agree who is doing which tasks.

During the module introduction I also discussed these steps at length, describing why they were important to follow. This ‘contract’ was signed-off by all group members, and a work-log diary was to be kept by each student in relation to the key points. The aim was for each group to establish their own set of clear and unambiguous ground rules, but which would be flexible enough to take account of their individual commitments, such as part-time employment or commuting patterns. The ground rules also provided a format through which the other design teachers and I could discuss any problems that arose within a group during the module.

Constructing the team

Another dimension to creating the social-cultural learning context for small groups is how those groups are constructed. There are numerous methods that can be used to do this, including: random allocation, alphabetical by name, streaming – in which students are allocated based on ability, and self-selection by the students. It has been suggested that random allocation is one of the methods least favoured by students; Gibbs (2009) argues that allowing students to form their own groups will likely have a similar effect as teachers deliberately streaming students with those of a similar ability – stronger students will tend to form groups with other strong students, and consequently weaker students will work with each other. Interestingly, commentary from one of my programme’s External Examiners the previous academic year considered it appropriate that students do not select their own groups at undergraduate level, but that teachers do this.

For this module I streamed the students into mixed ability groups, using the mean overall mark from Level 4 to ensure that each group contained a student whose performance had been within the upper quartile, a student whose performance had been in the lower quartile, and a student whose performance had been within the middle quartiles. Most groups contained three students; however, due to the need for parity in the size of each tutorial group, some groups were made up of four. Whilst it might be thought that the groups of three would be disadvantaged due to having one less student to contribute to the task, experience has taught that this does not bear out in practice.

There may be several reasons for this; for example, groups of three being more effective in decision-making as there will be a majority position, and groups of three being able to communicate more effectively than groups of four.

Some critical reflections

Implementing these new ground rules for group work etiquette was not a panacea. There were still instances during the module when students voiced concerns to me about communication between members of their group, and over what they perceived as a lack of contribution by others within their group. That said, students with smoothly-running and effective group dynamics are much less likely to highlight this, and so arguably positive experiences are evidenced more by “no news is good news”. Although I can only comment anecdotally, there did appear to be fewer instances of students raising concern over their group during the module. Furthermore, there were more positive comments about the experience of working in groups in the Module Evaluation survey than there were negative comments, which has not occurred in previous years. Of course, this could be due to other factors – such as the students within this cohort being very integrated and so worked together better – and not the ground rules on group work etiquette that were set out at the start of the module.

However, Mills and Alexander (2013) highlight that it is important for teachers to think critically about the way in which interactions between group members develop, and how this might impact on the way students feel about their learning within the group. Springer, Stanne and Donovan (1999) suggest that the opportunity for students to discuss, debate, and present their own and hear one another’s perspectives is the critical element in small group learning. It is, therefore, of paramount importance that teachers employing small group coursework take proactive steps to nurture a supportive socio-cultural learning context, underpinned by clearly identified conduit through which each group’s interactions can take place. At the same time, these protocols must be fluid enough to allow for individual student’s personal commitments elsewhere.

Whilst small group learning is already found across numerous disciplines and levels in higher education, arguably its significance is likely to grow. For example, it may increasingly be seen as an attractive strategy to facilitate learning and teaching in an era of diminishing resources. Also, and perhaps more crucially, the National Student Survey now asks students to rate their sense of belonging to a learning community, and if they have had the right opportunities to work with other students as part of their course. The philosopher and educational psychologist John Dewey (1916) believed that education is a fundamentally social process, particularised by its environment, and borne out of interaction. The nature and quality of these interactions will have significant impact upon the richness of that process, and on the quality of the socio-cultural learning context in which it occurs.

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