Making group-work work – an overview

Carol Elston
University of Leeds, UK

Background

Group work now plays an integral part in many undergraduate programmes of study; the aim to prepare students for the world of work where being a team-player is often a required skill. In the world of academia, few doubt the importance of the group project as a means of helping students to develop the required skills, however approaches can differ. Some advocate the 'throw them in at the deep end approach', suggesting that the group project provides the necessary 'on the job' development opportunities in a safe environment. Others challenge the assumption that students will develop skills simply by completing group projects and suggest that students benefit from some 'up front' development before embarking on a group project (Ettington & Camp, 2002). By understanding group dynamics and the process by which a group develops, the students know what to expect and are more prepared for the challenges they are likely to face (McGraw and Tidwell, 2001).

There is a growing emphasis on pre-group project development and, as such, it is interesting to find that in many cases educators are choosing not to include group-work development sessions either prior to or during practical group work tasks. Studies indicate that this deficiency in developing skills is frequently attributed to lack of time (Chapman & Van Auken, 2001). Modules often have limited time allocated to preparation for group work and in many cases the student's first exposure to working as part of a group is a team project.

It was this lack of pre-project development along with the growing evidence that many students harbour a negative attitude to group work that prompted the conception of the Making group-work work resource. Developed by three partners from the LearnHigher CETL (the Universities of Bradford, Leeds and Brunel), the resource has been specifically designed to make it easier for educators to develop

student's skills without incurring a great deal of time, effort or cost. Fortunately, from a pedagogical viewpoint, the subject lends itself to the online environment and the flexibility of the web-based solution allows 'any time, any place' access without financial cost for the user. However, although the resource is readily available for flexible independent use, it is assumed that it will generally be incorporated as part of a face-to-face or online discussion session. The intention is that a tutor will refer to the resource during a learning session or signpost the resource for pre or post session reference.

The resource

The resource is a website comprising ten episodes following a group of five students tasked with developing and delivering a group presentation. The project follows a timeline starting with the students' first meeting, concluding with an analysis of the presentation. The points on the timeline relate to a number of learning issues derived from research (Hartley & Thorpe, 2001).

Episode and title	Focus – main topics
1. The First Meeting	- First impressions - Reading body language - Group composition - Assumptions and opinions
2. Getting Started	- Planning - Allocating of tasks - Facilitating discussion
3. What is our approach?	- Decision making - Maintaining focus
4. Managing Conflict	- Causes and effects of conflict - Managing conflict - Leadership and roles
5. Meeting the tutor	- Seeking help - The tutor's role

	• Student and tutor interaction • Productive discussion
6. Structuring the presentation	• Productive discussion • Delivery style • Defining roles
7. Participation and sub-groups	• Participation • Sub-groups • Attitudes and assumptions
8. Assessment	• Individual contribution • Group assessment • Peer assessment • Self assessment • Tutor assessment
9. Support and Feedback	• Group discussion • Giving feedback • Peer support
10. Evaluating the experience	• Group dynamics • Analysis • Lessons learned

Figure 1 - The main focus for the episodes

The episodes are accessed from a menu and are supported by help information designed for both students and tutors.
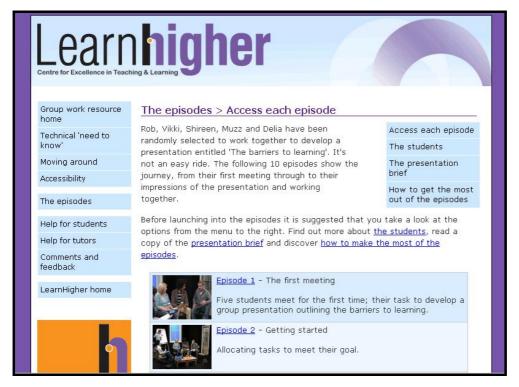
Figure 2 - Resource menu options

The issues identified within each episode are supported by learning resources accommodating a diverse range of learning preferences. Although the video clips have been identified as providing the back-bone of the resource, the additional learning resources that surround the video clips within each episode provide more focussed learning opportunities. The videos provide a visual stimulus for discussion with the resources providing more detailed help with specific issues. Each episode includes discussion points, learning resources and an audio commentary that sums up the learning outcomes from the episode. These alternative learning objects reinforce the intended learning outcomes but also, and more importantly, provide learning alternatives. The aim is for the resource to appeal to those with differing learning styles and learning needs as well as those with accessibility constraints.

Figure 3 - Episode 1 from the Making group-work work resource

Dissemination and evaluation

The resource was launched in February 2008 and has been well received by both students and educators. Statistics show that the resource is being accessed worldwide, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Dissemination is ongoing and the figures show a growing awareness of the resource with over one thousand unique users accessing the resource in November 2008.

Evaluation played an important part during the development stages of the resource and has been ongoing since the launch. Feedback from conferences and workshops show that the resource has been well received by tutors:

'I will use it as a way to introduce the need for reflective practice in improving group work - it reflects the variety of approaches and flexibility needed and that self management relies on.'

'Not sure if I'm typical but I have already embedded the link in an online study advice resource - and now that the website has more complete orientation and

guidance for staff and students I'll be encouraging colleagues to use it directly with their students. All in all a really useful resource - thanks!'

Since the launch, feedback has shown that tutors use the resource in several ways:

1. Students are provided with the web address of the resource either directly or through a virtual learning environment (VLE). They are expected to refer to the resource independently if and when needed.

2. Students are referred to the resource and directed to watch one or more of the episodes before a face-to-face or online discussion session.

3. Students are referred to the resource on a needs basis; if they identify a problem they are sign-posted to the relevant episode.

In each case the impact on the tutor's time or effort is less than the more traditional methods for providing help. Typically tutors either provide theoretical sessions on group dynamics and development prior to the group project or they provide one-to-one help as issues arise (often responding to the same issues several times, duplicating effort).

Although tutor engagement is encouraging we are yet to confirm the levels of student acceptance. A current research project is following a cohort of first year undergraduate students who have viewed the video clips and documented their impressions using a blog. The students taking part in the discussions provide a positive indication that they have engaged with the videos and are able to identify with the characters and their personality traits. The scenarios enabled the students to successfully identify group strengths and weaknesses and provoked discussion and opinion. Although not conclusive, the data indicates that the resource has proved to be informative and has the potential to change practice. Data provided by a series of student focus groups will hopefully confirm these findings.

This is just a brief overview of the Making group-work work resource; to discover more, access the resource via the LearnHigher website at www.learnhigher.ac.uk or

directly at www.learnhighergroupwork.com. The resource is free to use and your comments and feedback would be appreciated.

References

Chapman, K., Van Auken, S. (2001) Creating positive group project experiences: an examination of the role of the instructor on students' perceptions of group projects *Journal of Marketing Education* 23(2):117-127

Ettington, D. R. and Camp, R. R. (2002) Facilitating Transfer of Skills between Group Projects and Work Teams *Journal of Management Education*, vol. 26: pp. 356 - 379.

Hartley & Thorpe, 2001 "Groupwork!" groaned the students. "As if we haven't enough to do." An examination of the key issues surrounding assessed groupwork from the student perspective. (Peter Hartley and Louise Thorpe, Sheffield Hallam University) *Paper to ILT Annual Conference, University of York*.

McGraw, P, Tidwell, A. (2001). Teaching group process skills to MBA students: a short workshop *Education and Training Volume*: 43(3), pp. 162–171

Author details

Carol Elston is the e-learning advisor for Skills@Library, University of Leeds.