Assessing Group Work

Introduction

Group work is a form of cooperative learning. For many years, teachers in higher education have been grouping students together to work on specific assignments. And in the recent years, the assessment of group work is becoming more popular in education. Engaging students with group learning activities can benefit them with high quality learning outcomes and satisfaction if:

1. Clear assessment guidelines and criteria are given
2. The process and product of group work is assessed with valid and fair grading which is able to reliably reflect the contribution of individual students
3. Group dynamics among students are efficiently managed

However, if students are not clear about the objectives and expectations of the group work, or are questioning the validity and fairness of the assessment. It may cause confusion and competition among the group. And the educational benefit of group work will be less effective and may even create a negative effect.

Advantages of Group Work

- Group work can enhance the quality of learning for students through collaboration with other peers. Working as a group allows students to clarify and explain their understanding of the concepts covered in the course during discussion with peers.

- It can develop a sense of responsibility for some students, because they would feel as they are part of the group, they would not want to disappoint others. It can enhance the motivation of students to contribute their efforts to the project.

- It helps to develop generic skills such as teamwork, communication, and project management skills of students while engaging in the group process, which are commonly valued by employers and important for their future in long term.

- Group work projects can reduce the heavy workload of teachers from their tight schedule. Submission of assignments in groups can significantly reduce the number of assignments to be marked by teachers, and is a particularly attractive option for first year courses which are typically huge in class size.

Disadvantages of Group Work

- Arranging group work projects can be very time-consuming for the teachers. It is often not easy to design the right tasks of appropriate span, difficulty and fair shares of work for students, and to mediate the balance of weightings between academic and social elements involved in the group work project

- It is difficult to accurately evaluate contribution of individual students within group work. Valid and fair assessment of individual competence in the group setting is difficult.

- Teachers often mark the group work solely on the basis of the product. Besides the final product, the process of the group work is also an important element. If the marking is only based on the group product, students will

neglect the learning process which is one of the main advantages of using groups and focus only on the end product.

- Assessing the group work using observation, engagement or attitude of group work can be quite subjective
- Employers may think the way that group work is organized in university courses are largely different from the way it is in the workplace. Therefore students may not be actually equipped with the practical group skills as claimed.
- Some students may think negatively that arranging group work is just a way for teaching staff to reduce their workload and escape from responsibilities, which does nothing good for their learning.

Some General Guidelines on Designing and Organizing Group Work

- How students engage themselves in group work is largely determined by how they are assessed. In arranging group work, it is always important to make the purposes, expectations and learning outcomes, organization, process, and also the grading descriptors very explicit and transparent to students. This is best done at the very beginning of the course.
- Students are often more accustomed to study and assess independently before entering university. The transition between individual learning to group learning must therefore be carefully considered. It is important to ensure that students are aware of the educational benefits that group work can deliver, and sufficiently equip them with the necessary skills to carry out group work in order to maximize the benefits in performing group work and group assessment.
- When grading individual students from the group product, it is necessary to have separate grading items (based on evidence of engagement of individual contribution, such as individual reflections, reports, peer-evaluation) to reflect the amount of contributions of individual students
- It is important to avoid overuse of group work across different courses. Managing and coordinating group work can be very stressful and time consuming for students.
- When organizing group work, the group size should not be too large or too small. If the group size is too large, some students may not get the opportunity to network or engage in the group. On the other hand, if the group size to too small, it may pose a limit to the roles in the group performed by students, and causes a very heavy workload for them.
- When organizing group work projects for students, it is extremely important to arrange a project that is best be done by a group (i.e. it cannot be completed by a student alone), so that students can understand why group work is necessary and appreciate the importance of collaboration. Otherwise, students may find group work time-wasting, cumbersome and may decrease collaboration.
- At the commencement of the group project, teachers should help the groups to establish the roles and responsibility for each group member, to ensure all students are clear of what they are expected to contribute for the group. Teachers can give brief guidelines for students explaining the group work process, including the planning and management of tasks, allocation of roles, and communication among the group. This can avoid conflicts regarding the freeloading of responsibilities among students at a later stage of the group project. It also can serve as one of the grading descriptors to evaluate whether a student have satisfactorily served the assigned role in the group.

- Teachers can ask students to write down their expectation about themselves and other group members in the project, and also the kind of help they might need from teachers during the process. At the commencement of the project, teachers can go through these points raised by students to ensure the expectation and requirement is clear.

- Always allow small amount of time in class to facilitate the students' communication of work progress. Teachers can also give feedback to assist their work progress, and solve any problem and conflicts at regular time intervals in the course. It is important to identify and deal with problems as they come out rather than leaving them unsolved till the end of the course.

Assigning Students into Groups

Generally, there are two ways to assign students into the groups.

1. Allowing students to choose their own group partners:
   o The advantage of allowing the students to choose their own group is that students can often begin their work smoothly and efficiently. They can quickly settle with their assigned roles at an early stage as they have already developed mutual trust with each others in the own circle of friends.
   o However, this setting can discourage students from adopting different roles and learn to perform different functions in the group work projects as they are too accustomed to their roles as friends.

2. Teachers assigning the group:
   o Teachers may assign the group members. By not allowing students to deliberately group with their friends, it will provide opportunity for the students to learn and deal with the challenges of working effectively with people of different backgrounds (e.g. academic, cultural backgrounds etc.), motivation and opinion. Such settings often occur in real work environments. This can be a meaningful learning experience for students to become compatible with different people, to learn how to work cooperatively and to share, lead and convince group members with their perspectives. In some situations, teachers can group the students who share common interest towards a certain topic, or deliberately group the students with similar or different backgrounds, which can lead to meaningful exchange of ideas, and fruitful learning outcomes and experience for the students.
   o Sometimes, it may be even desirable for teachers to constantly change the grouping and tasks given to the students, to allow students to try out and understand the different roles performed in a group.

Assessment of Group Work

Teachers need to focus and explain thoroughly to students on the following aspects regarding the assessment of group work:

- The balance between the product and the process of the group work (at what proportion will the assessment focus on each of them?)

- The grading descriptors for the group work (e.g. what constitutes an "A" in the assessment?) and who determines these grades (determined by the teacher, in consultation with the students, or both?)

- The party who will assess the work using these criteria (assessed by the teachers, or by peer-assessment among students, or both? Peer-assessment allows students to evaluate the contribution of other students in the group,
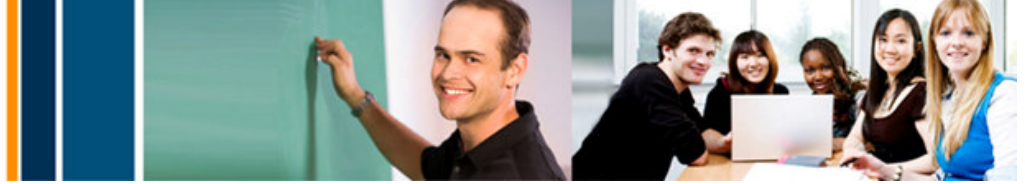
and can be a reliable tool to assess individual contribution of students. It is generally perceived as a fair instrument of mark adjustment by students.)

- The distribution of marks of the group work (all students in the group receive the same mark, or will the marks be distributed separately for individual students?)

It is relatively easier to grade the product of group work, but more difficult on the process. Examples of criteria which may be appropriate for assessing the process of group work include:

- Attendance of meetings and time management
- Attitude of being cooperative
- Application of a variety of methods to deal with different tasks and difficulties
- Engagement and motivation with the assigned task
- Ability to motivate other people
- Willingness to listen and the responsiveness to feedback and opinions

Marking Schemes for group work assessment:

1. **Shared group mark** – Every student in the group receive the same mark
   o It can encourage group work and cooperation because all members will share the same mark
   o It can decrease the tendency of students to commit plagiarism because of working as a group
   o However, individual contributions cannot be reflected by the group mark. It may also be unfair to strong students who receive lower marks because of the weaker students in their group.

2. **Individual mark** – Every student is assigned and assessed on a given task (may also include reports, reflection or portfolios) based on submitted work and direct observation of group dynamics. And the individual task will contribute to part of the final group product.
   o It can be more fairly reflects on individual student's contribution and can motivate individual student to engage in the assigned task.
   o However, it is difficult to find tasks that are equal in difficulty for all the students.
   o It also may discourage students from collaborating with each others. The final group product may be just a collection of discrete pieces of individual works without meaningful connections.

3. **Combination of individual and group marks** – The group mark given to individual students is adjusted in accordance to their performance in individual tasks and contributions
   o The marks awarded to students under such mechanism is generally perceived to be fairer than group average marks
   o But it poses additional work for teachers to set up the relevant procedures and marking mechanisms. In such case, peer-evaluation may be a useful option to reflect efforts and contribution of individual students

When grading individual contribution to the group work, teachers can ask each member of the group to allocate the weighting of contribution of individual members and send to them confidentially, and the teacher can adjust and award
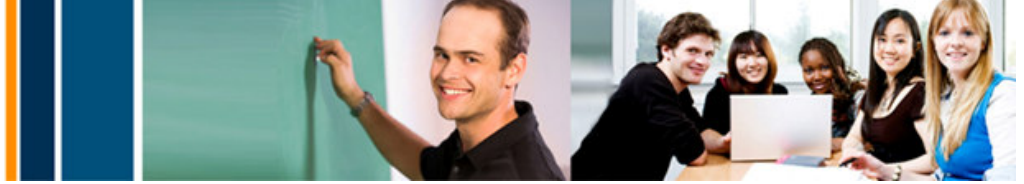
the marks to each student according to the overall weightings (by multiplying the group marks by the number of members, and assign each student according to the individual weightings)

Web References and Resources

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