From Groups to Teams: Creating Authentic Collaborative Learning Through Structured Peer Assessment

Abstract

This case study demonstrates how the complexities of group assessment can be approached differently using a ‘teamwork’ philosophy and the incorporation of other tools such as the BuddyCheck peer assessment. By integrating collaborative learning across multiple contexts, in class, outside class, and across the programme in various team configurations, and using structured monitoring tools, students develop genuine teamwork skills rather than simply completing assignments with others. The approach emphasises social learning as an integral part of the educational experience, with BuddyCheck serving as both a monitoring mechanism and a tool for pushing students toward meaningful collaboration.

Keywords

Teamwork, Social learning, Collaborative, BuddyCheck, Group assessment

Overview

Dr. Amr Al Khateeb has developed an innovative approach to group learning that challenges the common practice of superficial collaboration. Rather than simply assigning "group work" where students may sit together but work independently, this approach embeds authentic team learning as a core component of the programme level social learning experience. The philosophy centres on taking group learning "to a level or a different level" ensuring that collaborative work is meaningful, monitored, and integrated across all learning contexts where students interact. Dr. Al Khateeb implements this approach within the Business with programmes, working with approximately 130 students across Levels 4, 5, and 6.

The Challenge

Several key challenges needed addressing in transforming group work into authentic team learning. Moving beyond surface-level collaboration was paramount, as students often complete "group work" while remaining disengaged, with traditional group assignments becoming diminished skills rather than enhanced learning experiences. Creating genuine interaction in the classroom required ensuring that students actually work together rather than simply sitting in proximity and become more aware of the importance of developing real teamwork capabilities. The integration across learning contexts presented another challenge, as group learning is traditionally confined to specific assignments or class sessions, yet students need experience collaborating in diverse settings and configurations. Monitoring and motivation proved difficult, with challenges in observing in the classroom and encouraging genuine collaboration, ensuring all students contribute meaningfully, and finding ways to "push students to be in the right direction." Finally, shifting mindsets was essential, moving from "groups," which people associate with assigned work, to "teams," which implies genuine collaboration, and helping students see collaboration as part of their social learning rather than just task completion. As Amr explains: "Genuinely, genuinely, you know, with students glued to their smartphones not interacting enough, I do see big value that students need to work in groups. I see it as a diminishing skill."

The Innovation

Philosophy of Team Learning

A distinctive feature of Amr's approach is the early establishment of teams at Level 4, which serve a dual purpose beyond traditional group assessments. These teams function as both formal grouping structures for assessed collaborative work and as study groups that sit together during class sessions and are actively encouraged to work together on out-of-class study, even when group work is not formally required. This intentional design aims to build cohesion and deeper collaborative relationships over an extended period. Unless the team specifically requests a change, students remain in their original configuration throughout the entire programme, creating stability and the opportunity for genuine team dynamics to develop over time.

This approach may initially appear radical, particularly as it seemingly contradicts the conventional wisdom that students benefit from experiencing diverse peer perspectives by working with different classmates over time. However, Amr deliberately incorporates structured opportunities for cross-team interaction and knowledge exchange to ensure students do not miss out on the diversity of opinions and ideas. Through organised points in the curriculum where teams present their work to each other and engage with

other teams' outputs, students gain exposure to alternative approaches and perspectives while maintaining the benefits of stable, deep collaborative relationships within their core team. This design combines the advantages of long-term team cohesion with the intellectual diversity that comes from engaging with the wider cohort's thinking.

"So I tell students we have that, not just in the sense of coming to class and do some group work. . . Basically they need to work in groups, in class, outside class, on teams, one on one, so their peers are always there. That's what I aspire my students to do in their work." Amr

Implementation and Assessment Design

BuddyCheck as Assessment Tool

BuddyCheck provides the formal mechanism for students to evaluate peer contributions, Amr enhances this with actively moving around the classroom with his laptop, checking attendance, observing team dynamics, and having conversations with students about absent teammates and contribution levels. Rather than relying on BuddyCheck's calculated scoring algorithm, which he finds "problematic," Amr has developed a simplified category system that makes assessment transparent and easier to justify. This includes his unique addition of an "above and beyond" level, which rewards exceptional contributors with an extra 10 marks without undermining the team ethos, addressing students who say "I'm doing all the work" by giving them a mechanism for recognition if their teammates agree. For those not contributing sufficiently, marks are capped, with the most severe cases of non-participation receiving no credit.

The philosophy behind this modified approach reflects Amr's belief that "students should not get different marks for group work unless there's something" significant - either exceptional contribution or failure to meaningfully participate. He structures the BuddyCheck survey so that while students answer multiple questions about contributions in seminars, outside class, and online, only one question ultimately determines marks, with the other questions serving to "guide the students how to decide." This design encourages most students to select the "fair" category and share marks equally because "it's about building that teamwork spirit. We work together. We're going to share that success. We're all equal." The system addresses the pre-BuddyCheck era when "students are always complaining about X student not doing the work," providing a transparent mechanism that both reassures engaged students that non-contributors "will be marked down" and motivates participation since students know their peers will evaluate them. As Amr emphasises, "using the category makes it

easier for students to understand and easier for me to justify why the students have got that mark," ultimately putting the decision in students' hands while maintaining clear, consistent standards. In addition, the category system must be well communicated to the students right from day one to motivate them to engage in group activities swiftly and make it transparent, particularly the effect on their marks.

Conclusion and Implications for Practice

This case study demonstrates that transforming superficial group work into authentic team learning requires more than implementing peer assessment tools, it demands a comprehensive philosophical approach to social learning. Amr's success comes from treating teamwork as a "diminishing skill" that needs deliberate cultivation across all learning contexts, not just during formal assessments. By establishing stable teams at Level 4 that persist throughout the programme, combining BuddyCheck's digital peer assessment with classroom monitoring, and adapting assessment categories to reward excellence while maintaining team unity, the approach creates what Amr calls a "social learning experiment" where collaboration becomes embedded in students' educational journey. The deliberate use of "teams" rather than "groups" signals higher expectations, while the balance of structure with autonomy, letting students form their own teams, choose their working methods, and evaluate each other, ensures genuine ownership of the collaborative process.

For educators seeking to implement similar approaches, several key principles emerge. First, authentic team learning requires integration across multiple contexts (in-class, online, outside class) rather than isolation to specific assignments, making collaboration a natural part of how students learn rather than an add-on requirement. Second, peer assessment tools like BuddyCheck work best when adapted to institutional context and pedagogical philosophy. Amr's simplified category system proves more transparent and justifiable than algorithmic calculations, while his "above and beyond" addition addresses common student concerns about unfair workload distribution. Third, the combination of digital and physical monitoring provides richer insights than either method alone, with classroom observations informing understanding of peer assessment data. Finally, success depends on explicitly communicating the philosophy behind team learning to students, giving them agency within clear structures, and maintaining consistent expectations across years of study.