‘I’d rather vomit up a live hedgehog’ – L2 students and group assessment in mainstream university programs

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ABSTRACT

Many of the L2 students enrolled in mainstream programs at tertiary institutions experience grave difficulties with English as a medium of instruction. Although group work appears to offer these students numerous benefits, the assessment of group work projects is proving to be a thorny issue. The student whose words gave rise to the title of this article had little doubt as to his feelings about group assessment (Zariski 1997), and it is clear from the literature that group assessment is a contentious issue. A major concern is that some students may be disadvantaged by an approach which is often perceived by students to be unfair. These comments appear to have particular relevance for L2 students who experience difficulty in interacting with their L1 peers, or where the latter feel that their academic standing might be jeopardised by the L2 students. This article explores the pitfalls that may be encountered when group assessment is used as means of evaluation, especially when the students involved are not all native speakers of English. Issues of cultural differences and their impact on group formation, and the problems surrounding free-loading in the group assessment process are discussed. It is argued that a clear distinction needs to be drawn between cooperative learning and group assessment, and that the implementation of the latter should be approached with caution, especially when L2 students are involved.

The differences between group (cooperative) learning and group assessment

Group work has been described as a technique that ‘involves students working together in small groups to accomplish shared learning goals and to maximise their own and each other’s learning’ (Johnson, Johnson and Smith 1998a: 25). Group assessment, on the other hand, involves evaluating the product of the group work and assigning marks to students. Lejk, Wyvill and Farrow (1999) note that a survey of methods used in group assessment showed that the vast majority of these methods assess a group product and then distribute the mark among members of the group through some form of peer assessment.
Group assessment

The importance of the type of assessment that an institution endorses cannot be overrated. Boud, Cohen and Sampson (1999: 1) state unequivocally that assessment is ‘the single most powerful influence on learning in formal courses’. They go on to warn that badly designed assessment tools can undermine important strategies in teaching and learning approaches. Rowntree (in Sambell and McDowell 1998) argues that if we want to find the truth of an educational system, ‘… we must look to its assessment procedures. If we accept the undoubted influence that assessment exerts over an educational system, it is essential that our selection of assessment tools is carefully made’ (Sambell and McDowell 1998: 392).

Group assessment is one of a number of assessment techniques that are being explored in the wake of growing acceptance of the idea that traditional norm-referenced tests often fail to measure students’ ability accurately, and that many of these traditional assessment practices do not promote the development of independent critical learners (Freeman 1995, Darling-Hammond 1997). The alternative to this type of assessment seeks to engage students in authentic, or ‘real world’, tasks and to evaluate students according to criteria that are relevant in the world outside the classroom (Darling-Hammond 1997). Increasingly the outside world is impacting on the approaches adopted in tertiary institutions. Lejk, Wyvill and Farrow (1997) argue that this recognition that students must be prepared for life and work has contributed to the growing use of group work and group assessment because employers see teamwork as an important skill.

The linking of group work and group assessment should lead to a happy marriage of sound principles. Cooperative learning is seen as an effective tool for improving academic performance (Zhining, Johnson and Johnson 1995; Lejk et al 1997; Johnson, Johnson and Smith 1998a, 1998b; Piper and Thoreau 1998; Lejk et al 1999; Karakowsky and McBey 2001). Therefore, if skills and knowledge are assessed in such a way that cooperative learning is promoted, not only will material be tested in the same way as it is learnt, but the importance of cooperative work will be emphasised.

Group assessment would appear to be an ideal way to assess students at a time when universities are under pressure to train graduates who are equipped to deal with the ‘real world’ – a world that lays increasing emphasis on the value of group work. Added to this is the fact that it offers a way for universities to cope with ever increasing workloads and declining resources (Morris and Hayes 1996; Boud et al 1999; Livingstone and Lynch 2000). However, some researchers have expressed reservations about this type of testing. Lejk et al (1999) speak of group work as being extremely valuable, but warn that the assessment of group work is problematic. They argue that there is a certain amount of unease about the integrity of marks gained from group assessment, and they claim that ‘there is

An additional cause for concern is that students themselves may not view group assessment as fair and equitable. The student whose comment led to the title of the article was one of a number of law students included in a survey at Murdoch University (Zariski 1997). Zariski was concerned that while group work has an effect on student values, attitudes and learning, this effect is not always positive.

Of particular concern to institutions catering for increasing numbers of L2 students is the possibility that this type of assessment may cause friction between different cultural groups. Ledwith and Lee (1998: 103) speak of the tensions caused by group assessment ‘… with the issues of mixing different cultures and of English language ability being prominent’.

**Group assessment and L2 students**

**BACKGROUND**

For L2 students, the adjustments required to study successfully in a tertiary institution are varied and taxing. Probably the greatest difficulty they encounter is overcoming the lack of appropriate linguistic and cultural knowledge required for meaningful interaction (Zou 1998). Verbitsky (1998) conducted a survey of the problems of international students at the Auckland University of Technology (AUT). Of the 30 students who volunteered to be interviewed about their experiences at the institution, 87 per cent came from countries in the East and South East Asian regions, while the rest came from Pacific or European countries. Verbitsky chose interviewing as a research method because of the wide variation in the students’ mastery of English, the antipathy she claims some students have to surveys and questionnaires, and the expressed desire of many of the students to discuss the issues in more depth than questionnaires would allow.

In these interviews the students stressed that one of their greatest problems was the difficulty they experienced interacting with staff and other students. They found the notion of a lecturer being questioned as problematic. They were equally uneasy about participating in classroom debates and discussions. They tended to withdraw from these discussions, afraid of exposing their lack of familiarity with the teaching methods and the subject matter, especially if there was some local content (Verbitsky 1998). Liu (1998: 5) points out that in Asian cultures the teacher is not seen as a facilitator but as a ‘fount of knowledge’, and Littlewood (2000: 31) quotes a Mainland Chinese student as saying that ‘our culture is very different from Western culture. We are taught to obey, not to invent’.
In a study conducted in Australia, Vietnamese teachers enrolled in a second language teaching program at the University of Canberra said that the differences between the two cultures, and their lack of background knowledge, hindered their successful adjustment to Australian society (Nixon 1996). This deficit of local knowledge can erode students’ self-confidence. Verbitsky (1998) notes that the students she interviewed all felt that their New Zealand counterparts were more intelligent, and more knowledgeable, than they were.

It may be argued that if students from a different culture enrol in New Zealand institutions, they should expect the culture of learning to be different, and that part of the education process will be their integration into the new system. Many Asian students do appear to want this and are willing, even eager, to come to grips with a new style of learning. Littlewood (2000) who surveyed over 2000 students from eight Asian countries maintains that:

The overall message that emerges is that Asian students do not, in fact, wish to be spoon-fed with facts from an all-knowing ‘fount of knowledge’. They want to explore knowledge themselves and find their own answers. Most of all, they want to do this together with their fellow students in an atmosphere which is friendly and supportive. (Littlewood 2000: 34)

One of the obvious ways to foster this transition would appear to be the encouragement of group projects. These projects should, on the face of it, facilitate greater interaction and cooperation between students, and lead to greater integration between ethnic groups. Johnson et al (1998a) argue that students who work cooperatively to complete assignments develop positive and supportive ways of interacting regardless of ethnic, cultural and social differences.

However, as has been noted, this is not always the case. One of the problems appears to be that certain cultures are identified as collectivistic and it is assumed that students from these cultures will work well in a team situation simply because of their cultural backgrounds (McConchie 1996). Kim et al (1996) take issue with studies that describe cultures in simplistic terms such as ‘individualistic’ or ‘collectivistic’. They note that empirical data have consistently shown the stereotypic model to be inaccurate, and point out that there is substantial variation within cultures. Early (1993: 343) also warns against making these kinds of generalisations about the group work ethic of various cultures, saying that ‘…the blanket adoption of group-based work in a collectivistic culture is not appropriate’. He goes on to explain that it is the type of group which is of paramount importance, not the group context per se. What is important in a collectivistic society is membership of in-groups that share common interests and traits and are concerned about each other’s welfare. A group of students from collectivistic cultures will not necessarily form cohesive groups.
GROUP FORMATION

Groups are formed based either on assignment by instructors, which may be random or structured, or on the basis of self-selection (Helms and Haynes 1990, Lou et al 1996). Both these methods of group formation present difficulties (Buckenmyer 2000; Livingstone and Lynch 2000). Livingstone and Lynch argue that allowing students to select their own group membership emphasises individualistic learning approaches, while the approach that allows instructors to assign students to groups either randomly or on the basis of a structured selection emphasises the sociocultural aspect of the exercise.

Self-selection

If students are allowed to select their own groups, it is impossible to prevent the formation of homogeneous groups and students will choose those students with whom they feel comfortable as group members (Buckenmyer 2000). This may have a negative impact on L2 students who feel that L1 students do not want to work with them. Students in Verbitsky’s study (1998) felt that New Zealand students tended to form closed groups in and out of the classroom, and it was difficult for the L2 students to be accepted. In Ledwith and Lee’s (1998) study, all students agreed that facility in English was a dominant issue, and that students would be excluded from groups because their mastery of the language was judged insufficient. Students at AUT are keenly aware of this bias. The students Verbitsky (1998) surveyed preferred tutor-designated groups as this was the only way to ensure that they were not left in groups consisting of solely L2 students. An L2 student from the Middle East who was interviewed during the study said that L2 students develop strategies of their own to cope with the situation. To avoid the embarrassment of rejection they rush to form their own groups, not allowing any time for overtures from their New Zealand counterparts, who then regard the L2 students as ethnocentric. Thus a vicious circle is set in place.

Imposed group membership

The other approach is for lecturers to assume responsibility for group membership, either by selecting students whom they feel will form effective groups, or by opting for random selection. Siciliano (2001) argues instructor-determined groupings are more effective than random assignment of students or self-selection of group members. There are, however, a number of drawbacks to this system. In the first place, it is likely that lecturers will be concerned with placing L2 students with native speakers or fluent speakers of English. It appears that, in the latter are often resentful of such tactics (Ledwith and Lee 1998).

Another concern is that students may not take ownership of a group if they believe that it has been imposed upon them (Ledwith and Lee 1998). Stefani
(1998) points out that assessment procedures have a potential role in defining students’ attitude towards their work and adds that a sense of ownership and control impacts on the learning achieved. She feels that all assessment of learning should be carried out in partnership. If lecturers force students into groups this might damage the students’ ownership of group assessment as they have not been consulted in the formation of the groups. Interestingly, Ledwith and Lee (1998) found that students reported overwhelmingly that the best groups (that is, those groups in which their experiences had been most positive) were organised by themselves, or jointly with their tutors, and just over half the worst groups (that is, those groups where their experiences, had, on the whole, been negative) had been organised by their tutors alone.

The other approach that lecturers frequently adopt is random selection. Although this type of selection does have the merit of freeing the lecturer from any accusation of bias, it can be questioned, as chance will play a large part in the success or failure of the group. Ledwith and Lee (1998) note that students could be fortunate, and be placed in a group of motivated and committed peers. Alternatively, they could be less fortunate and be placed in a group where students were less concerned about their academic commitments. This reservation is echoed by Wheelan and Lisk (2000: 734), who are concerned that ‘the luck of the draw may determine the fate of an individual student’. Webb, Nemer, Chizhik and Sugrue (1998) also point out that some combinations of students may have the edge over other groups in terms of learning or group productivity. It does not seem desirable that students’ assessment should be so heavily influenced by happenings over which they have no control.

**L2 students and group formation**

Whether L2 students form part of self-selected groups, or are assigned to groups by lecturers, these students face a number of difficulties. One of these difficulties is negative stereotyping. An L2 student coming into a group may find that the group has reservations about his/her competence because of issues of language and ethnicity. Karakowsky and McBey (2001) conducted a study in which they found that imputed expertise can clearly affect group members’ perceptions and behaviour. The authors point out that external status characteristics such as race, age and gender are used by group members to form initial expectations about the relative competencies of other members of the group.

This uncertainty will probably be exacerbated if the student is not familiar with the academic environment in which the group is to operate. According to these researchers, if the group does not impute relatively high expertise in this field to a member it is unlikely that this student will be given opportunities to contribute to the task effort or will receive positive feedback for any attempted...
contribution. In other words, the status of the L2 student might be considered to be quite low. This was raised as an issue by the students in Verbitsky’s (1998) study.

Carrier (1999) argues that if L2 students feel that their contributions are not highly regarded this will have an impact on their behaviour. She notes that a student’s native culture might define status relationships in such a way that the student finds it very difficult to question or make requests, even if he or she possesses both the subject knowledge, and sufficient mastery of the dominant language, to do so effectively. An L1 student in the study by Ledwith and Lee (1998: 115) summed this up: ‘They (L2 students) could be super-intelligent in their own country … but it doesn’t come across, so we just think, “they don’t know what they are talking about” sort of thing’. Clearly with some L1 students expressing these reservations, lecturers who assign students to groups need to exercise caution in the selection process.

Criteria for selection

Whichever selection method lecturers choose, the underlying aim should be to promote the best interests of the students. According to Johnson et al (1998a), there are five basic elements that need to be present if a group is to be truly cooperative. The first is positive interdependence, where each student believes that they will not succeed unless the other members are also successful. The second element is individual accountability, where students accept their responsibility to contribute and to aid members of the team who might be experiencing difficulty with the work. Third, there must be successful interaction between group members where they support and praise each other. Fourth, members should have some knowledge of teamwork skills. Finally, students must be able to assess their progress as individuals, and as a team.

However, even if all these criteria are met, research indicates that certain groupings will be more beneficial for some students than others (Lou et al 1996; Webb et al 1998; Fuchs, Fuchs, Hamlett and Karns 1998). Webb et al (1998) investigated the effects of group ability composition on group processes. Their study involved 672 seventh- and eighth-grade students from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. The authors argue that some combinations of students may confer an advantage over others in terms of learning from group work in relation to group productivity or both. They claim that classroom studies of group composition and learning usually indicate that low-ability students learn best in groups with high-ability students, high-ability students perform well in any group composition, and medium-ability students perform best in relatively homogeneous groups. If this is so, then the heterogeneous grouping of students is really only to the advantage of the lower-ability students and is irrelevant at best, or harmful at
worst, to the rest of the class. The situation becomes more problematic when one considers research that indicates that high achievers might well do better in homogeneous groups than in heterogeneous groups (for example, Lou et al 1996; Fuchs et al 1998).

For lecturers who wish to make use of widely accepted heterogeneous groupings, the L2 students present a challenge. Many of these students have high ability, and are very motivated, but their command of English, particularly in academic domains, is problematic and may interfere with their ability to contribute to the group (Ledwith and Lee 1998). Placing them in heterogeneous groups, where L1 speakers can help with language difficulties, may not alleviate the problem. Fuchs et al (1998) hinted at this anomaly when they indicated that in heterogeneous pairings low achievers participated in disappointingly menial and non-substantive ways. This trend might easily be repeated in groups where L2 students are regarded as a liability. One Chinese student, interviewed during the writing of this article, noted that his group had decided that his contribution towards the assessment would be to type up the handwritten reports of the other members. Such students might well be forced to become unwilling freeloaders and add to a problem which is regarded by many as the Achilles’ heel of group assessment.

**L2 STUDENTS AND THE PROBLEM OF FREELOADING IN GROUP ASSESSMENT**

As noted above, the process of assessment is a powerful, if not the most powerful, influence on teaching and learning. Group work has much to offer to the teaching and learning process, but this will be lost if students question the fairness of its results. One of the greatest obstacles to a just allocation of marks is freeloding. Morris and Hayes (1996: 231) define freeloding as the ‘problem of the non-performing group member who reaps the benefit of the accomplishments of the remaining group members with little or no cost to him/herself’. They warn that failure to come to grips with the problem ‘… puts in question the legitimacy of the use of group work as a form of assessment’.

A number of suggestions have been offered to deal with the problem. The most common appears to be making use of peer feedback and self-assessment (Lejk et al 1997). Students can be penalised if they are judged not to have contributed adequately to the project. Expulsion is also mentioned as a possibility. However, this is regarded as an extreme measure which involves fellow members in unpleasantness and confrontation. Piper and Thoreau (1998) express their concerns that students may choose not to raise uncomfortable issues and avoid taking ownership of the problem in order to avoid this type of confrontation.

The concerns that Piper and Thoreau (1998) raise about students’ high level of discomfort with confrontation must be even more relevant for L2 students. Flowerdew (1998) notes that Chinese students do not like to lose face themselves,
and will therefore do their best to prevent threatening the face of their peers. Cultural considerations aside, their lack of familiarity with both social conventions and the necessary linguistic skills in which to frame their reservations, may make them feel that it is an exercise best abandoned.

Even more damaging is the situation where the L2 student is forced into the position of freeloading as noted above. Slavin (1990) and Johnson et al (1998a) note that one of the most important outcomes of cooperative learning methods is the effect on student self-esteem – that students feel they are well liked by their peers and are doing well academically. Stefani (1998) agrees that assessment procedures help define the attitudes students take to their work – their sense of ownership and control, learning styles and strategies, as well as their confidence and self-esteem – and that these attitudes impact on the quality of learning achieved. If L2 students are freeloading either because their command of English makes it difficult to take part in the group activities, or because their contributions are negated, it would appear that this free-loading would be detrimental to their self-esteem.

These issues deserve our attention. We certainly do not want to teach our L2 students that the best strategy for group assessment is to get into a good group, and then do as little as possible. Nor do we want to place these students in the kind of group situation in which they feel that their contributions are not valued.

Conclusion

If our L2 students are to benefit from group assessments, we need to address the difficulties and challenges presented by this approach. Boud, Cohen and Sampson (1999: 3) warn that, while cooperative learning has much to offer, there are major difficulties to be faced when the groups are made up of ‘… students of substantially different ages, life experiences and cultures, who are unused to interacting freely with each other’. The problems inherent in group assessments with L2 students need to be openly acknowledged so that these challenges can be dealt with in a constructive way.

One of the most important issues is the allocation of time. Group assessment does not appear suited to courses where the time frame does not allow students an extended period in which to work through the various stages inherent in a cooperative approach (Ledwith and Lee 1998; Piper and Thoreau 1998; Wheelan and Lisk 2000). Pressure of work, and a limited time frame, are hardly conducive to allowing students to develop a good group relationship and a healthy work environment. The authors cited above advocate a period of months rather than weeks.

It is also important that the assessments are well structured and have very clear directions and expectations as to how team members are to contribute and
interact (Ledwith and Lee 1998; Siciliano 2001). Assignments should clearly indicate how marks will be allocated and how group cooperation will be measured. Where possible, assignments should be structured in such a way that the background knowledge and skills of students who are not native to the dominant culture will be viewed as an asset (Ledwith and Lee 1998).

Ideally, students should be prepared for group assessment by exploring and discussing group-related concepts (Fuchs et al 1998; Piper and Thoreau 1998; Webb et al 1998; Livingstone and Lynch 2000; Wheelan and Lisk 2000). As Johnson et al (1998b: 27) note, ‘simply assigning students to groups and telling them to work together does not in and of itself result in cooperative activities’. Staff in the survey conducted by Ledwith and Lee (1998) also felt that they themselves needed training to deal with the problems that might arise with group evaluations, and, in particular, issues that might arise because of intercultural difficulties.

The method of assessment should also be carefully considered. It was noted earlier that the most commonly used method was to assess a group product and then distribute the mark among members of the group through some form of peer assessment. Livingstone and Lynch (2000) note that students might be more concerned about the influence of a group assessment mark on their overall grade than for other types of assessment because they view this assessment as beyond their control. The suspicion that they might have fared better in another group can manifest itself in feelings of injustice. However, if group work is not assessed, students are unlikely to take it seriously (Lejk et al 1999). Lejk et al suggest that the solution to this problem is to assess students individually on the work undertaken in a group project. Although this approach runs counter to the philosophy behind cooperative learning, it addresses some of the difficulties presented by group evaluation. It also overcomes the practical difficulty of problems related to the writing up of assignments. The L1 students in Ledwith and Lee’s (1998) survey complained of having to rewrite those parts of the assignments written by L2 students.

Self-selection may be preferable to tutor-designated groups. Although this process will probably lead to some groups consisting solely of L2 students, this may be preferable to placing them with L1 students who do not welcome their presence. A better way to approach this problem, as mentioned above, would be to structure the assessments in such a way that the knowledge and skills that L2 students bring to their groups are seen as an asset. L2 students will then be more likely to be welcomed into groups of L1 students. Perhaps what emerges most strongly from the literature is that group assessment should be implemented cautiously, especially when L2 students are involved. As Watson and Marshall (1995: 407) wryly note: ‘There is a strong possibility that some students simply learn most effectively alone’.
REFERENCES


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