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Can group work assist independent work? Psychology 'ReGrouPs'

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The rapidly developing interest in qualitative methods in psychology (defined as interpretative studies of specific issues or problems in which the researcher is central to the sense that is made – Elliott, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999) is currently being paralleled by students' use of qualitative methods in final year research projects, which is itself a piece of independent research required for programme accreditation by the British Psychological Society. Whilst most students produce qualitative projects of a good standard, there is evidence that both students and supervisors of such research experience demands specific to this methodology.

Student anxiety with qualitative methods

Following a national workshop exploring the supervision of undergraduate qualitative research, Madill, Gough, Lawton and Stratton (in press) report that students experience anxiety around their ability to deploy qualitative methods despite teaching on and practice in such methods at Levels 1 and 2. This is echoed in supervisors' concerns about student preparedness for designing qualitative research, interviewing participants and conducting qualitative analyses, which often translate into heavy time-demands on both final year students and their supervisors.

Student satisfaction with supervision

The project supervision system within the Department of Psychology at Leeds is typical of most UK psychology departments in offering one-to-one project supervision with final year students. Student feedback (June 2005) evidences satisfaction with the supervision process; students, however, also report anxiety about their projects and a need for more reassurance about their project management and further opportunities to 'chat through' their progress.

Seeking to enhance the experience

Whilst the Department is entirely satisfied with the quality and quantity of supervision to final year students (many students report supervision as 'excellent' and supervision is part of the Department's teaching observation system), there is a case for seeking to enhance the student experience, and potentially the final written product, in relation to project work. We are seeking to achieve this by establishing, monitoring and evaluating ReGrouP (Research Groups in Psychology), a series of trial discussion groups to facilitate peer interaction in the

design, implementation and analysis of qualitative project work. The project, running from October 2005, has received funding from the Higher Education Academy Psychology Network, under its Departmental Teaching Enhancement Scheme.

Collaborative work is good for students

Despite student caution about group work, there is evidence that when students participate as stakeholders, the reported benefit is high. Mitchell-Williams et al (2004) report that collaborative work, rather than diluting the research experience, contributes to students' ownership of their projects. They become more responsible for absorbing ideas and processes useful to their own project (McMichael, 1992) without having to 'surrender power to the experts' (Ashworth, 2004, p 157).

Aims of the group work project

As well as enhancing student learning, the groups aim to promote the development and subsequent articulation of research skills (e.g. interviewing, data analysis) and group skills (e.g. managing criticism, progressing a discussion, etc).

The timings and aims of the discussion groups reflect both the pivotal times in the research process and the usual focus of one-to-one supervision meetings. A sample of these groups will be systematically observed over the year and, in conjunction with formal student feedback and focus groups, the researchers hope to isolate how students:

- engage with group work whilst maintaining responsibility and ownership of personal project work;
- manage group discussions that require a disclosure of independent, personal work;
- seek and receive peer feedback on their work; steer group discussions to a level at which they can participate in and benefit from;
- evidence learning that occurs through the discussion; utilise group work to enhance their own research;
- combine the learning available in one-to-one supervision with that available through group work.

The groups will run throughout the current academic year, and analysis of group activity will be conducted by the end of Summer 2006. The outcomes of the study will be available by September 2006.

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