

# IMPROVING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF GROUP WORK FOR MARKETING STUDENTS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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## ABSTRACT

There is strong evidence to suggest that student-to-student interaction, both formal and spontaneous, can enrich learning outcomes. It has also been established that employers value students who have problem solving skills and who can work effectively with others. The purpose of this project was to provide some insight into group projects and to improve the quality of student learning in student problem solving projects. Specifically, this project addressed two research questions concerned with group problem-based learning; first, understanding the barriers to deep student learning and, second, how deep student learning can be improved with this technique.

This research project involved two fundamental, non-mutually exclusive research approaches, namely, phenomenography and action research. Brainstorming and focus group techniques were used to collect data and the findings indicate that, in order for group **synergy** to be achieved, initial group **establishment** and accepted group **disciplines** must be carefully undertaken.

## INTRODUCTION

There is strong evidence to suggest that student-to-student interaction both formal and spontaneous can enrich learning outcomes (Biggs 2001). It has also been established that employers value students who have problem solving skills and who can work effectively with others (Entwistle 1997). The group student project that is concerned with problem solving and functioning knowledge is a rich learning context where 'teachers teach less but learners learn more' (Biggs 2001, p. 95). Whilst group projects espouse many of the virtues of psychological learning theory (Hartley 1998), evidence suggests that group work projects are fraught with problems and may be counter-productive with regard to learning outcomes for some students (Laurillard 1993, Kates 2002). In Business programs in Australian Universities, for pedagogical and practical reasons, student group problem solving projects are increasing in popularity. Indeed, in marketing education in particular, it has been suggested that group-work is well suited as a 'testing ground' for the development of deeper understanding of marketing theory and concepts (Graeff 1997, Murphy 1998).

### ***Problem Based Learning***

Problem based learning (PBL) has been promoted as a solution to surface learning (Bain 1994), where PBL is defined as 'engaging students in thinking about the subject matter in ways designed to improve their understanding of it' (Laurillard 1993, p. 126). Indeed, the problem-solving approach is a frequent tool in teaching and learning approaches, appearing as a regular activity on most courses in medicine, dentistry and science, and also in some social science courses (Laurillard 1993). The

problem solving activity, however, needs to take a divergent rather than convergent route if the learning is to be generative; practice can make perfect but what is sought is practice with growing understanding.

Educators have been provided with a framework (Colbeck, Campbell and Bjorklund 2000, p. 61) of four conditions to assist student learning in PBL. Instructors should: provide instruction about interpersonal skills, encourage positive inter-dependence among students, make individual goal achievement dependent upon attainment of group goals and encourage students to reflect on the group process. If these conditions are applied and fostered successfully the rewards will be evident; students will collaborate and support each other's learning, hold all members accountable for the group performance, share leadership, and monitor their group progress (Colbeck, Campbell and Bjorklund 2000). Cognitive psychology emphasises the importance of prior knowledge for effective learning and behavioural psychology theory informs us that learning is better when the learner is active and when the student is allowed to practice and apply what he/she has learned (Hartley 1998). Social psychology tells us the socially constructed knowledge and learning in a social setting, with discussion and interaction, is valuable for students as is a real life view of the world (Hartley 1998).

### ***Problem Based Learning and Group Work***

It has been estimated that managers spend 60-90% of their time at work in group activities (Blanchard, Carew and Parisi-Carew 1996), often serving on 3 teams simultaneously, (Chapman and Van Auken 2001). Businesses are seeking graduates who can work and learn effectively in teams (Gardner and Korth 1998), as they will be asked to do so very early in their careers (Chapman and Van Auken 2001). Thus, it is a fact of life for both business students and their instructors that the former must learn to work effectively in groups, whilst the latter must teach them how.

One of the major drawbacks for both students and instructors utilising a group work approach is the issue of social loafing, conceptualised by Latané, Williams and Harking in 1979 as 'the decline in member effort that often occurs in groups' (in Comer 1995, p. 647). Two types of social loafing are free-riding and the sucker effect. The former has its roots in economic theory and is where a group member 'derives benefits from membership in a large group that are disproportionately larger than his or her contributions to the group' (Comer 1995, p. 649). The latter is where a competent group member feels that a free-rider is taking advantage and thus reduces his or her own effort (Bacon et al. 1998, p. 65). As teams and groups increase in size, individual effort drops off dramatically and free-riding is also more common (Bacon et al. 1998). In practice, we have observed some student unease with the PBL and group-based learning model and anecdotal evidence suggests that the problems can be crudely categorised into three factors, namely control, commitment and trust. Hence our research questions formulated from the above literature search are:

- 1. What are the barriers to deep student learning in group PBL?**
- 2. How can deep student learning be improved with group PBL?**

## METHODOLOGY

*Research Approach:* In order to provide a ‘starting point for the research for researcher and researched’ we must have a shared topic which is recognised by both parties (Ashworth and Lucas 2001). Thus, the first stage of the project was exploratory in nature and involved a review of pertinent literature in the learning processes in problem solving group projects. This was followed by the second stage, also exploratory and aimed at finding the key issues (the shared topic) from the unit of study, the students themselves. This stage involved using a brainstorming approach with a group of 44 students, focusing on the phenomenon under investigation, improving deep learning using problem-based learning. The third stage of the research utilised focus group discussions with 2 groups of third year marketing students who had three years’ experience of group work. The focus groups comprised 6 people in each and were conducted using a variation of the convergent interviewing approach (Dick 1990).

*Data Analysis:* The grounded theory approach of Strauss (1987) guided the analysis of the data in this study, and methods advocated by Strauss and Corbin (1990) were employed in the quest for increased rigor. Thus, the coding paradigm for this research focused on: the causal *conditions* that gave rise to the categories identified, the *action/interaction* strategies used to manage or respond to the categories, and the *consequences* of the strategies. The focus group interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed.

## FINDINGS<sup>5</sup>

**Barriers to deep student learning:** The findings of this study confirmed the results obtained in research by Kates (2002) that control, poor conflict management skills and ‘freeloading’ were real barriers to deep learning in group PBL. But other problems have emerged from this study and these are discussed. The **control** phenomenon is concerned with the situation where a group member has a need to take control of the planning and execution of the project. This phenomenon has a number of manifestations. In the Kates study, the ‘controller’ ‘hijacked’ the assignment but did not perform satisfactorily (2002, p. 17), whilst in our study the ‘controller’ inhibited group thinking, discussion and action:

*‘... in the group, she was an absolute control freak; it was like treading on glass. I was scared to have any input; it was terrible. I wanted to play my part but she wanted to do it her way’ (1:32).*

Group learning and performance were adversely affected because of the one-dimensional nature of the outcome. But, to compound the felony, group members appeared to reject the wisdom of a good student if s/he was perceived as too dominant:

*‘He knows his stuff but he’s a bit awkward to get on with, a bit domineering. I would go without his input to keep the group working; maybe he knows more but causes conflict’ (1:238).*

The student in question was a 'High Distinction' student, so it is likely that group learning was sacrificed for the sake of internal harmony. This finding is closely related to the second barrier to learning in group work, which is the inability of some students to manage **conflict**. There is a reluctance to confront the stronger and more vociferous members of the group and this trait is demonstrated in the foregoing experiences of respondents.

The third barrier to successful group dynamics was the propensity of some team members to **freeload** on the efforts of the group and group synergy and output is affected (Kates 2002).

*'I tend to put in more effort than they have' (1:23)*

*'People don't pull their weight' (1:262)*

*'The group was bad because there was an unequal amount of work being done' (1:25)*

Students have expressed concern that group projects can expose individuals as incompetent or lacking experience in front of their peers and that cultural or gender differences can affect group performance (Brown 1999). Students were concerned that uneven contributions were 'rewarded' with the same grade, and that grades were adversely affected by lazy or less able students. (Note students equate learning with grade achievement – a case of 'backwash' (Biggs 2001), or a reflection of our assessment procedures). Better students were actually fearful that their grades would suffer as a result of group work and most groups were uneasy about group conflict and about confronting issues that would generate conflict. Paradoxically, there was much less reticence on the part of students in involving tutors in these conflicts – but in the absence of the offending parties.

**Initial Inertia Precedes Frenetic Activity:** Both groups with whom we were working experienced early difficulties with their research project. Group two was indecisive with respect to project choice as each member explored a number of options. Since the project proposal had to be submitted in week three, we met with the group towards the end of week two to assess progress. We explored the problem and decided that the students would develop key criteria by which they could evaluate the various projects. They did so and quickly and enthusiastically embraced a retail/branding project.

Group one experienced a similar exploration stage as they had difficulty in understanding a complex business that a member had suggested for their project. We concluded that the business problem was too large and complex for a one-semester project and the group were invited to develop criteria for project choice. They did so and chose instead to help a local 'backpacker' business to improve bookings, but had left it too late to prepare a proposal of the quality they would have liked. Since proposal preparation was an important learning objective of the course, and that these skills develop as the students progress through the research process, we negotiated, after the proposals had been submitted (but not graded), that revised proposals could be submitted with the final report. The revised proposals were of a significantly higher quality than the original documents. All groups were encouraged to explore the theory relating to their projects and group two discovered a retail model first

espoused in 1922 by Copeland that helped them to solve a sampling problem. Group one applied a Scandinavian theory of services marketing to their backpacker project.

**Building More Effective Groups:** In an attempt to encourage students to explore group dynamics and the roles that need to be performed to achieve group objectives we used an animal metaphor. Students in the focus groups were asked to consider themselves an animal and project this behaviour to their contribution to the group.

In group two, the first animal mentioned was:

*'A lion, the king, a leader. But we're all lions, there's no hierarchy here' (2:88)*  
*'The hare, a doer, a busy person who pushes us all along and gets things done' (2:95)*  
*'... as opposed to the worker bee who does all the real work making sure that it is right – I put in hours at the end, typing and reading and typing and reading to get it done' (2:102)*

In sharp contrast the first group expressed a stronger team orientation:

*'... like a bird, when they are building a nest they go off and get the material and work together' (1:81)*  
*'A sheepdog that can go off and work hard and come back, be part of a group' (1:73)*  
*'Dolphins because when you see dolphins they're usually in a group and they're sort of working together, that's what I maybe picture ourselves as a group. We're not sort of greyhounds where you are going after the hare full pace ahead, we're just working as a group and working our way through the project' (1:69)*

The above findings were encapsulated in a more detailed and rigorous analytical process as meanings and concepts were developed from the data. The coding paradigm developed by Strauss and Corbin (1990) was utilised in this analysis, focusing on the causal conditions which gave rise to the categories identified, the action/interaction strategies used to manage or respond to the categories, and the predicted consequences of the strategies.

When discussing student performance and evaluating the course after the final assignment, groups were asked to assess group performance and the reasons for it. Effective work groups had learned from past experiences and tended to choose group members with similar 'objectives, values and work ethics'. They enjoyed 'discovering' other points of view that gave them other perspectives and sounder solutions and found ways to manage this process in a harmonious fashion. There were attempts to assess individual strengths and weaknesses and to exploit these in a technical and human relations sense (but grades still take precedence over learning):

*'Ryan handled the stats and Damien did the graphics – but we were all involved' (1:post)*

And, more tellingly:

*'We found that he was always critical of the ideas tabled but never put anything else in their place. We told him to "put up or shut up" and that worked well and brought greater strength to the group. He took it alright and is better for it' (1:post)*

And, overall:

*'This was a brilliant result that we could not have achieved on our own' (1:post)*

## Conclusions

*It appears that a number of complex and interrelated factors are at work when problem solving group projects are employed to enhance learning in a higher education context.*

*Course Climate* – course climate is outside the control of the students but was found to impact on the behaviour of students when working in groups. For example, work ethic and motivation appear to be enhanced if the unit is viewed as central to student learning, that is if: the course is a capstone course, the course leader is professional, has high expectations of student performance and knows the students by name, the course is known to stretch students and the outcomes carry extra reward, for example accreditation to a professional body.

*Course Culture* – a course culture was seen to develop as students decided to perform well in their final third year unit in the subject. They became less competitive and more collaborative as they sought new ideas and strived to improve their degree grade point average. They developed and enjoyed closer working relations as they toiled hard and long to produce an 'excellent' project report that would facilitate the job interview process which would come after the course (as found in Chapman and Van Auken 2001).

*Group Establishment, Motivations and Values* – students displayed a preference for self-selecting groups rather than have group imposition from teaching staff, thus recommendations from the literature about instructor interference in this process were not apparent (Bacon et al. 1998).

*Group Discipline* – past group experience had taught the students the value of a disciplined and planned approach to project management. One group established a list of tasks that had to be performed, by whom and by when. When they ran into conflict as a result of the supposed 'errant behaviour' of one group member, it was suggested that they use this list to establish criteria by which group members' performance could be judged and the grade distributed if they sought unequal shares (Heathfield 1999). Thus, peer evaluation should be used but the criteria selected by the instructor (Beatty et al. 1996), however we have found that students must be included in the criteria selection for peer evaluation, promoting ownership of the problem.

*Group Synergy* – the groups 'discovered' that the whole was greater than the sum of the parts, for example:

*'I've learned that there's not just one way to do things, there's a number of ways. When you're working on your own, there's only your way, whereas working in a group, everybody's got different ideas so the way that I would have approached the problem would have been different' (1:305)*

And consensus prevails:

*We're strong and we all have different ideas and strong personalities but we don't fight – we have a discussion and we convince each other and then you go that way'*  
(2:6)

In terms of future research, it is now important for interested scholars to take the insights generated here and test them on a larger scale. Finally, this research project has provided us with three key insights into improving teaching and learning in group work at the tertiary level. The three insights are guidance, understanding and peer assessment and, due to page length limitation, these will be discussed at the ANZMAC conference presentation.

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