

Report for Scholars Network 2005

Groupwork Project – Faculty of Commerce

Introduction

My earlier work of developing a worksheet to optimise active learning for postgraduate students provided an excellent basis for this project. The worksheet based a problem on the subject content and guided the analysis by means of sequenced tasks to provide learning challenges, thereby integrating Information Literacy activities to enhance adult learning. Further, these activities provided scaffolding for the group assessment task, which itself built on the previous research by students. The challenge in this component was assessing each student's contribution to the group, as well as forming groups in a way that is not detrimental to high achievers.

My early attempts at evaluating students' contribution to groups were limited to a half page of reflection from each student.

Because of my efforts in the above work I was invited to represent the Faculty of Commerce in the Scholars Network by engaging in the groupwork project.

The action plan

Like any good action plan, mine was modified as I learned more about groupwork and attitudes towards it. I believe this has enhanced the outcome achieved by this project. The action plan agreed to at the commencement of this project, showing timeframes and expected outcomes, is attached as Appendix A.

In brief, the components of the action plan are:

- To examine subject outlines in the Graduate School of Business to get a snapshot of subjects that include groupwork;
- To examine how tertiary literacies are embedded in these subjects;
- To conduct a workshop where academics who utilise groupwork present their approach;
- To scan the relevant literature and so identify 'best practice'; and
- To publish the trial use of a groupwork methodology as a case study.

Examining subject outlines provided a comprehensive list, from a single teaching intake, of subjects with a groupwork component. This information was placed in a spreadsheet, which could be added to as the project progressed. This spreadsheet is attached as Appendix B.

For each subject identified with a groupwork component the lecturer was contacted and further information requested about the type of task set, the intended learning outcomes, and the form of assessment. This information was analysed and summarised in the spreadsheet. I was unable to get information for only two of the subjects.

Examining how Tertiary Literacies were embedded turned into an exercise in trying to identify as many of these that may apply in each subject. Beyond Academic Literacy and Information Literacy virtually no other was embedded. This 'difficulty' was discussed with the Scholars Network coordinator and it was decided that an

identification of embedded Graduate Attributes would be beneficial. Both Tertiary Literacies and Graduate Attributes are included in the spreadsheet.

A small number of the lecturers felt the need to justify their approach to groupwork. This project was never intended as an evaluation of the effectiveness of groupwork use but as a means of identifying possible duplication, and so possibly facilitating a redistribution of its use across a course, and to find ways to enhance the effectiveness of groupwork in postgraduate subjects.

Following discussion with some lecturers about their approach to groupwork I decided not to proceed with a workshop which relied on lecturers presenting their approach. I had gained some information which was helpful, and felt that a discussion of attitudes about groupwork at this stage could detract from a discussion of the actual approaches in terms of their benefit to learning. It is intended, instead, that findings and outcomes from this project will be distributed as widely as possible. For example, in January 2006 a three page worksheet for the formation of groups was provided to CEDIR for inclusion on the groupwork web site. I intend, in some form, to review the role of groupwork across subjects in the Master of International Business course, which I coordinate, and to negotiate any modifications that may be appropriate.

The publication of this work will be possible later this year, after the use of the groupwork worksheet has been evaluated. This three page worksheet has been incorporated into my Intake B subject, TBS981, and will be evaluated during its use, and as part of the overall assessment task to which it applies. A Student Online Survey will be used for the latter. It is intended to publish this evaluation as a case study, as was the done for the evaluation of the worksheet which integrated Information Literacy into the subject content.

Discussion

The key questions which arose during the project were about the aims of using groupwork in Graduate School of Business postgraduate subjects and how tasks can be allocated within groups.

On some occasions groupwork was used to reduce the quantity of marking of assessment tasks. This use of groupwork should be discouraged.

There is much literature on the value of groupwork to learning. For our postgraduate program there are several perceived benefits. Primarily, as our students will eventually be working as part of a team, often with members dispersed across the globe, groupwork is seen as an opportunity to enhance a variety of skills required. Many of these skills are those which are identified as important Graduate Attributes. Of particular importance is the need for students to be able to divide up the tasks and to bring together the individual components into a cohesive outcome (report). The process involved in producing such an outcome requires effective communication. Many students complain that face to face meetings are difficult to achieve in their group but I see this as an opportunity to develop skills in other modes of communication, as is regularly required in the business world.

How tasks are allocated within a group can be an issue for some students. At times, students in a group have complained about one member either not doing his/her share or trying to dictate to the group. In these instances there is an opportunity for the lecturer to provide guidance and to encourage students to resolve the issue between

them, as they would in the workplace. The previous Scholars project by Cathy Rudkin provides some resources for students in these situations.

Over time I have attempted to gain a better insight into how students have divided up project work and the extent of their contribution to the project outcome. My approach to evaluating this has evolved over time from initially being only a report of who did what to now requiring a one to two page structured critical reflection from each student in the group. Students are instructed to discuss what they have learnt from their own contribution and to explain why they believe they have learned this. Marks are allocated for both parts to encourage students to do both. The second part is difficult for some students and so they leave it out, but I feel that it is valuable to prompt students to consider the overall process.

For the reasons discussed above and others not significant, a worksheet for the formation of groups was developed. This was done in conjunction with the University of Wollongong's Graduate Attributes Lecturer, who was also working on a groupwork project. The joint development of the worksheet for group formation was seen as beneficial for overcoming some of the difficulties identified during this project and it provided another template for University of Wollongong lecturers as part of the suite being finalised by Learning Development.

The main issue of students not knowing anyone else in their group was the first addressed. A concern held by lecturers was that of groups being formed only between friends so as to be detrimental to the learning outcomes for the group as a whole.

The aim of the worksheet is for it to be completed by a pair of students; being friends or acquaintances. Based on skills identified by the pair they will be matched with another pair that will complement these skills. During this process students are asked to identify skills they need to develop while part of this group and to identify any gaps in the group's collective skills that could impact on the outcomes of the group activity. These are to be collected and reviewed by the lecturer.

Outcomes

This project has developed a methodology for forming groups in a way that considers skills of the group members, as well as ensuring that no member feels they do not know other members. This fits into the University of Wollongong's framework for groupwork teaching approaches. The evaluation of the trialling of this worksheet should provide valuable input for its enhancement. The final product will be a much needed resource for the University of Wollongong's teaching staff. This product, the worksheet, is attached as Appendix C.

Conclusion

While the project has not been able to deliver all outcomes as listed in the action plan, there have been unanticipated developments that have resulted in the creation of an important resource for groupwork components.

The resulting worksheet for the formation of groups will complement the resources already available through the various support web sites. University of Wollongong teaching staff are encouraged to adapt these resources to assist them in the many aspects of their teaching.

Recommendations

This project has found some aspects of groupwork, as trialled in a postgraduate subject in the Graduate School of Business, to be beneficial to teaching when a collaborative approach is being utilised. Recommendations listed below intend to further the benefits possible from this approach. These recommendations are:

- Make the group formation worksheet available on the teaching support intranet site;
- Encourage lecturers engaging students in groupwork to adapt this to their needs and make use of it as much as possible;
- Lecturers include some peer assessment in their groupwork to enable student to gain a portion of their marks as an individual component;
- Lecturers who adapt and utilise the worksheet are asked to provide feedback to enable ongoing enhancements to be made; and
- Groupwork is built into courses in a controlled fashion to ensure that Tertiary Literacies underpin effective Groupwork.