

Students' Attitudes Towards Group Presentation Assessment: a survey at London Metropolitan University

Svetlana Stephenson and Gordana Uzelac
Department of Applied Social Studies
London Metropolitan University

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Introduction

The need to make assessment an integral part of learning is an important consideration for teachers in higher education. Not only does assessment determine to a large extent what the students do in order to demonstrate the results of their studies, but it also makes a profound impact on the learning process. This has long been established in literature. For example, Brown *et al* (1997) argued that assessment creates a strong motivation to learning. Biggs (1996) advocates 'constructive alignment' between learning activities and learning outcomes, in which assessment plays a crucial role.

Group work as a learning and teaching method and method of assessment has been a subject of a great interest, but also of substantial controversy. Many educationalists have argued in favour of group work, yet in practice serious difficulties can arise when it is used as a means of individual assessment.

The aim of this paper is to analyse the advantages and disadvantages of assessing group work as a method of assessment and suggest ways of optimising this method in the context of teaching at London Metropolitan University [LMU].

Theoretical basis of group work

Group work as a learning activity and method of assessment has several theoretical underpinnings. The value of group work as a way of learning is particularly important for those who, in teaching professional subjects, share a social constructivist approach to knowledge. This approach presumes that learning is the subjective construction of meaning from experience by those involved in a specific context (DoE, 1994). Different actors negotiate what knowledge means for them in a specific situation, and a group project can be seen as a product of this joint negotiation.

Another conceptual source behind this method can be traced to Vygotsky's developmental pedagogy. Vygotsky believed that through engagement with 'authentic' tasks in realistic settings students are helped to deepen their knowledge and understanding. By cooperating and communicating with others, students become 'cognitive apprentices' to more expert practitioners. Each

student has a 'zone of proximal development' in which progress in understanding can occur through this interaction (Vygotsky, 1978).

Recent research into student's learning in the UK educational context confirmed the benefits for individual learning of students' communication and cooperation in groups. For example, Entwistle found that students developed understanding through discussion of their subject with student peers, and McClelland established that students who attended a 'commuter college' did not make the same gains as those who attended college on a residential basis (cited in DoE, 1994).

Changing ideas about assessment have also brought new attention to group work. The shift of emphasis from assessment as a control mechanism to assessment as an aid learning has implied a shift from teacher control towards student control (Parsons and Drew, 1996). Also, self-assessment and peer-assessment are increasingly encouraged in higher education, and group work is taken to be a suitable area where these can be used.

Educationalists agree that there are sound reasons for organising students to work in groups or teams in terms of their transferrable skills and capabilities. Group work demands the development of a range of skills such as chairing, organisation, team/interpersonal work and peer tutoring. Teamwork encourages creative thinking. It is often easier for an individual to be independent or creative in a team, because they can try out ideas and take risks, which they would not do if they were working on their own (Brown, Rust and Gibbs, 1994; Jacques, 2001).

Specific profiles of the students at LMU can also make group work a useful method of learning and assessment. Teaching and learning strategy must take into account specific characteristics of the students and engage with their prior knowledge, attitudes and values. Many students come from deprived backgrounds and may feel that academic knowledge is part of a dominant and alien discourse. They may see it as being constructed in such a way as to create "ordeals" for them to overcome (Dubet, 2000: 93).

There is also the pragmatic reason for students working in groups: to assess a small number of groups, rather than a large number of individuals, will save assessment time. This is partly why nationally there is a growing interest in group work in HE (Parsons and Drew, 1996). Students are coming to universities with varied learning experience, especially given increasing numbers of mature and part-time students. Large student numbers mean that individual contact can be difficult.

Critical appraisal of the method

The current literature also points to several problems related to difficulties with using the results of a collective project for judging individual performances. These problems make reliability and validity of the method often questionable, and can result in the students (and sometimes teachers) perceiving the

assessment as unfair. Also, the feasibility of the method is sometimes questioned.

o *Reliability*: The method may not measure individual students' efforts and contributions reliably. Contributions of some may be overlooked, while others can be marked too high. Some students can make false claims to have undertaken tasks, which they have not actually achieved.

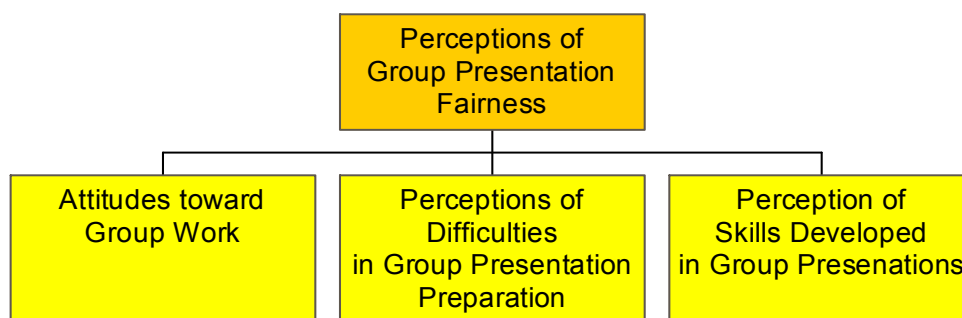
o *Validity*: The method does not allow for the measurement of students' preparation for group work and can be badly suited for projects where collective pooling is unlikely to add value (such as small-scale projects, work requiring mostly individual research etc.).

o *Fairness*: Questions of equity invariably arise when it comes to assessing group work. Allocation of people to groups can cause unfairness – presence of poor students or able students can influence the results. Students who make an effort often feel that they are insufficiently rewarded. The tutor finds it difficult to assess individual work objectively. The literature shows that attempts to charge students with giving marks to each other can also be problematic. In principle it is possible to allow the students to give each other differentiated marks. Yet students can manipulate the allocation of marks to maximise and equalise their own score (Drew, 1993, quoted in Parsons and Drew, 1996). Usually they tend to either award the same marks to everybody, or in some cases they give a small number of individuals very low marks. This may be because somebody has been absent part way through the group process, or through gender, race or class discrimination (Heathfield, 2000).

o *Feasibility*: Students often complain of logistical problems in organizing group work. They must find time and space to meet outside class A great deal of time is wasted arranging abortive meetings.

Based on the above theoretical discussion, this paper examines students' attitudes towards group oral presentation as an assessment method, drawing on a small survey conducted at LMU.

Structure of the survey



Students' general attitudes toward the group presentations will be 'measured' through their perceptions of the assessment's fairness in comparison with other methods of assessment, using the above scheme.

The reasons for the respondents' perceptions of the fairness of the group oral presentation method of assessment will be searched for on three levels. First, it will be considered whether perceptions of fairness are influenced by students' attitudes towards group work in general. It could be assumed that those students who express certain reluctance towards group work will be more inclined to question the fairness of the method. Second, it will be investigated to what extent students perceive different stages of preparation for group presentation to be difficult for them. This analysis could reveal the main weaknesses of this assessment method. Finally, the students' sense of the effectiveness of this method will be established by examining their perceptions of transferable skills that could be improved by group presentations^[1].

Sample

The survey was conducted in December 2002 on a sample of 39 students of London Metropolitan University. Just above 70% of the sample were students of age 25 and younger, mainly in their second year of study in both Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities and Natural and Technical sciences. It is also important to emphasise that 94.4% of the respondents have been assessed through group presentations at least once.

Issue of Fairness

As the first stage of the survey the students were asked to evaluate fairness of the various methods of assessment. Table 1 summarises the results.

		Very unfair	Unfair	Neither fair nor unfair	Fair	Very Fair	\bar{x}
1	Coursework essays	0	2.7	8.1	45.9	43.2	4.30
2	Practical reports	0	2.7	5.4	62.2	29.7	4.19
3	Individual oral presentations (peer-assessed)	0	16.7	11.1	55.6	16.7	3.72
4	Individual oral presentations (tutor-assessed)	2.8	13.9	13.9	50.0	19.4	3.69
5	Exams	0	16.2	24.3	37.8	21.6	3.65
6	Group oral presentations (peer-assessed)	2.8	22.2	25.0	36.1	13.9	3.36
7	Group oral presentations (tutor-assessed)	0	23.5	29.4	35.3	11.8	3.35

The results show that on average the respondents perceive all methods of assessment as relatively fair. The highest ranked methods of assessment are coursework essays and practical reports where around 90% of the respondents see them as fair or very fair. According to the respondents the least fair methods of assessment are group oral presentations, both peer- and tutor-assessed.

However, not all categories of the respondents perceive the fairness of the group presentations equally. Further analysis of the data^[2] reveals that the students of Social Sciences and Art and Humanities are more willing to evaluate these methods of assessment as 'not fair'. Moreover, those respondents who have been assessed through group presentations more than once are more inclined to perceive this method of assessment as 'not-fair'.

Attitudes toward group work

With the aim to investigate students attitudes toward group work in general, a set of seven statements were offered for their evaluation. The results show (Table 2) that on average the respondents have positive attitudes toward group work. They hold that group work helps them to integrate more with other students, it helps them to learn and increases their motivation. Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that just less than 40% of the respondents find difficult to work in a group and more than a quarter of them feel reluctant about being a group member.

Table 2: Can you please tell us to which extent do you agree with the following statements:							
		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	\bar{x}
1	The group work sessions help me to integrate more with other students	2.8	2.8	13.9	63.9	16.7	3.89
2	The group work sessions help me to learn	8.1	5.4	27.0	48.6	10.8	3.49
3	The group work sessions increase my motivation	7.9	10.5	21.1	47.4	13.2	3.47
4	The group work sessions are more enjoyable	5.4	16.2	21.6	43.2	13.5	3.43
5	It is easy to work collaboratively in the group	7.9	31.6	10.5	42.1	7.9	3.11
6	I would like to work in a group, but only if this work is not assessed	5.6	27.8	33.3	27.8	5.6	3.00
7	I feel reluctant about being a group member	16.7	25.0	30.6	22.2	5.6	2.75

Difficulties in group presentation preparation

In further analysis students were asked to evaluate a level of difficulty of different aspects of group presentation preparation. Table 3 below summarizes the results.

Table 3: In your opinion, to which extent the following could be difficult for you when preparing for group presentations:

		Very difficult	Difficult	Neither difficult nor easy	Not so difficult	Not difficult at all	\bar{x}
1	Tutor monitoring of the process	0	2.8	47.2	38.9	11.1	3.58
2	Assessment objectivity	2.7	24.3	32.4	29.7	10.8	3.22
3	Working styles of team members	5.6	22.2	30.6	36.1	5.6	3.14
4	Size of the groups	2.8	36.1	30.6	19.4	11.1	3.00
5	Contribution of the all members of the group	10.5	31.6	21.1	26.3	10.5	2.95

The results show that the respondents were somewhat polarised in assessing difficulties of preparation for group presentations. It could be noticed that a significant portion of the respondents finds all aspects of preparation neither difficult nor easy. Nevertheless, in average tutor monitoring of the process was perceived as the least problematic aspect of preparation. Just above quarter of the respondents found assessment objectivity as problematic. In contrast only about 30% of the respondents did not find size of the groups difficult to cope with. Most remarkably, more than 40% of the respondents found that the 'contribution of all members of the group' is the most difficult aspect, and an additional 21.1% found it neither difficult nor easy. Bearing in mind that equal contribution of all members is the essence of group work, these results bring into question the very purpose of this method of assessment.

An analysis of the correlation matrix shows that the group presentation assessment will be considered as not objective by those respondents who find difficult to cope with different working styles of team members ($r = .716$). Objectivity of this method of assessment is also hindered by lack of equal contribution of all members of the group ($r = .693$). The correlation matrix also indicates the level of contribution of the all members of the group could be increased by better tutor monitoring ($r = .356$), and reduction of the group's size ($r = .500$).

Skills improved by group presentations

With the aim of investigating students' perception of the effectiveness of group work, the respondents were asked to evaluate to which extent this method improves various skills. The results show (see Table 4) that the respondents on average are aware of benefits of the group presentation assessment method. The skills perceived to be mostly improved are communication skills, teamwork, time-management and leadership skills. In comparison, the least improved skills are perceived to be study skills and subject knowledge. The analysis also shows that the respondents have different ideas of group presentation effectiveness in developing various learning skills.

Table 4: How do you feel the group presentations improve the following skills:							
		Not at all	Not too much	Don't know	To certain degree	Very much	\bar{x}
1	Communications skills	2.9	2.9	8.6	40.0	45.7	4.23
2	Teamwork	2.9	8.6	8.6	45.7	34.3	4.00
3	Time-management skills	2.9	14.3	5.7	45.7	31.4	3.89
4	Leadership skills	2.9	11.4	11.4	60.0	14.3	3.71
5	Self-assessment skills	2.9	17.1	8.6	51.4	20.0	3.69
6	Research skills	8.8	11.8	2.9	55.9	20.6	3.68
7	Problem-solving skills	2.9	11.8	14.7	58.8	11.8	3.65
8	Study skills	5.7	11.4	14.3	51.4	17.1	3.63
9	Subject knowledge	5.7	14.3	14.3	42.9	22.9	3.63

Conclusions

This survey was not constructed with the aim of offering answers on all the questions about group presentation assessment. Rather, it had a limited task of offering a glimpse of students' attitudes toward group presentations. As such the survey offers results that could serve as guidance for increasing fairness of assessment, improving learning skills and reducing difficulties of group presentation preparation.

Group work assessment may be an inaccurate tool, but it has many advantages if organised properly: groups of students take a responsibility for their learning and contribute towards reflective practice. It is very important for group work to be well organised and well supported. The students need to be made aware of particular group skills which are required by this type of work, and the teachers of the possibility of interpersonal problems and being ready to adjudicate when there are conflicts.

Tutors should use this method of assessment very selectively. Even in students' minds, group presentations serve to improve some skills more than others. Hence, group presentations should be used as a method of assessment only in those modules where increase of interpersonal skills is one of the major learning objectives. In order to improve subject knowledge tutors might need to consider using other methods of assessment.

Those tutors who opt for group presentation as a method of assessment should increase monitoring of all stages of preparation process with the aim to facilitate equal contribution of all members of the group and forming groups of smaller size. The problems with this method of assessment can be significantly resolved if tutors find a way to "individualise" the grades. This can be done through self- and peer-assessment, through weighting marks (on the basis of observation of students' work and/or students' own reflexive accounts) and through combining assessment of group work with assessment of individual work.

To obviate bias through student marking, tutors should also avoid group presentations that are only assessed by peers. Indeed, where self-assessment is not a part of the learning objectives, tutors should arguably consider excluding peers as assessors. Finally, and most importantly, tutors should be aware that different students have different conceptions of learning, and vary in their abilities and assessment preferences. Hence, group presentation as a method of assessment should be used only in combination with other methods.

NOTES

[1] All instruments are designed as sets of statements with attached Likert scale of measurement. Various univariate (frequencies, measures of central tendency), bivariate (correlation, linear regression, analysis of variance) and multivariate methods (multiple regression analysis, factor analysis) will be used for data analysis.

[2] Charts and table of correlations are not included here but are obtainable from the authors.

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Biographical note

Svetlana Stephenson is a Senior Lecturer in Comparative Sociology and Social Policy. She has been at this university since 2002, having previously worked at the University of Luton, University of Essex and the Russian Centre for Public Opinion Research. Her research interests include homelessness, street children and child labour in Eastern Europe. She is a member of the National Committee of the British Association of Slavonic and East European Studies. [email: s.stephenson@londonmet.ac.uk]

Gordana Uzelac (PhD, LSE) is a Lecturer in Quantitative Sociology, Department of Applied Social Sciences, LMU. Her research interests include theories of nations and nationalism, ethnicity and research methods. Her work has been published in several journals including *Nations and Nationalism*, *Geopolitics*, and *East European Quarterly*. [email:g.uzelac@londonmet.ac.uk]