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Doing group assessment: A web-based resource of good practice case-studies

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This paper reports on a national project, *Doing Group Assessment*, based at the University of Canberra and funded by the Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education Inc., now the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC). The development of this web-based resource of good practice case-studies in group assessment in disciplines such as theatre, communication, film and theatre studies is outlined. The specific focus of the paper is on the question: Should a common group mark be awarded or should marks reflect differential inputs of group members? Five major strategies emerged from the case studies and these are described and contextualized within the discipline cluster.

Keywords: group assessment, communication, grades

Introduction

Many Australian employers are seeking graduates who possess teamwork skills that enable them to deal effectively with the dynamics of working in groups. While university policies on assessment commonly advocate the value of group work, a study by Burdett (2003) of 344 final year business degree students at the University of South Australia concluded that student frustration with unfair group assessment practices was a major concern. Such a finding is neither surprising nor atypical, given that university assessment policy and indeed all university marks are finally translated into individual grades that are carefully validated to maintain the credibility of degree-conferring status. University degrees are not awarded to teams or groups in the way that Nobel Prizes are for example.

Most Australian universities have policies on Graduate Attributes that recognize the value of group work but at an institutional level this is conceptualized in different ways. The University of Technology Sydney (2008) for instance describes a broad profile of communication and interpersonal skills and understands that specific attributes are best developed in relation to the professional and disciplinary contexts of each course. Similarly, the University of Sydney (2008) has communication as an over-arching attribute and then links this to learning and negotiating with others. The University of Canberra (2008) and Griffith University (2008) specifically list working with others as part of a group or in a team as a major attribute.

Collaborative learning at university associated with networking and communication skills, as well as the ability to contribute to authentic assessment activities, group processes, and working with a broad range of students is clearly a foundation that can be built upon in the workplace. Mutch (1998) observes that students need to have time, skill and motivation to work through the stages of group work.

An assumption in this paper is that it is generally very difficult to compare groups working on assessment activities in university courses with work-based communities. Classes and relationships in many courses are ephemeral compared to the organizational structure of the work environment; classes may be so large that students are strangers to each other; and there are many constraints associated with formal assessment. Elements of communities of practice that Wenger (2002, 2005) describes, such as shared concerns or passions, regular interaction, the right rhythm and mix of activities, common repertoires, and being inherently self-defined and self-managed, are applicable in some courses but not in a general sense. What is significant is that group assessment activities can be authentically designed so that they incorporate the problem elements that are encountered in professional practice; furthermore, they can help to equip students with some of the attributes and skills to engage successfully in work-based learning communities when they enter the work environment.

This paper reports data from a national project, *Doing Group Assessment*, based at the University of Canberra in partnership with the University of New South Wales and Macquarie University, and supported by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC). The website that was developed, *Doing Group Assessment in Media and Communication*, can be accessed at: http://creative.canberra.edu.au/groupwork/.

 The following section contextualizes the issue that is the focus of this paper — grading group assessment —within the broader context of group assessment concerns. It is followed by a description of the data and the method of analysis employed to investigate this issue. The investigation revealed that unit conveners resolve the challenge of assigning grades using one of five strategies: award the same mark, allow elements of peer evaluation, use of project management strategies, confidential peer and self evaluation and problem-based developmental strategies. This finding both complements and builds upon current national assessment initiatives.

Review of the literature

In terms of previous research around group assessment in tertiary education, Jaques and Salmon (2007) note that much of it has centered on discussion groups, especially variables such as seating position, talkativeness, personality of the participants and the kinds of leadership in different groups. Focusing on networked collaborative learning, McConnell (2006) reports on the opportunities it provides to explore learning in the workplace dealing with problem-solving and teamwork, as well as contributing to the development of learning communities.

Strauss and U (2007) describe how lecturers are increasingly required to implement group assessment but lack formal training and question its value, especially where students are required to work under inflexible deadlines of eight to ten weeks.

There are complex issues around group dynamics. The tendency of particular students to dominate groups and manipulate tasks is clearly recognized (Kennedy 2006; Roberts & McInnerney 2007) but whether staff are equipped to teach conflict resolution in groups and whether they have the time for it in a normal teaching semester are debatable. James, McInnis and Devlin (2002) argue that there is value in spending some time promoting group cohesiveness so that group time and effort is spent on the task, rather than on dealing with unproductive conflict. Isaacs (2002) agrees with this approach, noting that the logistics of group formation and group working are not, strictly speaking, an assessment issue but that quite obviously, if the group can not function well, or possibly not at all, this will have an effect on learning and assessment outcomes.

In a recent article Roberts & McInnerney (2007) identify the top seven issues reported about group assessment in the literature: student antipathy to group work, group selection, lack of essential skills, the free rider, possible inequalities of student abilities, the withdrawal of group members and the assessment of individuals within groups.

What is apparent from even a cursory snapshot of contemporary research around group assessment is that many of the problems are predictable; what is not so obvious, is how disciplinary assumptions around group assessment impact on good practice. In the biological sciences for instance Harris et al. (2007) indicate that the key considerations in planning group assessment are:
- deciding what is to be assessed - the process, the product or both
- selecting criteria - particularly if the group process is to be directly assessed
- deciding who is to 'do' the assessing - staff, students or both
- deciding how grades are to be assigned - collectively, individually or a mixture.

While there are recurring assessment issues in all group assessment, Crossley (2006) argues that in the performing arts, controversy and drama represent positive opportunities; students need to engage with conflict constructively rather than attempt to avoid it; and controversy in fact allows for the entry of new ideas that may be suppressed in the interests of 'groupthink'. Such disciplinary assumptions are significant in this study.

Specifically on the question of whether a common group mark should be awarded or whether marks represent varied inputs, James, McInnis and Devlin (2002) note that students are keen that grading practices are established such that grades properly reflect the levels of performance of each student and that where necessary, grade adjustments occur to better reflect these levels. Isaacs (2002) suggests there is no clear 'yes' or 'no' answer to this question and that decisions should be based on the goals for the course and for the assessment exercise. Having the group share the same mark should enhance collaboration in his view, so the important question becomes one of how to deal with freeloaders (students who do not participate adequately in the group's work). Raban and Litchfield (2007) report that between 75% to 90% of all groups opted for almost equal mark distribution, an expected result in line with similar cases reported in the literature but they argue that this nearly equal distribution of marks was hardly plausible as in groups of 10 students one can expect a wide-range of individual contributions.

James, McInnis and Devlin (2002) present a range of options:
- The group submits one product and all group members receive the same mark from the lecturer/tutor, regardless of individual contribution
- Individual submissions are marked individually. The group members each then receive an average of these marks
- Each student completes an allocated task that contributes to the final group product and gets the marks for that task
- Each student writes and submits an individual report based on the group's work on the task/project
- Exam questions specifically target the group projects and can only be answered by students who have been involved in the project
- The group mark is awarded to each member with a mechanism for adjusting for individual contributions.

White, Lloyd and Goldfried (2007, p. 71) refer to numerous methods and research for obtaining individual marks from group work. The specific area of interest is what constitutes good practice in disciplines in the performing arts, media and related studies.

Methodology
The scope of the ALTC project was to compile case studies that reflected good practice guidelines in dealing with the most difficult issues around group assessment in disciplines such as multimedia, film and television, graphic design, creative writing, drama and performance. Table 1 lists the institutions and the unit title for each case study. The case studies were drawn from partner institutions as well as selected on the basis of acceptance of invitations to participate, extended through the professional association listservs of HERDSA, ASCILITE and ODLAA.

Each case study comprises a video clip of an interview with the unit convener and documents such as the unit outline, unit resources and unit-related publications. Many of the case studies are enriched by perspectives of group assessment from students enrolled in the case study unit. The collection of all material for this project was approved by the University of Canberra Committee for Ethics in Human Research.

Table 1: Case studies presented in the site

Institution	Unit Title
1. University of Canberra	New Media Production
2. University of Canberra	Television Production
3. University of Canberra	Writing for Young People
4. University of NSW	OMNIUM
5. University of NSW	Aspects of Theatre and Performance History
6. University of NSW	Theories of Acting & Performance
7. University of NSW	Theatre Workshop Exercise
8. University of NSW	Multimedia Production & Industry Contexts
9. University of Technology Sydney	Visual Communication
10. University of NSW	Medicine
11. University of Canberra	Advertising and Marketing
12. University of Canberra	Brand Building
13. University of Canberra	Communication Foundations

This paper reports an interpretive study based on the transcripts of interviews with the unit convener for each of the case study units. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with thirteen participants at their respective institutions and the transcripts of these interviews constituted the rich data that were subsequently imported into QSR International's Nvivo, Version 7, software to support qualitative coding and analysis. This analysis investigated the question: Should a common group mark be awarded or should marks reflect differential inputs of group members?

Findings: Key themes
From the analysis of the thirteen transcripts the following eight major issues emerged:

1. Why conduct group assessment?
2. What are effective methods for creating and structuring groups?
3. How do you manage groups and deal with issues such as conflict?
4. In designing group assessment, should a common group mark be awarded or should marks reflect differential inputs of group members?
5. Should peer assessment be a component of group assessment?
6. How can technology be used to support group assessment?
7. What constitutes good practice in making group assessment criteria transparent to students?
8. How can feedback be provided effectively in group assessment?

Table 2 presents the five strategies that emerged in response to question 4, the central question of this study.

Table 2: Strategies to recognize differential inputs in group assessment

Central question	Strategies identified in the case studies
Should a common group mark be awarded or should marks reflect differential inputs of group members?	Strategy 1: Award the same mark to all group members but differentiate between groups.(CS13) Strategy 2: Allow elements of peer evaluation to over-ride the group mark but only within a small range (+/- 5).(CS5, CS6 and CS8) Strategy 3: Anticipate/address elements that lead to unequal inputs in groups: Conduct regular group mediation meetings to review emerging problems (CS11) Require students to sign off on minutes of group meetings (CS12) Allow confidential submission of peer-evaluations. (CS12) Strategy 4: Design group assessment that provides for confidential inputs of self and peer-evaluations against clearly defined criteria with subsequent online moderation of the data according to set formulae. (CS9) Strategy 5: Course level strategy which systematically addresses group work in a development sense, linked with a portfolio exam and two-year reviews and supported by an online system that allows feedback to be shared. (CS10)

For many staff, group assessment is challenging enough without having to identify individual group contributions (strategy 1). Strategy 2 recognises the issues but confines the range because students themselves vary widely in their capacity to allocate marks even when the criteria are clearly defined. Strategy 3 recognises that there will be freeloaders in groups and there may be dysfunctional members, so it monitors group dynamics on a regular basis from evidence available such as mediation meetings, group minutes and individual consultations.

If there is an acceptance of the premise that individual contributions to group assessment process will always be highly variable and that certain students will always resent the allocation of marks that do not accurately reflect inputs, then strategy 4 contains the essential ingredients to advance on present practice. Finally, strategy 5 adopts a course strategy that radically departs from established practice in most universities and focuses on the developmental aspects of group work in larger time frames rather than being confined to individual units.

Discussion
Group behavior that subverts the integrity of the assessment process and staff/student antipathy to group work are common blocks to implementing effective group assessment

reported in the literature. There is a general acceptance that equal marks should not be awarded by default to all group members and that students should have a rational understanding of the basis on which marks have been allocated. Solutions vary from emphasis on a new group support tool (Raban and Litchfield 2007), the introduction of self and peer-assessment (Roberts & McInnerney 2007) to assessment options that encompass a shared group mark, a group average mark, and individual marks based on allocated tasks (James, McInnis and Devlin 2002). Strategies that emerge in this paper incorporate all of these elements but are more personally applied in the context of specific disciplines.

The CS1 (case study 1, Table 1) Unit Convener remarked that he had encountered instances of collusion between groups and this led him to remove the peer-assessment component because, 'groups that were harmonious and strategic would simply agree to give each other high marks'. Students in the CS2 case study stated that in groups 'a lot of people don't have the same motivation' and, furthermore, that it was difficult to allocate equal marks for equal work in video production because the role of the Best Boy can hardly be equated with the role of the Director.

What became apparent in many of the case studies was that staff had refined their group assessment practice over the years and had developed strategies to deal with blocks that re-occurred. In CS5 for example, self-evaluation and peer review informed the final group assessment mark but a variation of +/- 5 meant that the final group mark would not be overridden. In CS6 the Unit Convener (also the Convener in CS5) stated that group members have widely different marking scales and this was a factor in the +/- 5 that over-rode the group assessment mark in both cases. She explained the process in the following terms:

> Our students fill out self-evaluation and peer review forms. If a student is under-performing we have a formula where if they're underperforming by more than 5 marks of the final group mark for the presentation we give them a mark for where we think they're performing, add it with the final group mark, divide it by 2 and they come away with that - that average mark.

Student comments, both in CS2 and CS6, accepted that group assessment, whether it be video production or theatre performance, required some amelioration of the individualistic ethos that underpinned most university assessment. Assessing group work in video production was perceived as different from the assessment that occurred in Economics and Law; the perspective expressed in CS6 was on 'having a good show, not my individual mark'.

In CS8, an example of authentic assessment in industry contexts, the key assessment elements were:
- Project proposal (10%)
- Beta presentation Report (20%)
- Final package and exhibition (25%)
- Project contribution (5%).

While there is recognition of different individual inputs in the Project Contribution item, the contribution mark is relatively small at 5% and students have the option of awarding only one peer-assessment mark to individuals within the group. The Unit Convener remarked:

> *So the students know that they have this percentage of the final mark that is theirs to give each other based on how much each group member contributes, how well they worked in the team. The mark is quite a small percentage of the overall mark but it's very telling.*

An additional comment by this convener also illustrates issues that arise in groups where conflict has not been resolved:

> *The groups that have had a lot of problem are still quibbling about the marks and who should get what and end up robbing themselves of marks that are virtually gift marks.*

It is in CS9 that the strongest challenge is made about awarding a common group mark. The Unit Convener states that students become 'disgruntled' about working in groups when their individual inputs are not accurately differentiated. There is an acceptance in this case study that self-assessment and peer-assessment are critical components in group assessment and that many of the problems that dissuade lecturers from differential marking in group assessment can be resolved with the adoption of an online system such as The Self and Peer Assessment Resource Kit (SPARK). This system allows students to submit confidential ratings of their own and other group members' performances online. The CS9 Unit Convener described it this way:

> *Versatility is what was required, helping the group function well as a team; creative input throughout the process; etc. The students go in and you can see there, click on a pull-down menu. The grading is from -1 to +3. The student has been detrimental to the group on that particular criteria; 0 is no contribution; 1 is below average contribution; 2 is average and 3 is above average. Then when they've assessed themselves and each other, SPARK calculates a factor and that's used to determine their individual share of the group mark.*

The Unit Convener along with a colleague (Thompson & McGregor 2005, p. 41) has independently published in this area and argues that 'lecturers have often avoided the issue of group assessment by requiring individual submissions from group work activities' and that this actually diminishes interdependence and promotes non-collaboration. SPARK promotes student ratings against transparent criteria and it then adjusts these inputs to calculate an individual mark for each member.

CS10, the only one outside the cluster of related disciplines, is a Medicine unit which is based on systemic design principles embedded in the whole course. Students are required to complete a group project in every unit but their contributions are not moderated to produce different marks. Group assessment is supported by an online system, e-Med, which enables students to comment on the performance of other members against a range of criteria such as: Did this student (come on) time? or Was their research of high

quality? While awarding a common group mark, this case study is more focused on a strong developmental aspect to group assessment with linkages to a portfolio exam and reviews of how particular students have responded to evaluation feedback. The development of teamwork is an important value and students have left the course because of a failure in this area.

CS11 introduces the idea of regular reports on group work and regular group mediation meetings with the lecturer to address issues that arise in particular groups. A group mark is awarded if there are sufficient layers of evidence to support it. CS12 incorporates a 40% group work assignment with individual and group components but it provides for the submission of peer evaluation which is submitted confidentially to the lecturer. Students are also required to sign off on the minutes of group work meetings. In CS13, a large first year unit with 300 – 400 students, tutors grade group work and differentiate between the quality of different group presentations but not within the group itself.

These then were the principal strategies that emerged from the thirteen case studies to address the central question posed in this paper. The dynamics of group work are deeply embedded in disciplines such as television production, theatre and media production; furthermore, positive peer-reviews and critiques have a critical role in attracting audiences and affecting the success of productions in professional contexts.

Conclusion

The case studies explored in this paper (with the exception of CS10) are drawn from disciplines such as media, communication, theatre and performance studies. They complement and build upon earlier work by James, McInnis and Devlin (2002). The Carrick Institute (2007) was supporting thirty-two assessment related projects at the end of 2007 and reports from these projects in disciplines as diverse as Biology and Accounting are now being published on the website of the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC). What is becoming clear as these studies conclude is that, while the eight major group assessment questions that emerged in this study are generic concerns (see for example: Raban & Litchfield 2007; Roberts & McInnerney 2007), discipline context, assumptions and cultures overlay the strategies used to determine individual and group marks.

Acknowledgement

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