Viewpoint

Small group work: dodging potential pitfalls to reach the pedagogic possibilities

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Abstract

Small group work is a common learning format in higher education. Whilst numerous positive learning outcomes are associated with this approach, there are also pitfalls scattered along the way that can undermine the entire process. In this Viewpoint paper, I reflect on my experiences of teaching a small group work module. It discusses new strategies I have employed to nurture communication and interaction within the student groups, and considerations I took when constructing them. My challenge was to build a positive socio-cultural context for learning to take place, as the learning environment can exert considerable influence on the experiences students have whilst trying to work cooperatively with their peers.

Keywords

small group work; learning context; student interaction; student experience

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Small group work

In this Viewpoint paper, I reflect on my experiences on teaching a Level 5 module with assessed small group work. The 2017/18 academic year was my third as the Module Leader and, each time, I have approached it with trepidation! Of course, the start of every module creates some sense of apprehension, but it is particularly acute for this owing to the additional dimension of unpredictability, created by overseeing 20-25 groups within the cohort, allocating students into these groups and, in particular, the potential lack of (and, sometimes, adversarial) interactions within them.

My small group teaching occupies six weeks of the students' first semester. This module, Urban Design, instructs students to redesign a small part of Liverpool's city centre. The scale and complexity of the tasks involved in urban design are such that working in groups is a highly appropriate format. However, whilst recognising the value of this approach, commentary from students has also identified some problematic aspects associated with small group work. Rather than changing the format of learning or content, I sought, instead, to address some of the root causes of pitfalls with this approach.

Jean Piaget's theories on the merits of peer learning, and of cooperation between participants underpinned by a sense of mutual respect, have significant relevance to the desired nature of interactions between students in small group work. On reflection, a key issue centred on the examination of trust, democracy and dynamics within the group setting. The complex landscape in which students are interacting and cooperating within their groups I conceptualise here as the *socio-cultural learning context*.

Background

Small group working is common across many disciplines and in all levels of higher education. The approach can facilitate numerous positive learning experiences. Such benefits include tackling problems larger in scale and complexity than they would individually; elaboration of known content; and deepening critical discourse through debate within the group (Biggs, 2003; Gibbs, 2009). Others are tacit – yet valuable – and relate to students' broader skills development, such as learning to work cooperatively, and to communicate and delegate as part of a team. Small group work can also improve students' social and academic integration and thus retention (Pauli et al., 2008). However, there are numerous pitfalls, which may undermine the entire process and result in a challenging or detrimental experience for students. These include lack of group commitment, disparate contributions by group members, reluctance to attend and engage in group meetings, unequal task allocation, hijacking by dominant group members, and fear of negative impact on grades (*ibid.*). Students' feedback on the small group activity in my module have, at some point, voiced most of these concerns.

Many graduate jobs require soft skills, such as working as part of a team, and this is explains the rationale for including small group work within a curriculum. Out in the workplace, such teams may include those who don't have an affinity to work together, or who readily perceive imbalances with workload. However, and more often than not, setting aside such personal and professional differences to complete the task is the norm. One may think that the diplomacy and communication skills required represent tacit learning experiences for students involved in small group learning. A study by the Higher Education Academy (2014) suggests that, whilst group work is often 'sold' to students on its benefits and relevance to their future careers, they will prioritise more here-

and-now considerations over those upon which they don't see an immediate return. Seen in that light, the importance of ensuring that small group work is carefully managed, to avoid the pitfalls of intra-group conflict, becomes much clearer.

Before constructing my intervention with the Level 5 module, a review of literature on students' positive and negative experiences of small group work revealed some salient considerations. Research by Willis et al. (2002) found that students conceptualised a good group in terms of how they interact with each other, and how they discuss and work through a problem. In comparison, Pauli et al. (2008) identified four parameters within which students' negative experiences of small group learning can be conceptualised: lack of group commitment, task disorganisation, storming (interactional difficulties and interpersonal conflicts), and fractionation of the group. Mills and Alexander (2013) suggest that the dynamics and structure of small groups is very much contingent on social and cultural context, and that a student's sense of belonging within a group is essential to its effective functioning.

It thus became clear that my careful and deliberate construction of the socio-cultural context for learning to take place was of paramount importance, and that this would be defined, to a significant extent, by the nature and quality of interaction dynamics within the student groups.

Constructing socio-cultural learning context

Drawing upon ideas I gleaned from a recent conference (Handley and Dunlop, 2017) new strategies were trialled during the 2017/18 academic year. My challenge was to nurture a positive social and cultural context for small group learning, which would address the source of potential problems before they arose. To achieve this, my new strategies formalised and reinforced the means through which group members would interact with each other, whilst trying to mitigate against the potential for task disorganisation, interactional difficulties, and fractionation.

I added a new section to the project brief – the foundation document of reference, headed 'Important Notes on Group Work Etiquette'. This explicitly set out several points that students were to agree to during the first meeting, and recorded:

- *Establish communication routes:* emails, phone numbers, social media groups, document exchanges, etc.
- *Discuss and agree on group meetings:* what time, what location, and on which days students in the group would regularly meet outside of studio days, during self-directed study time.
- *Discuss and agree allocation of tasks:* agree who is doing which tasks.

At the outset of the module, we discussed the rationale. All groups agreed to this 'contract' and each student, in relation to the key points, kept a work-log diary. The aim was for each group to establish their own set of clear and unambiguous ground rules, but which would be flexible enough to take account of their individual commitments, such as part-time employment or commuting patterns. The ground rules also provided a format through which the other design teachers and I could discuss any problems that arose within a group during the module.

Constructing the team

Another dimension to creating the social-cultural learning context for small groups is how those groups are constructed and there are numerous methods. For instance, random allocation, alphabetical by name, streaming – an arrangement of students by ability - and self-selection by students. Random allocation is one of the methods least favoured by students; Gibbs (2009) argues that allowing students to form their own groups will likely have a similar effect to teachers deliberately streaming students with those of a similar ability – stronger students will tend to form cliques with other strong students, and consequently weaker students will work with each other. Interestingly, commentary from one of my programme's External Examiners the previous academic year considered it appropriate that students do not

select their own groups at undergraduate level, but that teachers do this.

For this module, I streamed the students into mixed ability groups, using the mean overall mark from Level 4 to ensure that each group contained a student whose performance had been within the upper quartile, a student whose performance had been in the lower quartile, and a student whose performance had been within the middle quartiles. Most groups contained three students, however, owing to the need for parity in the size of each tutorial group, some groups had four members. Whilst one may think that the groups of three would be disadvantaged, experience has taught that this does not bear out in practice. There may be several reasons for this; for example, groups of three being more decisive in decision-making as there will be a majority position, and groups of three being able to communicate more effectively than groups of four.

Some critical reflections

Implementing these new ground rules for group work etiquette was not a panacea. There were still instances when students voiced concerns to me about communication issues, or what they perceived as a lack of contribution by others within their group. Although I can only comment anecdotally, there did appear to be fewer instances of students raising concern over their group during the module. Furthermore, positive comments outweighed negative ones when reflecting working in groups in the Module Evaluation survey, which had not occurred previously. Of course, there could be any number of factors.

Mills and Alexander (2013) highlight that it is important for teachers to think critically about the way in which interactions between group members develop, and how this might impact on the way students feel about their learning within the group. Springer et al. (1999) suggest that the opportunity for students to discuss, debate, and present their own and hear one another's perspectives is the critical element in small group learning. It is, therefore, of paramount importance that teachers employing small group coursework take proactive steps to nurture a supportive socio-cultural learning context, underpinned by clearly identified conduit through which each group's interactions can take place. At the same time, these protocols must be fluid enough to allow for individual student's personal commitments elsewhere.

Looking ahead…

Thus, over the course of the year, I have far less trepidation when thinking about deploying small group working. Working in partnership with students at the outset is key, discussing and explaining the rationale crucial. The timing couldn't have been better for, as borne out in last year's revised National Student Survey, students now rate their sense of belonging to a 'learning community'. The philosopher and educational psychologist John Dewey (1916) believed that education is a fundamentally social process, particularised by its environment, and borne out of interaction. The nature and quality of these interactions will have significant impact upon the richness of that process, and on the quality of the socio-cultural learning context in which it occurs.

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