

PURPOSES, BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF GROUP WORK ASSESSMENT

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Abstract: Group work assessment plays a crucial role in academic processes, aiming to enhance teamwork skills, motivation, and knowledge co-construction. This article explores the purposes, benefits, and challenges of assessing group work, emphasizing its impact on student learning and employability. While group work can foster collaboration and critical thinking, issues such as unequal contributions, cultural dynamics, and assessment fairness remain significant concerns. The study highlights different perspectives on group assessment, including the debate on its effectiveness in preparing students for the workplace. It also discusses alternative strategies, such as individual grading within team-based learning, to balance collaborative benefits with fair assessment. The role of tutors in designing, monitoring, and reassessing group work is examined to ensure meaningful learning outcomes.

Keywords: group work, assessment, higher education, teamwork, collaboration, cooperative learning, employability, fairness, problem-based learning, student motivation.

Assessment plays an essential role in the academic processes and in the work undertaken by students during their courses. Hence, the design and delivery of all aspects of assessment practice needs to be “fit for purpose”, and subject to regular review.

Earl categorises assessment from three perspectives: “*assessment of learning*”, “*assessment for learning*” and “*assessment as learning*” [1,6]. When appraising students’ work and awarding marks, tutors are assessing the learning that students are demonstrating in their assessment (“assessment of learning”). In the design of assessment activity and in providing ‘formative’ feedback to students, tutors are using assessment to aid student’s learning (“assessment for learning”). By giving thoughtful attention to assessment design and implementation, tutors can enable students, through their own close involvement with assessment, to come to have a better understanding of the subject being studied and of their own learning, (“assessment as learning”). These different roles of assessment are explored and illustrated in this Assessment Framework.

In the context of assessment, group work refers to a process that entails learners working in a team (usually small) towards a common assignment on which they may be assessed jointly and/or individually. There are a number of purposes that group work assessment might fulfil, for example it is often argued that it can;

- develop an understanding of team working and mirror skills used in employment.
- increase student motivation, and there is growing evidence that suggests that developing positive social relationships can effectively support retention and progression.
- provide a forum for the co-construction of knowledge.
- promote a more independent approach to learning and sense of responsibility.
- provide opportunities to work on authentic/“real world” projects and in multidisciplinary contexts.

On the practical side, group work may reduce the workload around assessing and providing feedback to students. Possible advantages might be:

- reduced time spent on marking.
- a more manageable degree of tutor support required.
- more timely support from student peers in the same team.

However, despite the perceived practical advantages positive outcomes are not always inherent in group assignments. There are many studies that outline serious concerns that the process can have inequitable outcomes, damage interpersonal interactions and undermine learning and teaching [2, 10]. Many students have a very negative attitude towards this form of assessment. This negativity is often linked to concerns about 'freeloading' which is a term which Gunn defines (2007:6) as a student 'seeming unengaged whilst others seem to be doing all of the work.' A survey of the literature referring to 'free-loading' or 'free-riders' shows that these students are generally construed as lazy and as cheating the assessment system by gaining a higher grade than that to which they are entitled. However there is also a literature which suggests these students may sometimes be implicitly or explicitly excluded by other members of the group and that this may be a particular issue for culturally diverse groups (Strauss and Alice 2007). He et al reported [3, 18] in their study international students who felt marginalised or ignored in groupwork and that domestic students controlled the groupwork process. Given the complex nature of group dynamics and the diversity of the student body there may be many reasons why students might 'seem' to fit Gunn's description.

Some students are sceptical about the appropriateness of groupwork assessment as preparation for employment arguing that in the workplace employers focus on the individual and not the team and that there is a structured hierarchy of authority in the workplace unlike in student teams, making the way in which groupwork is carried out and evaluated very different [1, 25]. Drake et al argue similarly that teamwork and groupwork are different concepts and that developing teamworking skills requires a specific emphasis on understanding group dynamics and the cognitive and emotional processes that underpin teamwork [2, 38]. They describe a module that is designed specifically to focus on the development of skills and understanding in teamworking through specific facilitation and coaching. This they see this deliberate focus as key to professional development/employability rather than the assessment of groupwork per se.

Although the assessment of group work is often claimed to be essential to engaging students in cooperative learning, Pitt who considers group work assessment from the perspective of game theory concludes that 'under the tenets of the theory, students' desires to receive the highest individual grades are...at odds with cooperative learning.' [2, 64] he suggests for example that where students receive the same mark, a sensible strategy would be for the weaker members to contribute less and also that factors such as 'team work' and 'contribution to the group' are essentially impossible to assess fairly. The role of the tutor in designing and monitoring the process and making appropriate interventions is therefore a complex one.

The use of group work assessment should be considered carefully in the context of the module learning outcomes, the nature of the assessment task and the time available. A useful question might be, "What is it, in terms of learning, that this form of assessment delivers over and above that of individual assessment?" It may be preferable to promote the use of collaborative learning through team work but focus grading on individual performance. This is common in Problem Based Learning (PBL) activities whereby tasks are designed such that students work co-operatively, sharing resources but are often assessed via individual written work. See <http://www.aishe.org/readings/2005-2/chapter9.pdf>

In this way by designing collaborative activities to underpin individual assessment the advantages of team assignments can perhaps be realised without the need to resolve issues of grading. In the current HE climate of ever increasing student numbers there is perhaps a danger of group assessment becoming overused and the timing, extent and continuity of group work throughout particular courses (single-subject or joint) needs to be coordinated.

Re-assessment of groupwork. If a student or group of students fail a group work assessment it can be problematic to provide a re-assessment opportunity. The regulations do allow for an alternative reassessment instrument. This may be appropriate where the assessment is group-based but the learning outcomes of the module do not make reference to group work. In other words, if the module does not explicitly need to assess group working ability, then an individual assessment is appropriate.

It is possible to create a group out of all the students who are referred, but it is often the case that such a "sink group" has members who have really left and this is likely to be a problematic option. An alternative could be to ask the student to provide a reflection of what went wrong in the original assignment and what the student could have done in order to improve performance.

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