

Group Projects: assessment issues

Review of D. Nordberg (2006) 'Fairness in Assessing Group Projects', paper published by the Social Science Research Network (www.ssrn.com)

Donald Nordberg has written a useful article on a topic where the quantity and relevance of the literature is fast catching up with the importance of group project work in higher education and its widespread use. As Nordberg himself points out, against the context of "massification" of higher education in the UK group projects are being widely used as vehicles for learning. In my subject area of business, group projects are much in vogue, and used widely for learning and for assessment. His paper is also useful as an aggregator of the mix of data that exists on group projects and their assessment, which is currently spread among various disciplines: management development; psychology; education and learning theory.

Moreover, students are alert to the issue of fairness in group working. In particular, the second- and third-year undergraduates I teach report poor experiences in their first and second years with group work. Many found the issue of group dynamics challenging and something they were not prepared for by the project supervisor, whose approach was to tell them to get on and finish the work. Students have complained about the impact of weaker or lazy members of the group failing to contribute to the overall workload and yet being rewarded with the same grade as the rest of the group. This issue has arisen in cases where students are placed randomly in groups by the tutor or when they choose groups themselves.

Regardless of the pedagogical merits of group projects, Nordberg asserts that assessment approaches here are often lacking in fairness. The central issue is the extent to which giving a single mark to work generated by a group of, say, 4-6 students, fairly reflects the contribution made by individuals. A single mark, according to Nordberg, is a simple (and for lecturers, quick and convenient) approach to the problem of assessing group projects. And yet it is flawed since but there will be varied levels of contribution and effort from different individuals that is not reflected in a single score.

In addition, certain suggestions in the literature on group assessment for dealing with the weaknesses of a single mark for multiple individuals are problematic. For example, the suggestion that members of a group should deal with the problem of weaker members by use of self and peer assessment tools – as is the practice in my own area – is plagued with problems. Putting aside the very real problems to the social system of asking student peers to report on each other's failings, there is the issue that, according to work by Lejk and Wyvill (2001) on self-assessment, stronger students tend to award themselves marks that are too low (compared with those of a tutor), while weaker students awarded themselves higher marks (compared with those of a tutor). Yet Nordberg also reports the findings of a study in New Zealand by Johnston and Miles (2005) where "peer assessment conducted in secret" led to a "low incidence of free-riding and consequently more involvement in group learning".

The paper also includes a useful examination of the group dynamics and interpersonal aspects of group working. Nordberg notes that in the world of business (for which we are

preparing our students) group working is a reality of day-to-day operations, so it makes sense in learning terms for students to acquire group-working skills. In business, the reality of the task and the fact that the teams will work together over a long period – compared to the artificially short time duration of many student projects at university – means there are fundamental differences and issues between the two settings for group work. Moreover, in a business setting, Nordberg points out that the stakes for successful group working and completion of the task are so high that organisations often invest time and money to consider and address dynamics issues when forming a group. They will use personality tests and personal team-role typing (such as that developed by Belbin) to ensure the group has an optimum mix of the different personality types required for an effective group.

While Nordberg records instances when these techniques have been used in an educational setting, he acknowledges that this was for postgraduate business courses where students worked in the same group throughout the year. Because of the varied modules and learning paths students can take at London Metropolitan University and elsewhere, such an approach is not viable. It is unclear how it would be resourced and the process would not be feasible as groups are formed *ad hoc* for many of the modules that students complete each year, so would need to be repeated many times over the academic year to configure new groups for each module.

In considering whether this group profiling process would make assessment fairer, I suspect the effects would be marginal. Indeed, Nordberg himself admits (p.13) that the difference between a good and bad mark for a module has only a very modest impact on the overall category of the degree awarded. It is a useful perspective, but over the year the many group projects do add up to a larger proportion of the overall degree. Nordberg's viewpoint in this paper is solely from the perspective of an assessor. An obvious omission is any consideration of the learner experience, the learning perspective and the risks to learning that the group setting generates. By focussing on assessment only, we fail adequately to consider the role of group projects as a learning event whose main outcome is for pedagogical gain

Even if the group project or task is planned carefully, there is a danger that the weaker members of the group (who may include those weakest in the common language of the course) are overlooked by the stronger members. Whereas a skilled tutor may be able to exercise the care and patience needed to elicit the contributions from students who struggle in terms of language skills, it is less likely that fellow students will use such approaches to maximise the contributions and learning from such group members.

Indeed, usually none of the group members has any incentive to consider the learning dimension of the project. Rather they too are focussed on an assessment outcome (a high mark) and meeting the assessment requirements. In other words, the very nature of a group project (in game theory terms) means that it is in the interests of both the weaker and the stronger members to allow the stronger members to go ahead with the majority of the work in order to minimise time spent and maximise the returns of that time with high marks. It seems students are ever mindful of the assessment rather than learning objectives of projects!

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