Teaching Tip #4 for 2015:Fairness and Integrity in Marked Group Work

Questions: How can we ensure that there are processes in place for marked group work? What are some of the challenges of group work for marks? What set up could lead to fewer complaints and appeals?

Key Words: Assessment, Course Outcomes, Grading, Validity.

Reasons Students Attempt to Appeal Group Work Results
(Review of appeals by K. Brillinger, 2014)

a) **Group Presentations**. Examples include: Rules not clear. Not clear on what happens if a student contributes to preparation but absent from the presentation? Part marks? Can a student present again if ill? If the group has challenges are they counseled and given options? If one student does less/performs poorly will the faculty assign differing marks? If one student is a weak presenter does everyone suffer?

b) **Group Writing Projects**. Examples include: Rules for projects not clear; no guidance on how to handle communication with rude/difficult/harassing group members; no process for presenting a concern; if a group's challenge can't be resolved, options not fair in terms of providing each member time and resources to complete after group dissolved; is it ok for the students to chop the work up and paste it together at the end or does this fail to ensure that each student has demonstrated the outcomes mapped to this evaluation; no class time provided for the group work with faculty advice available; faculty told students to just sort it out themselves; substantial peer mark indefensible; peers were expected to measure each other against course outcomes, expect student to have transportation to or time for group meetings outside of college hours; peer to peer feedback not well-planned; inter-group problems included harassment; faculty did not provide guidance or justification for set up of the peer mark; did not problem solve with a student who raised a concern; thought students should manage group work on their own; did not discourage off-campus group meetings. One student did all the work.

Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

Students can be very apprehensive of group work. Two cohorts of nursing students were surveyed and Morgan & Rogers (2014) found:

> *"Students indicated an appreciation of the value of team skills for their future role as a registered nurse and agreed that group assessment assisted them to gain these skills. However, they often did not enjoy working in groups for assessment purposes, they thought this penalised good students, and was not as reliable as individual assessments. Perceptions changed little over the duration of the program."*

Well-designed group work can be a useful and motivating experience for students. Collaborative, social teams engaged in problem-solving have proven efficacy, a long history of research backing and strong theoretical underpinnings. Working as a team can enhance the learning experience and is used successfully in well-designed problem and project-based learning. We know working as a team provides opportunities for excellent formative feedback.

What we don't have as much research on is how to avoid problem group assessments in post-secondary courses. Chiriac (2014) interviewed 210 students from two universities and found that working as a group had a potential to enhance learning experiences but that some group work causes positive experiences and other instances of group work causes negative experiences. The students suggested supportive processes needed to be in place for group work to be positive.

Tombaugh & Mayfield (2014) coded advice from experienced students and use the themes to help new students achieve good group work results. You can access the themes when logged in at the college via the permalink in the References section below.

The fine-line between collaboration and collusion also arises. Students sometimes work together in class but are required to produce written work or code on their own. A study of 17 students charged with such academic offences at an Australian university indicates that students "are angry, frustrated and upset about the outcomes of the proceedings and blame lecturers and the institution for not making the line clear between collaboration and collusion in group-work" (Sutherland-Smith, 2013).

Marks & O'Conner (2013) provide a study that looks at many of the issues we experience with group work. One interesting finding was that students do not always perceive that the faculty had the best reasons for choosing group

work for assessment. They concluded that "many students believe professors use group activities to reduce their grading responsibilities." Ironically well set-up group work takes significant faculty consulting time.

Faculty need well-defined processes when group work is used for summative assessments.

Suggestions and Innovations:

If the course is in the first semester of study, consider assigning the task as an individual assignment but allowing students to form a partnership or group of three if they so choose. This would remove a lot of the issues the tips below are meant to resolve. We need to scaffold our expectations of group work across programs so that students are given support in learning to work effectively and to produce products on teams.

Remember that you are considered the manager of the students under Ontario workplace law. You must ensure that the students are safe and that any issues of harassment are addressed immediately. You must also be sure you have enough information to create a valid grade – the grade must reflect each individual student's achievement against the course outcomes.

Group Members

1. Limit the number of students in a group to 2-3. The larger the group the more challenging and time-consuming it is to manage. Larger groups can also be less rich learning opportunities. Large groups do not mimic work expectations. Presentations and written products are seldom done in large groups in the workplace.
2. If the students are demonstrating a work process that does involve a large team then explain the rationale carefully. You will still have a challenge. Each student may not perform all the steps and then you may not be measuring each against the associated course outcomes.
3. Allow students to request to do the same volume of work alone. Some people can learn more and demonstrate the outcomes more effectively on their own. There is no evidence doing group projects builds future work skills though they can enhance learning opportunities.
4. If you identify group members using eConestoga or another randomization process, consider inviting students to let you know if there are reasons they need to change groups. Previous bad experiences may exist. You cannot put a student into a potentially unsafe situation or poisoned learning environment.

5. Do not assign group members by previous academic history (such as grades etc.). If you select the group members, have a defensible academic reason for your choice.
6. Divide the project into stages and after the initial stage (locating topic, finding initial resources, planning work division and timing, etc.), review a deliverable and provide formative feedback.
7. Invite students to see you confidentially if there are challenges.

Instructions for the Assignment

1. Ensure that you provide written instructions for the assignment and for your expectations of group work.
2. Indicate in writing if you reserve the right to assign individual marks should the group work be determined to have been inequitably performed.
3. Separate the PROCESS from the PRODUCT so that students can see your expectations for both. For example, can they chop up the task and then just meet to reassemble? Probably not as this assignment is supposed to measure each student against the associated course outcomes.

Peer Feedback

1. Use peer feedback as a formative tool and checkpoint (formative assessment).
2. Do not allow students to assign marks to each other beyond a minimally weighted peer check (e.g. 10% of an assignment which is 40% of the course mark). It is your role as Professor to determine the extent to which each student has met the learning outcomes for the course (summative assessment).
3. If you want to know who did the work, incorporate checkpoints. Set aside class time to have each group member show you the work in their folder on their computer or to lay it out. Require the group to keep a log of time spent with dates, hours, foci. It is best to have them use a group folder and discussions in eConestoga to house evidence of progress across time.

Group Communication

1. Request that students communicate only through eConestoga or Conestoga email just as you would with fellow faculty.
2. Remind students that their messages to each other, the uploads of documents for review in eConestoga, version codes, etc. are all

evidence that can be called on to check equitable distribution and production of work.
3. NEVER infer that students should meet off-campus.
4. Suggest that students restrict their meetings to an on-campus, safe location.

Disputes

1. Invite students to see you with any concerns. Do not suggest that one course in "Group Dynamics" was enough. Many employees have extensive training in such areas but still need advice on working with a particular team member. Some of our students are direct-entry from high school (aged 17 or 18) and some are new to this (educational) culture.
2. You mandated the group work and need to help manage it via pre-set processes and consultations as needed.
3. If a complaint arises, ask group members to email you separately with their impressions of the group processes and products to date and any concerns. Maintain their confidentiality. Students may have to work together for years to come depending on their program.
4. If you need to disband a group, you will likely need to revise the due date so that the individual students have a reasonable amount of time to complete the work.

Presentations

1. Be very careful with your rubric. You can't justify assigning the same mark to each person for presentation skills (volume, clarity of expression, attention to audience etc.) If such individual skills exist in your rubric, mark each student separately for that section.
2. Divide the product from the presentation of the product. If a student misses the actual presentation they will still have demonstrated the course outcomes in the product.

Plagiarism and Cheating

1. Students all put their names to the written product but it takes a very experienced reader to locate plagiarism. You can have the group use "Turnitin" when submitting the assignment in the eConestoga drop box. You must first click that feature on. That way you can say all group members were supposed to review the "Turnitin" report prior to final submission to you.

2. Charging all students in a group when it is found one has plagiarized or cheated on their section may not be tenable. You may need to follow the electronic threads of file exchange to locate the individual.
3. If the group buys a product online or submits someone else's entire work as their own then this is cheating, not plagiarism.
4. You may have cases where students work in class on general ideas and then you see those ideas in two papers. This may not be what you wanted but it may be hard to provide evidence that this was cheating rather than collaboration unless the work is word-for-word.

Student Program Workload

1. The faculty team for the semester needs to collaborate on workload and timing. If the student has 5 courses x 3 hours + 5 hours extra work per course (preview, review, studying, and projects) then they are at 40 hours. Much more would be unreasonable given that most students are not only students but workers and family members. Group work adds an extra time requirement as students need to coordinate multiple schedules outside of class hours.

References

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