GETTING THE MOST FROM GROUPWORK ASSESSMENT

ASKe

Assessment Standards Knowledge exchange
The Centre for Excellence in Assessment at the Business School

ASKe

The aim of this leaflet is not to prescribe one best method for the assessment of groupwork, because it is dependent on context. Instead, it attempts to set out, as simply as possible, the complex set of factors that need to be considered in designing and implementing groupwork assessment.

This leaflet is based on the ASKe groupwork literature review – available at: www.brookes.ac.uk/aske

Four key texts contributing to this review were:

Falchokov, N. & Boud, D. (1989) Student self-assessment in higher education: a meta-analysis. *Review of Educational Research*, 59, pp. 395-430.

Falchikov, N. & Goldfinch, J. (2000) Student peer-assessment in higher education: a meta-analysis comparing peer and teacher marks.
Review of Educational Research, 70,3, pp. 287-322.

Lejk, M., Wyvill, M. & Farrow, S. (1996) A survey of methods for deriving individual grades from group assessments. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 21, 3, pp 267-280.

Springer, L., Stanne, M.E. & Donovan, S.S. (1999) Effects of small group learning on undergraduate Science, Mathematics, Engineering and Technology: a meta-analysis. *Review of Educational Research*, 69, 1, pp. 21-51.

Fundamental issues

1

Pay close attention to the issue of fairness; perceived unfairness is the source of students' greatest dissatisfaction

- Wherever possible, devise assessment involving groupwork that allows reward for individual but perhaps different contributions. There are many mechanisms that allow the award of differential marks (see 'Managing groupwork assessment', page 6).
- Where circumstances require that the same mark is allocated to all members of the group, ensure an appropriate balance of marks between groupwork and other individual assessments within a module/programme.

2

Evaluate the validity of the task and the assessment standards to be applied

- Groupwork should only be used where the task requires groupwork to make a clear contribution to the achievement of a learning outcome(s).
- Groupwork assessment can contribute to a range of outcomes but the role it plays in the achievement of an outcome must be apparent to both the staff teaching team and the students.
- Groupwork can be conducted collaboratively (all members working together) or co-operatively (all members making a contribution). Design assessment tasks to engender the approach that aligns with the outcomes required.
- Apply assessment standards/criteria that clearly acknowledge the groupwork aspect of the task and align with the outcome to be achieved (see 'First, consider purpose', page 4).

3

Understand the importance of the learning milieu and the programme of study

- While attention should be paid to mechanisms to support groupwork assessment, the overarching learning milieu created by the tutor underlies the success of those mechanisms and students' attitudes towards groupwork assessment.
- Consider the 'fit' of groupwork assessment tasks within the programme assessment strategy. The validity of the task must relate to the programme learning outcomes.
- The purpose and place of specific groupwork tasks in the programme will influence their design and the support they require.
- Use the programme assessment strategy to frame the development of the students' ability to manage groupwork processes. It is likely to improve with practice and with formative feedback; for example, early stage groupwork will need more scaffolding than later stage work.

First, consider purpose

1

Be clear about the purpose of using a groupwork assignment

- Groupwork can be used to produce a particular outcome, e.g. the achievement of a complex task (beyond that expected of an individual, such as simulation of authentic professional activity) or evidence of groupwork skills.
- Groupwork can also be used as a pedagogic device to encourage debate and create a participative learning environment.
- It is important that the purpose(s) of the groupwork assessment is clear and communicated to the students.

2

Distinguish between the assessment of groupwork process and product

- The purpose of the assessment and intended learning outcomes will determine which aspects of groupwork are to be assessed.
- The methods for assessing product and process are different. The work produced by the group will not provide evidence of the quality of group processes, nor will information about the effectiveness of group processes provide evidence of the quality of the work produced.
- The distinction between assessment of product and process must therefore be very clear. A groupwork product can be assessed in the same way as an individual product, for example, by a member of staff. However, assessment of group process and/or individual contribution to the assessed product is likely to need assessment by group participants.

3

Consider the formative/summative nature of the assessment

- Assessment of groupwork is likely to be used both formatively and summatively in different contexts, for example to support learning or to accredit groupwork skills.
- Aspects of the same groupwork assignment may include formative and summative assessment. This enables a differentiation between group activity and assessment of individual learning and allows for differential marking - for example, testing understanding of formative groupwork tasks in a subsequent individual examination.
- Plan the use of formative and summative assessment of groupwork within the framework of a programme allowing for developmental activity and feedback.

Setting up groupwork assessment

1

Pay attention to the size and composition of groups

- There needs to be a balance between groups large enough to cope with the workload and engender creative thinking, and one small enough to facilitate communication, decision-making and co-ordination, and make 'social loafing' more difficult. A group size of four to six seems to be optimum, with groups of eight or more creating significant problems.
- If groups are too large, individual motivation and effort can be less than if students had studied alone.
- Group composition is also significant for effectiveness and performance. Ability, cultural background and gender all need consideration:
  – Culturally homogeneous groups outperform heterogeneous groups if the group task is of short duration (less than four months).
  – With practice, mixed ability groups, with a mechanism to recognise the greater contribution of high ability students, provide the fairest option.

2

Provide practice in groupwork using formative assessment and feedback

- Students often have a lot of practice in more traditional forms of individual assessment, but very little before high stakes summatively assessed groupwork; this adds to the perception of unfairness.
- Formative feedback during the groupwork process can lead to improvements, both in group processes and in the quality of project outcomes.

3

Plan evidence-gathering mechanisms for use in the assessment of group process and product

- Evidence on which to base assessment (judgements) needs to be gathered during the groupwork process, therefore collection mechanisms need to be set up. For example, requiring groups to keep minutes of meetings, work planning records, on-line group discussion posts, etc., and individuals to keep journals or portfolios of their contributions.

Managing group work assessment

1

For summatively assessed groupwork, choose an appropriate mark allocation mechanism

Allocating the same mark to all members rarely leads to appropriate student learning behaviour, and is often perceived as unfair. An alternative option is 'differential marking', which can be achieved through several mechanisms; for example:

- Assess groupwork with subsequent individual assignments or examinations that can only be completed well if there has been full participation in the groupwork, e.g. questions about methodological issues encountered or changing a key variable in the problem scenario the groups tackled, requiring a reworking of the conclusion.
- Award individuals marks for component tasks. These tasks may be pre-allocated or allocated by the group. If 50% of marks are awarded for components and 50% for overall group product, attention will be paid to the whole task as well as to the individual components.
- Students moderate each others' marks on the basis of perceived contribution; to achieve a reasonable spread of marks this should be undertaken anonymously.

2

Plan and prepare for peer assessment

- The process needs to be closely aligned with the purpose (see 'Fundamental issues' page 3) and intended learning outcomes of the groupwork assessment.
- Several factors including criteria, timing, anonymity, use of evidence, numbers of assessors need to be taken into account in choosing a process (for more detail see 'Implementing peer assessment of groupwork', page 7).
- Encourage groups to recognise the value of early peer feedback among group members.
- Encourage early discussion in the group about equity, shared or different expectations, managing the group and the outputs. Suggest development of groupwork agreements.

3

Anticipate potential issues arising in groups and choose an early warning system to flag up problems

There are several examples of these including:

- Football card system. A yellow (and ultimately a red) card is issued within the group to any member who is considered to be underperforming. The tutor should be kept informed of the use of the cards. The outcome of issuing a red card needs to be agreed at the outset of the groupwork process.
- In order to encourage early engagement with the task, set a time limit on when the tutor will intervene to support a dysfunctional group.

Implementing peer assessment of groupwork

1

Recognise the validity and reliability of well-managed self and peer assessment. Even those students who do not favour group projects as learning activities believe peer assessment to be a valid means of determining students' achievement

Evidence shows that:

- There is sufficient agreement between peer marks and tutor marks to be fair.
- Global judgements of peers are more reliable than using range of specified dimensions.
- One student assessor is generally as reliable as multiple assessors.
- Level of course or stage in programme is irrelevant to the reliability of peer assessment.

2

Recognise the value and disadvantage of anonymity

- Where an individual knows only the outcome of the averaging of others' peer assessments, rather than which individual gave which mark, this produces a greater range in marks.
- Public feedback from peers has more effect on subsequent behaviour than from a supervisor or teacher.
- Context, purpose and whether assessment is formative or summative, should determine the use of anonymity.

3

Provide appropriate rating scales

- Rating scales must be 'behaviourally anchored' so that the assessment is based on evidence and evident behaviours (e.g. contributed to and attended group meetings) rather than behaviours that are open to interpretation e.g. 'helpfulness to the group`.

ASKe (Assessment Standards Knowledge exchange) is a Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) based in the Business School at Oxford Brookes University. It was set up in summer 2005 with a £4.5 million award from HEFCE in recognition of good practice based on pedagogic research into aspects of assessment.

The work of ASKe has been organised into three strands of activity

Strand 1: Replicating proven practice through:

- A pre-assessment intervention which the ASKe team has shown to work. A simple intervention such as a marking workshop prior to undertaking an assessed task can significantly increase students' understanding of the assessment criteria and improve their performance of the task. ASKe has supported the development of this kind of intervention on all Business School courses, as well as in three other Schools (Built Environment, Health and Social Care, and Westminster Institute of Education). This same support is available for the remaining four Schools plus five partner institutions.

- The Academic Conduct Officer (ACO) system which the ASKe team is further developing, in addition to researching effective ways of encouraging and promoting academic integrity.

- The Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) programme, long used by the Business School, which ASKe has extended across the School. Support is also offered to help at least three other Schools introduce PAL.

Strand 2: Pioneering evidence-based practice

Appropriate development projects will be funded, both within the Business School and across the whole University. Projects will seek out and support ways to develop and enhance assessment practices.

Strand 3: Cultivating a community of practice

The ASKe team has developed a new, £2 million building on Brookes' Wheatley Campus. This provides a physical environment to support student learning outside structured class time, in which staff and students can meet to develop a shared understanding of academic standards.

But it's more than just a building. The ASKe team argues that only a true community of practice will ensure shared understanding, so ASKe (in conjunction with other parties at Brookes) is also developing the social environment necessary to colonise this physical space.

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