

Learning and Teaching Conference 2012

Abstract 5D

Maximising Student Learning with Autonomous Group Projects in a Philosophy Honours Module

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While group-learning activity is a common feature of undergraduate course curricula in sciences and social sciences it is noticeably less common within the traditional humanities subjects (including my subject, Philosophy), particularly if we look beyond the conventional tutorial or seminar setting. In Philosophy, as in many humanities subjects, it is widespread practice for students within tutorial or seminar settings to be broken down into smaller sub-groups and tasked with discussing ideas, arguments, or problems; but such group work is generally informal and temporary, lasting only for the duration of the seminar hour. Longer-term group work activities seldom form a substantial part of the planned curriculum in Philosophy programmes. This is regrettable, given the proven benefits of peer-learning experiences (Boud, Cohen & Sampson, 2001; Jacques, 2000), and the potential for longer-term group projects to encourage key research skills in undergraduate students. Designing curricula that incorporate group projects provides an important framework for such student research.

This paper describes and evaluates an action-research project carried out in one of my Honours-level Philosophy modules, where the curriculum was substantially re-designed so as to require students to carry out research in groups on a topic of their choice. The student research projects, which culminated in a presentation of the research to the rest of the class, counted as part of the formal (summative) assessment for the module and encouraged the development of a broader set of skills in line with the declared graduate attributes that our Philosophy programme aims to promote. Evaluation of the group research initiative reveals that students performed well in this activity, and found it a positive learning experience that did indeed enhance their 'graduate attributes'.

Bibliography

Boud, D., Cohen, R., & Sampson, J. (2001) *Peer Learning in Higher Education*. London. Kogan Page.

Jacques, D. (2000) *Learning in Groups*. London. Kogan Page.

Learning outcomes of the session:

Understand the value to undergraduate student learning of group-learning and group research activity in humanities subjects (in terms of enhancing curriculum design and graduate attributes, and providing variation in assessment);

Understand ways in which group learning activities can be incorporated into traditional humanities' curricula, and evaluate the pros and cons of introducing such methods.

Presentation lasting approximately 20 minutes, with 10 minutes for audience questions. Some interaction with the audience will be invited at the start of, and throughout, the presentation, focusing on questions such as:

- What factors and features do we need to consider when designing a (module) curriculum?
- How can we ensure our curricula promote the graduate attributes we aim to foster?
- What benefits to the student does group-learning (peer-learning) offer?
- Why do so few philosophy modules incorporate group learning projects? (this may also resonate with teaching in other humanities subjects)