'It felt more real': Improving the experience of academic staff and students in assessed group work in undergraduate business education.

Abstract

This paper presents the findings of a Participatory Action Research project across two Higher Education institutions to inform the authors' practices in assessed group working (AGW) in a level 4 marketing module. The 'Guiding Principles Model for AGW' (Laurie et al. 2015) presented at the 2015 Academy of Marketing Conference 'The Magic in Marketing' was used to inform the action research project aimed at improving the outcomes of AGW for staff and students. Key areas for improvement were identified as fairness in allocation of grades and a reduction in free loading and social loafing. In addition, ways of reducing incidences of 'socially destructive behaviours' which critically harm weaker students' ability to develop were investigated. The lead author took the role of critical friend, and it was found that the guiding principles model was helpful when addressing the areas of concern in previous AGW.

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'It felt more real': Improving the experience of academic staff and students in assessed group work in undergraduate business education.

Any paper that refers to teamwork or working with groups in higher education in the UK, Europe, or Australia in recent years will include some discussion of the challenges it presents (Hughes 2011; Bravo et al 2014; Sykes et al. 2014). The challenges range from varying levels of participation and contribution to aspects of group conflict over decisions. Discussions with students and academic staff reveal many who dislike group work, and that many staff are reluctant to incorporate them in assessments.

This paper provides insight into a tutor's three-year development of assessed group work (AGW) within a first year undergraduate marketing module (2015-16). This module is taken by 252 students and managed by two tutors within a UK University. The findings presented here are part of an ongoing project to compare the experience of AGW across two Higher Education (HE) institutions to improve our understanding of practice in managing group work. It will also inform the further development of a conceptual framework for AGW. This paper presents the initial findings of the first stage from the project findings from one of the two institutions involved. A 'guiding principles model for AGW' (Laurie et al. 2015) was presented at the 2015 Academy of Marketing Conference 'The Magic in Marketing' (Appendix 1), and was used to inform the action research project aimed at improving the outcomes of AGW for staff and students. Changes were made to setting up, managing and grading of 51 groups formed within a first year Introduction to Marketing module.

The authors' discussions at the conference led them to believe that they could form a working relationship that would aid both parties in their understanding and development of AGW and be based on the principles of critical friendship, with the lead author taking the role of 'critical friend'. Costa and Callick (1993, p49-51) define a critical friend as:

> '...a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critiques of a person's work as a friend. A critical friend takes the time to fully understand the context of the work presented and the outcomes that the person or group is working toward. The friend is an advocate of that work.'

The critical friend approach was chosen as it is less formal than mentoring or coaching and fits well within an action research project based within HE focused on pedagogic practices. The specific areas of AGW to be examined were the same as those identified in the Laurie et al (2015) study, making comparison possible.

- A fair allocation of grades.
- Reducing the 'bad'(collective action) and 'ugly' (specialisation of labour in AGW).
- Ways of reducing incidences of 'socially destructive behaviours' which critically harm weaker students' ability to develop (Freeman and Greenacre, 2001).

The paper is structured as follows: first the literature relating to the guiding principles for AGW in undergraduate and, more specifically, marketing education is discussed. This is related to the actions taken in terms of the adjustments made to the AGW in the entry level marketing module. The methodology and a reflective account of the author and the experience of the process of deciding on the changes and the management of the process will be covered

before the presentation of the findings. The paper concludes with a review of the next stage of the project and the areas for further discussion in relation to the development of the AGW guiding principles framework and individual teaching practice.

Group work

Brennan (2013) in a review of marketing education research for The Higher Education Academy identifies four main themes in teaching and learning: ethics; CSR and sustainability; employability; curriculum design. Experiential learning and group projects are identified as significant sub-sections relevant to all four themes (Brennan, 2013). The Association of Business Schools (ABS) highlights the need for graduates to know how to have a difficult conversation about performance in a business context. They must also be able to manage a project, work in a team, and communicate and persuade – both orally and in writing. The ABS highlights the value of experiential leaning to develop skills and a business ready mind-set (ABS, 2014). Brennan (2014) suggests that, in the current challenging and changing field of higher education, 'marketing educators should be encouraged to reflect on their pedagogic practices, and that now is a particularly good time to consider carefully the methods employed to educate marketing students'. He goes on to pose the following question about experiential learning. 'What happens, for example, if experiential methods designed by marketing educators to enrich the student experience and enhance their employability, are found to be unattractive for one reason or another by the student-customer? (Brennan, 2014 p101). Hunter-Jones (2012) describes the very capable 'formulaic learner' as someone who is 'less prepared, or even able, to be flexible and accommodating of other learners in case this has a negative influence on their overall mark'. Ackerman and Hu (2011, cited in Brennan 2014) found that students with a high autonomy learning orientation respond better to experiential learning compared with those with low autonomy learning.

Although issues raised in relation to experiential learning theory (ELT) are important and clearly related since group work is frequently part of experiential approaches, this is not the focus of this paper. The point raised in relation to the need for guidance in learning pedagogy is important. In this context previous experience of, and expectations of, group work and the role of reflection in achieving deeper learning is important (Bravo, 2014). Young et al (2008, cited in Brennan. p102) states 'experience in and of itself is not educative… if students do not think seriously about their experiences, their experiences may reinforce stereotypes and incorrect assumptions'. In this instance it is also staff who are reflecting on their experience changes to their experience of AGW.

A key part of the 'guiding principles model for AGW' suggested by Laurie et al (2015) is the need to embed learning discussions (around previous group work experience and group set up) into the initial stages of the setup of any AGW. These early sessions should focus on the development of ground rules, and be based on negotiation around expectations. Students should be guided through discussion of free loading, social loafing, and socially destructive behaviour. The aspects of specialisation of labour, where students only focus on part of the task, should be highlighted, to explore the necessary inter-dependency of good group work. Laurie et al (2015) found this to be particularly important when setting up group work in first year modules. They found discussions with students around the management of variable skills within the group, and exploration of students' attitudes and understanding of skills required in the workplace, promote engagement in team working skills and their development for many students. They note, however, that this was variable across cohorts.

There is evidence from previous studies (McCorkale et al, 1999, Brennan 2014) and discussion with peers that not all colleagues are comfortable in the delivery of experiential learning approaches, and group work assessment strategies that are graded in terms of process as well as outcomes. The challenges of managing the time required supporting student group working can result in academics avoiding assessed group work, and students feeling the 'transactional costs' are too high i.e. direct time and mental effort are high and do not necessarily increase overall productivity. A significant factor in students' evaluations of AGW is the reward or grade distribution system; a minimum of 15% was discovered to be needed to have an impact on the overall student grade and their perception of fairness.

McCorkale et al (1999) describe 'collective action as' being characterised by freeloading – students making no contribution to group and still getting the group grade – and/or social loafing where there is lower than expected contribution by a group member. Sykes (2014) uses similar terminology and suggests that lack of leadership, scheduling conflicts, lack of team cohesion and dealing with students who do not like group work are also potential negative aspects. The work of Freedman and Greenacre (2001) draws attention to the need to 'understand the nature of social dynamics in groups and any problems that may be present; in particular, how group members support, or at least not undermine, fellow group members in projects'. They draw out the difference between the different reasons for non-engagement i.e. the 'can't be bothered' or deliberate free-loading or social-loafing, and a student who needs help with aspects of knowledge or skills development.

Sykes (2014, p291) discusses four general areas of academic shaping of teamwork practices: design, governance, formation and performance. Bravo (2014) discusses activities relating to transactional, action and interpersonal processes. In both instances the work maps well onto the 'guiding principles for AGW model' being used within this project.

Methodology

This research takes a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach as the study is part of a collaboration between staff from two UK Universities, as well as the students themselves. PAR is a collaborative cycle to improve an identified issue (Chevalier and Buckles, 2013). Rather than just standing back and observing the students, the skill of reflection is introduced as part of the AGW assignment to make it clear to the students that there are ideas and elements within their course with which they actively need to engage to develop the skills required by business graduates.

Initial discussion of previous practice in the management of AGW led to a number of major changes being made to the AGW assignment for 2015-16:
  - Introduction of a graded group meeting e-log (10%)
  - The allocation of 30% to an individual, reflective learning e-log (private), to be completed within 48hrs of the group presentation element (60%).

The group meeting e-logs were introduced to encourage students to work together and take ownership of their work. This also gives students a written record of who is meant to do what, and aids time management. The individual reflection is designed to allow the student to demonstrate what they have learned and also identify any issues related to the AGW. One of the main aims of these changes was to improve the accountability aspect in AGW and address issues of fairness in allocation of grades. Meeting e-logs were uploaded to the group blog, which only group members and teaching staff could access, view and modify. The group meeting logs were monitored and assessed by the module tutors. The individual reflection

was to enable the student to reflect fully about their experiences and other members of their group, and uploaded through TurnItIn, which was only visible to teaching staff and the individual student.

Students self-selected into groups (51 in total). The module leader then coded all students into their respective groups on Moodle giving each group an individual code (i.e. Business and Management, Seminar 1, Group 1 would be B&MS1G1). Blogs were created and hyperlinked for each group so students could upload their meeting e-logs. Each group was required to upload a minimum of 4 meeting e-logs and it was expected that each student would add a reflective entry within 48 hours of the completion of the group presentation element of the assessment. Training was given on the practical skills of adding these entries, and guidance on the principles of reflection. Muncy (2014) notes that it is vital for the instructor to be very clear about the expectation in any reflective task. The assignment brief was written to be as clear as possible. Time was dedicated by staff to clarify this element of the task.

This project is specific to the prevailing culture and experience within the student groups involved in the research, which limits the generalizable nature of the findings. However, a parallel study is taking place in the second UK University, and a comparison of the outcomes of the findings of both cohorts will be compared and presented at a later date. Qualitative research is accepted as being an efficient way of getting a sense of the issues of concern - in this case those of staff and students involved in AGW in an introductory marketing module. Observation and feedback from students and staff forms the basis of the evidence presented in the findings section of this paper. The findings are also compared to findings from the author's earlier study.

Findings

Module leader: The module leader attended the presentation of the paper by Laurie et al (2015) at the AM Limerick, where the subject was of particular interest due to personal experience and horrors of AGW. The method outlined by Laurie et al (2015) for AGW was a new concept for the module leader and, whilst in theory and concept it appeared straightforward, the actual implementation of this method was daunting when contemplating control, marking criteria and design. Throughout the process of this assessment (from assessment design to completion) the critical friend took on the role of sounding board, advisor, guidance and support.

The initial setup of groups, coding, creating blogs and hyperlinking each group to their blog was time consuming, due to two factors: Moodle was a new system introduced at the start of the academic year (September 2015) and group lists were collected over a number of weeks. In future, group lists will be collected more quickly. After demonstrating to students how to find their group code, how to upload meeting e-logs and individual reflection within the assessment area on Moodle, the whole process went smoothly. There were approximately 2 or 3 groups that could not access their blogs; however, this was a module leader error when setting up the groups, and was easily rectified by the module leader.

The current module leader has lead and taught this module for the past three years, and the first assessment has been group work based. In the past there would be a considerable number of students who lacked engagement to complete the task in a timely manner. Also there would be 'bickering' within groups which would sometimes encroach into seminar sessions, and students would complain that all group members received the same mark even if their

contribution was not the same. Following the changes to the latest assessment period (5/10/15-27/11/15) the module leader noted a reduction in the amount of complaints (verbal or email) from students regarding other group members' lack of engagement, social loafing and/or disruptive behaviour either with the group or the task. Teaching staff would discuss the assessment with students and ask 'how was it going?' and many would respond positively, indicating teamwork, cohesion and enjoying the responsibility of managing their own work.

Some unexpected benefits were observed; because students were put into groups on Moodle, the teaching team were able to select individual groups when marking student reflections. This allowed the marker to be able to cross reference against other group members work and their account of team members, and it also reduced time in this assessment and in the second assessment (submission February 2016) when searching for individuals within a group as teaching staff can quickly identify the students within their own seminar groups. This grouping of students will be used again when team teaching in other modules, as it speeds up finding students. Lecturers could easily locate groups and individual students from their seminar just by selecting group codes. Currently this assessment is worth 20% of total module marks, bur for future practice this is to be raised to 30%. The deadline for collecting group lists will also be shorter, and this practice will be introduced in Level 5 marketing modules.

Module Tutor: The module tutor also noticed a large reduction in complaints from students relating to other group members who were not working. They stated that there was less 'bickering' within groups and less blaming of others.

Students were noted to work better within their groups. It appeared that students were following the group meeting e-log notes, suggesting that students adhered to their own group guidelines as it was clear to them what they needed to do and when. Students liked the responsibility of organizing the meetings, the tasks and their own in-group deadlines. As a result, there was increased engagement within the process of the research task, meaning work was completed well within the assessment deadline.

Overall the teaching team had fewer problems, fewer emails and better classroom environment. Only one group out of 51 asked for help with another group member, due to a continued lack of engagement in attending meetings and contributing work. The students had tried to contact and reason with the individual but the student refused to engage until a member of the teaching team stepped in. It is unclear why this was the case but once spoken to the student eventually participated within the group. This module has 252 students, but organising them into groups ensured 'missing' students were identified a lot quicker; therefore, there are fewer students who have not submitted, reducing the number of non-attempts.

Student: Through observation, students appeared to find this system fair, and liked that those who did not contribute could receive a lesser mark than themselves through marks allocated for the individual reflection. Students enjoyed taking ownership of their work and the opportunity to self-manage the group. Students stated that the meeting log was a good visual source to remind them of their work commitments, and it helped them to keep 'on track' and to deadlines. Students commented that because they self-managed, recorded meetings, had deadlines and were accountable for work, it felt less like an academic assessment and more like a 'business report', therefore possibly motivating students to engage. It was noted that this assessment was a lot of work for just 20% of total module marks; this is something which will be addressed for the next academic year. One student noted '*it felt more real*'.

Conclusion

The aim of the original project was not to dictate how AGW should be done, but to provide a series of guiding principles, based on education theory and experience, as a means of developing curriculum and to inform module teams' practice in AGW. It is well documented that not all experience of group working is positive, and the outcomes, in terms of the development of attitude and skills, are not as intended. Employing an approach of 'critical friend' (Costa and Callick, 1993) has been a positive experience for both parties involved. Throughout the process of this assessment (from assessment design to completion) the critical friend took on the role of sounding board, advisor, guide and supporter, and helped give the tutor confidence to take on what they described as 'a daunting' change to their practice. The critical friend role came with a strong sense of responsibility. This required her to be careful to focus on extending and questioning thinking, and offering alternatives and examples of practice rather than a definite course of action. The engagement of both tutors in reflection has resulted in appropriate changes in their pedagogical practices. Elements of the learning will be repeated and also be applied in other modules in future teaching and peer support.

The findings of this paper confirm it is worth the effort to set up and manage groups within a VLE. In the original project this was tested in Blackboard, and in this application Moodle. The ongoing ability of being able to easily identify groups or individuals within a large cohort are noted as an unexpected benefit. Time spent setting up and training students in the use of the VLE blog system are confirmed as important, and that their use helps students with their time management and group engagement, and generally benefits good teamwork practices.

The structural processes employed were in line with 'the guidelines for AGW' (Laurie et al 2014), and as applied in this project reduced freeloading and social loafing in line with the findings of McCorkale (1999). The inclusion of an expectation of reflection and action planning throughout the project is seen to be appropriate in supporting students' learning of team working skills that are useful in life, and valued by academics and future employers. In this study everyone worked together in a timely fashion, although this was again variable across cohorts. This is accepted by academics in both studies, and is illustrated by tutor comment '*there will always be the odd group who do not do what is asked, doing the bare minimum*' (seminar tutor 2015).

The findings of this project confirmed the view that both group work and experiential learning approaches should be carefully planned into the learning process, and need to be managed if they are to achieve the desired outcomes of deeper learning and creating a positive student and staff experience (Laurie, 2014., Sykes et al, 2014, Bravo et al 2014). Skills should be taught in context, and competencies relevant to future employment should be highlighted. AGW should be graded in terms of process as well as outcomes.

The next stage in the project will involve analysis of reflective comments from academic staff in the second institution's experience of AGW that applies the principles set out in the AGW conceptual model by three new tutors. Brennan (2013) suggests that it is unclear if the application of pedagogy will achieve the same results when implemented by non enthusiasts for the approach taken. It is through analysis of reflection of the aforementioned new tutors involved that the guiding principle model can be refined to aid those tutors who find themselves asked to manage group work who would choose not to use AGW. It is also intended that aspects of student skills in reflection and development of confidence in engaging in difficult conversations about performance within groups will be explored.

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Appendix 1:

Guiding principles for AGW model. (Laurie et al. 2015)

Teamwork skills development (the good): achieved through collaborative/experiential learning& AGW	
Administrative Factors:	
Structural	Task Characteristic: level specific & interdependency are essential
	Identifiable individual contribution
	Reward & punishment available to group members
	Effective group size – context & year dependent
	Time within class for AGW
Process	Openness of communication
	Cohesiveness & formulation of norms

Problems of group work: bad & ugly and suggested solution	
Specialisation of labour (ugly)	Design assessment that require interdependency; make explicit the principles of collaborative learning and problem solving; and locate the work in professional context.
Inadequate rewards.	Individual contribution: task & process should be assessed, allocate a minimum of 15% for individual contribution.
Skills and attitude.	Early learning discussions of previous group work experience; the first set of tasks should focus on group set up, ground rules and negotiation of expectations, to include discussion of social loafing, freeloading and variable skills and their management. Motivation and confidence building & affect management – ability to undertake difficult conversations during group problem solving is best develops through consistent AGW experiences developed over time.
Transaction-costs.	Time in class for group meetings: tutor role as supervisor /facilitator, all group meetings to be documented.
Collective action: free riding /social loafing (bad)	(a) interventions should be aimed at the student exhibiting the destructive behavior, (b) discussion should focus on the behavior not people, and (c) discussions need to focus on benefits to the group as a whole. *(Freeman & Greenacre, 2001, p15)*

Adapted from: McCorkle, D., et al (1999)

Table1: Current practice in group work across the field group: classification & formation

Definition	Use	Examples
Informal learning groups: ad hoc temporary clustering in a class session	All UG levels, any class size to:- • check understanding of material, • opportunity to apply learning, • to provide a change of pace.	• Asking students to take a minute or two talking to others • Students work in groups of 3-5 to solve a problem, review a case, discuss a topic
Formal learning groups: specific task,	• groups complete their work in a single class session or over several weeks - students stay together until task is graded	• A project or a student led seminar, with a written group report & or group presentation,
Study / consultancy teams long-term groups	• Stable membership aim for 'High Performing Team' • The larger the class the more complex the subject matter, the more valuable the study	• External client brief based project • Group research project

Adapted from: Johnson, D., et al (1998)

Group organisation / selection	
Students select their own groups	• Work best in small classes or groups who know each other well • Risks - challenge of friendship groups
Hybrid student & tutor selection	• Ask students to identify one or two students they would like to work with, commit to them having a minimum of one 'friend'
Tutor assigned groups to maximise their heterogeneity	• Mix of males and female; home and international students, • Verbal and quiet students, • Avoid friendship groups, • Ensure mixed ability or mixed discipline
Group size	• Groups of 4/5 work best. Larger groups decrease opt to participate, • The less skilful the group members, the smaller the groups should be • Shorter the time for group work, the smaller the groups should be. • Aim to keep groups together over time.
Dis-functional group management	Colleagues approach varied here ranging from • offering an alternative individual assignment • moving a student to another group • allowing groups to 'sack' non-contributing members • tutor intervention to discuss and resolve issues.