MAKING ONLINE TEAMS WORK – THE TUTOR VIEW

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Introduction

The opportunities and challenges posed by groups

From a sociocultural viewpoint, working in a small team can be creative and inspiring, because, given the right conditions, thinking can be enhanced through interactions with others (called interthinking) (Littleton & Mercer, 2013). However, poor group dynamics can be a barrier to creative thought with problems including social loafing, authoritarian leadership where one individual dominates the others, and groupthink (a tendency to focus on internal consensus, rather than accept external criticism; Janis, cited in Littleton & Mercer, 2013). Littleton and Mercer suggest that many of these difficulties can be overcome by the group generating ground rules for working together, since these ground rules create an appropriate discursive environment for interthinking and creativity (e.g. Figure 1).

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Class 7's ground rules
When we work in a group …
Everyone offers relevant information
Everyone's ideas are treated as worthwhile — but are critically evaluated
We ask each other questions
We ask for reasons and give them
We try to reach agreement
People trust each other and act as a team!
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Figure 1. caption: Ground rules (source Littleton & Mercer, Figure 2.1, p.38)

Much of the research into group work in educational settings has studied face-to-face groups, where students interact directly however online student groups have additional, specific challenges. If students work in forums, they need to adapt to the asynchronous nature of the interactions. Exchange of information, clarifications and conflict resolution can be laborious and time-consuming (Littleton & Mercer, 2013); discussions can take tangential routes, meaning that students waste time and energy pursuing ideas which have moved on by the next time they log on (Ferguson, cited in Littleton & Mercer). Students may find different solutions to these problems, such as using synchronous talk to resolve issues quickly and basing discussion around shared knowledge.

The Higher Educational context

The past few years have seen a huge increase in the use of computer-mediated learning activities in the HE curriculum in the UK. Students are expected to access a VLE and online tuition is a common alternative or supplement to face-to-face teaching. Some subject areas such as Psychology require students to complete substantial amounts of empirical work in practical classes and in final year projects. Providing opportunities for students to fulfil these requirements online is a challenge that HEI need to rise to. The Open University (OU) offers a very popular Psychology degree that is accredited by the British Psychological Society (BPS) as providing the Graduate Basis for Chartered membership (GBC). Traditionally, the OU offered residential study – "summer schools" where students participate in an intensive course based in the premises of another university to complete empirical project work. While this continues to be an option, the OU has developed an online alternative. At OU level 2 (National Qualification framework level 5), students may choose between a traditional residential school module and an online module.

Online Project Module outline

At the start of the module, *DZX222, Exploring Psychology Project* students take part in taught activities, using a variety of empirical methods and analysing data. They then undertake a small-scale project in groups of 4-6, under the close supervision of a tutor. The group must work together in formulating a research question, deciding upon an appropriate method of investigation and specifying a protocol. Each group then designs a research project, collects and analyses quantitative or qualitative data. Finally, the group prepares and delivers a short presentation (e.g. in PowerPoint). They are assessed on an individually produced project report. The module is worth 15 credit points and takes place over a 3-month period, building on a theoretically based 60-point module usually completed some 4 months previously. Communication among students and tutors is via asynchronous electronic fora, so although students must spend a specified minimum time online, there is considerable flexibility in when they do so. Location too is flexible, so access and engagement may be from the home, workplace, or even on the move.

The proportion of students opting for the online module has seen a notable increase over the past few years. A student survey (n=257) revealed students chose the online option to fit with their work and caring responsibilities; for some students this opportunity is highly valued because it is their sole opportunity to work with other students (Kaye et al., 2013). To complete their project, our students work as small project teams in online groups; however, group dynamics were identified as the worst aspect by more online than residential-school students. Thus, there appears to be a tension between the opportunities on offer for working with others in an online environment and the difficulties that can emerge from working in a small team.

Tutors have a unique perspective because they are participant observers of these small groups of learners: they read all the postings, interpret the interactions, try to ameliorate the difficulties and nudge students through to completion of their projects. This paper explores the group dynamics of these teams through the unique lens of their tutors, asking how tutors perceive their students.

Methods

Materials and resources

The survey aimed to explore tutors' perceptions of their student groups by asking them to focus on their 'best' and 'worst' groups. It explored how tutors defined these groups, their perceptions about how the group worked together; and how reliant they judged them to be on tutor input. Issues about ground rules were explored in terms of whether they were introduced, and by whom; Finally aspects of group dynamics based on Littleton and Mercer's ground rules were explored (see Figure 1 and Appendix, question 6 (a-g)).

The survey was sent to all tutors employed on the online project module presented in 2013 (53 tutors with 25 responses – 21 complete and 4 incomplete). The survey consisted of 20 questions, with numerical and free-text responses. The first two questions asked about ground rules and how they were established; the others focused on the perceived behaviour in groups. Tutors were asked to identify two groups: their 'best' group and their 'worst' group; initially defining their own categorizations and then responding to nine questions about each group's behaviours. (See Appendix for survey questions and responses.)

Results

Ground rules

Most tutors reported that they introduced or suggested some form of ground rules in the early stages of group formation (21; 84%). Most tutors said that they suggested using ground rules as a way to ease communication; others said that they suggested initial ground rules and then students adapted these to fit their groups. Even then, the process was not an easy one and could vary between groups – one tutor commented that they were 'by group discussion', adding 'if you could get all the group members to take part'.

Comparisons between the 'best' and 'worst' groups

How are groups defined?

Tutors identified a diversity of characteristics for their 'best' groups: these were groups where tasks were shared, deadlines were met, decisions made amongst members of the group; words like 'cooperation', 'collaboration' and 'support' were used. There was some disagreement about whether a leader was required – two tutors mentioned this as defining their 'best' group, but another emphasised that members 'pulled their weight' (equitable contributions), whilst supporting other members who found tasks difficult.

Tutors identified non-contributors as being a major source of difficulty in their 'worst' groups. The asynchronous nature of the discussion forums meant that students had to log on regularly to contribute; not doing so made it difficult for individuals to complete the time-limited tasks. Other issues involved not 'listening' to one another, particularly when dominant individuals were intent on doing things their own way.

How did the groups manage their projects?

Table 1: Project management
(numbers represent tutor's choice of statement)

	a. The group split the tasks	b. Group responsibility	c. Student 'leader'	d. Some combination of a, b and c
'Best' group	6	6	0	9
'Worst' group	3	3	5	10

Tutors indicated some differences in the way that their groups managed the projects (Table 1): the 'best' groups perhaps being more likely to be democratic and to allocate responsibility to individuals for specific tasks than the 'worst' groups. The worst groups were more likely to have a dominant group member who took charge and made the decisions.

When groups work together, what is perceived as important in terms of group dynamics?

Tutors were asked to choose which statement characterised most closely how the students worked together in their best and worst groups (Table 2). Tutors' responses suggested that the 'best' group could be characterised by mutual regard for one another: sharing information, listening to one another and respecting opinions and ideas. The 'worst' group could be characterised by dependence on the tutor: tutors reported that these groups needed regular forum intervention for facilitation, decision-making, and resolution of disputes.

Table 2: Comparison of group dynamics
(numbers indicate tutor's choice of statement)

	'Best' group	'Worst' group
All ideas and information were shared	5	0
All members of the group were invited to contribute to the discussion	4	0
Opinions and ideas were respected and considered by the students in the group	9	0
Students asked one another to give reasons for their views	0	0
Challenges and alternatives were made explicit and negotiated	0	0
The group tried to reach agreement before taking a decision or acting	1	0
Consensus was reached before actions were taken	1	0
The group needed guidance from their tutor(s) before making a decision	0	8
The group worked independently, with minimal input from their tutors	1	1
Their tutor(s) made frequent contributions to the forum	0	3
Students needed tutor input to resolve disputes amongst group members	0	9

How successful were the groups?

Perhaps unsurprisingly, tutors rated their 'best' groups as being more likely to be successful than the 'worst' groups in working together to produce a joint project (Table 3).

Table 3: Successful outcomes
(numbers indicate tutor's choice of statement)

Producing a joint project was:	'Best' groups	'Worst' groups
Totally successful	18	0
Partially successful	3	16
Totally unsuccessful	0	5

Conclusions and Discussion

Tapping tutors' implicit knowledge about how groups interact online is very important in trying to unpick the opportunities and challenges for students in a high-risk module, where gaining high grades in their assessment depends on successful group work.

The asynchronous nature of forums provides an opportunity for reflection and considered responses. But group formation and task completion needs to be done quickly, making this more suited to a synchronous activity. This produces a tension since many students who choose the online project module do so because it fits into their lifestyle and their work responsibilities and caring commitments (Kaye et al., 2013). In reality, their personal circumstances make it difficult or impossible to commit to specific prearranged times to study. One way forward might involve seeking a way of capturing the advantages of synchronicity whilst working in an asynchronous medium.

In the initial group formation stage, establishing ground rules appears to facilitate what Littleton and Mercer call 'interthinking', where ideas and innovations emerge from group interactions. Most tutors initiated discussions about ground rules, some concentrating on the rules of netiquette, whereas others made students aware of how to create a good online working environment with mutual regard for one another. Some groups took up these ideas, but others didn't and it would be interesting to investigate in a larger study which groups were more successful.

Whilst their 'best' groups had diverse characterizations, tutors identified group attributes which lead to productive teamwork as being important (such as mutual regard). The 'worst' groups had a difficult time in this online environment. Tutors provided a more coherent picture of these groups, with non-contributors being a major cause of tension. These groups were more likely to have leaders than the 'best' groups, but it was characterised as being uneasy alliance with one person making a decision and doing most of the work, and other members of the group (for whatever reason), lagging behind or just not turning up to post their ideas on the forum. Such difficult group dynamics were identified previously as a major source of dissent for these online students (Kaye et al., 2013). Students exhibited dependence on their tutors for decision making and conflict resolution; such dependence is contrary to the perceived benefits of collaborative learning and the desired learning outcome of independent learning. However, it is not clear whether this group trait is a consequence of the group and its poor dynamics or whether individuals who opt for this online module tend to be apathetic or lack the skills for working in a team.

Several issues arise from this small-scale study of tutors' perceptions of their online groups. First, is the study valid: does this method of reflecting on and distinguishing between 'best' and 'worst' groups reflect reality or is there a 'halo' effect? If it is possible to characterise groups who are less likely to succeed in group tasks, what can be done about it? All tutors recognised the importance of ground rules; but should they be imposed upon the groups or should groups formulate them as part of the group formation process? Hurst and Thomas (2008) suggested that team-building is essential to group formation and successful task completion: 'The biggest problem for any team is the assumption that you can put people together to work on a task, and they will automatically become a team and know how to work together'. Barrett and colleagues have recently completed a pilot study of an online team-building activity, where ground rules were generated by the students; preliminary results suggest that this was valuable for these students who had yet to do online project work, but it was costly in terms of student and tutor time. Even in this voluntary and low-risk activity with a group of interested volunteers, students engaged at different levels of intensity – with some students not contributing and others dropping out. So, what can we do for students who, however much we try to make project work palatable, still do not take part in collaborative activities – are they doomed to fail or can we find some creative way either to engage them or to provide an attractive alternative?

References

1. Hurst, D. and Thomas, J. (2008). Developing Team Skills and Accomplishing Team Projects Online. In T. Anderson (eds.), *The Theory and Practice of Online Learning,* Second Edition Edmonton, Alberta, Athabasca University.

2. Kaye, H.; Barrett, J.P. and Knightley, W.M. (2013). Student Preference for Residential or Online Project Work in Psychology. In *Psychology Learning & Teaching, 12(2),* (pp. 196-202).

3. Littleton, K. and Mercer, N. (2013). *Interthinking: Putting Talk to Work.* Oxford, Routledge.

Appendix: Tutor questionnaire

The appendix lists the instructions and the 6 questions examined in this paper.

Instructions

We are interested in how students work together on a collaborative task; particularly how they work together in small groups to design and implement a research project (as in DZX222). As you were recently a tutor on this module, we'd appreciate your telling us about how your students got on in their project groups.

Think about the best and worst groups you tutored in the last presentation of DZX222. We are not expecting more than general impressions about the two groups you have picked. If you cannot identify a 'worst /best group' because they were all fairly similar, use those you thought worked well/less well.

Now answer the questions whilst keeping these two groups in mind.

Questions:

1. In your project groups, did you specifically encourage the use of ground rules for working together? (yes/no)

2. How were these ground rules established? For example, who suggested using them and who formulated them? [free-text response]

Questions about 'best' group were presented first, then repeated for 'worst' group; as follows:

Think about your 'best group' ['worst group'] and answer the following questions:

3. What made your chosen group 'the best' (for confidentiality reasons, please don't identify them)? [free-text response]

4. How did this particular group manage their project? (Please check one of the options below.)

   a. **The group split the project into different tasks and each student took responsibility for one or more task;**

   b. **The group took responsibility for the whole project; individuals were not allocated tasks but contributed across all/most of the project requirements;**

   c. **One student took charge and made all the decisions;**

   d. **Some combination of a, b and c. Please give a brief explanation of your answer in the box below.**

5. The answers to the last two questions relate to how the group worked together and made decisions. In your opinion which of your answers characterizes most closely how your 'best group' worked together? Choose one statement from the drop-down list below.

   a. **All ideas and information were shared;**

    b. **All members of the group were invited to contribute to the discussion;**

    c. **Opinions and ideas were respected and considered by the students in the group;**

    d. **Students asked one another to give reasons for their views;**

    e. **Challenges and alternatives were made explicit and negotiated;**

    f. **The group tried to reach agreement before taking a decision or acting;**

    g. **Consensus was reached before actions were taken; a. The group needed guidance from their tutor(s) before making a decision; b. The group worked independently, with minimal input from their tutor(s); c. Their tutor(s) made frequent contributions to the forum; d. Students needed tutor input to resolve disputes amongst group members.**

6. Which statement in the list below is the nearest to how your 'best group' worked together?

    a. **Overall, the group was totally successful in working together to produce a joint project.**

    b. **Overall, the group was partially successful in working together to produce a joint project.**

    c. **Overall, the group was totally unsuccessful in working together to produce a joint project.**