Case study on posters and group work: diversifying assessment on the City, University of London MA Academic Practice
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Introduction

This case study outlines the challenges faced and insights gained by introducing a group assessment on City's MA Academic Practice. Centred on developing a poster artefact, this activity raised issues of inclusive practice and the assessment of group work, as well as questions around information literacy for teachers and participants alike.

Background

Shortly before I joined the Department of Learning Enhancement and Development (LEaD) in August 2017, the MA Academic Practice (MAAP) team adopted a new group-work assessment for one of its constituent modules: the only one on the programme. The module in question – EDM118 Student Support and Personal Tutoring (SSPT) – is one of the modules accredited at UKPSF D2 for the University's PG Certificate in Academic Practice. It is taught face-to-face over four teaching days in the Spring term of each academic year. There is also an associated Moodle space and participants are expected to undertake significant independent study. I took module leadership for this module shortly after my appointment and set about turning the group-work theory into practice and running the new assessment for the first time.

The rationale for introducing group assessment was two-fold: firstly, it was to vary the assessment types experienced by participants on the MAAP. Previously SSPT participants had written a 3000 word essay which, although it encouraged them to reflect on practice and make suggestions for enhancements to practice in their contexts, it did not result in an output that could actually be used other than for end-of-module assessment. Secondly, with the continued emphasis in HE on preparing students for the workplace (Berry, 2007), more staff are running group-work assessments with their own students (or are being strongly encouraged to do so). Group work (and assessment that it involves) continue to have the reputation of being challenging for academic staff to facilitate and for learners to engage with successfully (Martin Davies, 2009; Soetanto and MacDonald, 2017). These challenges can be even greater when distance or online learning are involved (Smith, et al., 2010). Giving SSPT participants direct experience – as learners – of engaging in such an assessment was intended to help them reflect on and empathise with their own students' experiences of similar assessments and (hopefully) validate their continued use.

Putting theory into practice

SSPT participants are now required to work in small groups to design a professional poster on a jointly agreed aspect of student support/personal tutoring aimed at informing others in their context. In addition to the poster, participants have to submit an individually written reflective report detailing the group's choices, undergirding these with relevant literature and identifying points of personal learning (thus aligning their work explicitly with the UKPSF dimensions).

Poster or infographic?

One of the first choices I had to make as module leader was exactly what kind of poster did I want the participants to produce? Reading the module specification, assessment and grade-related criteria, it was not entirely clear whether the desired output was an academic poster with extensive references (like those presented at academic conferences) or an infographic intended to convey complex information quickly and clearly using graphic means. In different places, the module documentation implied both formats. After consulting closely with colleagues, I decided that the emphasis on practical usability and the need for the poster to 'speak for itself' (on school noticeboards, etc.) suggested the infographic format made most sense. (The confusing elements in the module documentation were carefully and repeatedly explained throughout the module's first iteration and have been amended for the next.)

The role of digital tools

The choice of an infographic necessitated further pedagogic decisions: what technology and learning spaces would we use? I was concerned that, by asking participants to produce a graphic artefact, the assessment should remain valid. In other words, we should make sure we were assessing evidence of participants' understanding of student-support issues, not their skills in graphic design. This concern was met with a learning technology solution. We set up a number of accounts on Venngage (https://venngage.com/), an infographics program with a wide choice of templates which all the participants could use to be sure of having a visually satisfying design. Variation in grading should thus, we hoped, be influenced more by the participants' levels of information literacy than their informational design skills (Secker and Coonan, 2013). Integrating learning technology into the practical realisation of the assessment also had the benefit of meeting one of the module's learning outcomes. As we were planning to use a web-based program and intending to devote meaningful amounts of class time to practical group-work activity (see below), we needed to make sure that we had appropriate learning spaces in which we could work with participants. Thus we made sure we had a computer lab with circular tables and 'pop up' PCs for day 3 of the module, where the groups had a morning to work together on their poster project.

Running the module

As noted above, group work and group assessment are seen as challenging and difficult pedagogic modes. We had already identified 'muddy' areas in the module's existing documentation and I knew (from past experience of running group assessments) that I would need to be hands-on and proactive from the start if the participants were going to engage successfully with the group assessment and the class-based and online activities designed to prepare them for it.

Facilitation and scaffolding

Before the first face-to-face teaching day, I ran an ice-breaker on the module's Moodle space which encouraged participants to introduce themselves and say a little about their student support/personal tutoring experience. This worked well with the majority of participants posting. I endeavoured to role-model good practice by responding to participants' introductory posts – in particular making 'scaffolding' links between their articulated experience and issues that would come up in the module, recognising when I had met or taught them before in the context of the MAAP, and welcoming

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them all. The liveliness of these early pre-teaching discussions drew other lecturers on the course into the discussions, which was useful on a module that relies on a wide range of specialist contributors (in technology, academic support, mental health, etc.).

Developing communities of practice and staying relevant

In order for group assessments to have the best chance of working, the groups who work together on them need to be given time and facilitated opportunities to meet each other, develop rapport and spend time thinking about how they are going to complete their task (as well as reaching a shared understanding of why the assignment has been constructed in the ways that it has, and what they need to do/produce). It was an important feature of the assessment brief for this module that the poster could be used within participants' schools to increase awareness of student support/personal tutoring issues. It therefore made sense for groups to be formed from participants from the same schools or cognate areas (e.g. participants from the School of Health joined with externals working in related fields in NHS trusts). It was hoped also that such an organisational approach might assist in some small way towards the further development of participants' discipline-based communities of practice (e.g. Fearon et al, 2012).

Group formation and independent working

The first day's activities were all geared in some way towards achieving the formation of participant groups with something in common and allowing their members to establish rapport (e.g. through peer-to-peer discussion of in-class questions; participation in a world café activity, etc.). All the groups were invited to come up with names for themselves, which were then used consistently across the module. Bearing in mind the fact that personality clashes, etc. within groups sometimes cause problems with group work/assessment, individuals were allowed to swap and change groups freely during the first two days (and after that they would be permitted to change if they requested my permission to do so). Drawing on Elton's (1996) advice to engage in prompt and

clear discussion of assessment requirements, the extrinsic factor most likely to cause learners anxiety, the poster task was discussed in full on day 2, with supporting sessions actively exploring posters, infographics and introducing the chosen program (Venngage). I drew on the expertise of our Education Technology and Neurodiversity teams to help make these sessions both authoritative and inclusive. By the end of day 2 of the module, all groups were well established, working together purposefully and displaying obvious rapport.

This blended and scaffolded approach to establishing the groups made, I consider, all the difference in ensuring the success of the first between-class, independent-study activity: a fact-finding exercise for which each of the nine groups were tasked with discovering as much as they could about resources for and practice of student-support and personal tutoring in their schools. In the month between classes, online engagement was high (each group had been given their own named Moodle forum to record and discuss activity) and very purposeful. When the participants came back together in class, they were given class time and individual support from LEaD's academic team to work through and reflect on the results of their fact finding, firm up their choice of poster theme, and get to grips with using Venngage in a suitably laid out PC lab. Attending to one of the early intentions of setting up this group assessment in the first place – developing staff understanding of and empathy with their own students' engagement in group work – the final session of day 3 included reflexive discussion of students' digital and information literacy as well as of academic integrity.

Following the conclusion of the module (day 4 focused on student counselling, mental health and personal tutoring), participants continued to develop their posters and also began to work on their reflective reports individually. They all had the opportunity to submit both poster and report in draft for feedback from a member of the module team (22/30 participants submitted work for comment).

Assessment

Overall, the posters we marked were of a good standard and our hopes that using Venngage would establish a relatively level playing field in terms of graphic design were realised. However, the marking team's experience of grading and feeding back on the final assignments confirmed our initial doubts about the clarity and marker-friendliness of the original assessment and grade-related criteria. Some criteria clearly related to the poster and report exclusively; others were not so clear-cut. This raised the question of how we were going to be transparent about awarding a mark for the poster that was common to all members of a group if some criteria were shared. Careful moderation helped us feel confident that we had been fair and consistent in our marking despite these challenges. Options for revision were: tightening the criteria so that there are no 'shared' criteria, or giving clearly separate part marks for poster and report. Eventually we decided to tighten and reword the existing criteria and label clearly which ones were relevant to the group activity and the individual reflection. I have also introduced a criterion specifically about inclusive practice as this was an element which became a significant theme as the module unfolded. As this year, I will spend plenty of time in class talking through the criteria for assessment with SSPT participants.

Some 'dos' and 'don'ts'

This experience has enabled me to generate some recommendations for running group work assessments.

DO

- Consider including group assessment in your programme if group work is not currently assessed anywhere, you have 'team work' related learning outcomes, and/or there are distinct employability associated or practice-related reasons for developing your learners as team workers.
- Consider having a blended approach whereby learners are stretched to cooperate and make

decisions both face-to-face and online/at a distance.
- Clearly distinguish in assessment and grade-related criteria which marks are awarded for group activity and which for individual achievement and talk regularly to the students about these.
- Ask learners to produce something that is going to be useful in some way in their current practice / learning environment or future study/ employment.
- Include an element of individual reflection and/ or peer appraisal into your assessment. These different perspectives can be very revealing of common group work issues such as free-loading or teams-working-as-individuals and can help you assess group projects fairly.
- Explore how education technology could help you run your group assessment and help your learners meet the learning outcomes in valid and equitable ways.
- If you are going to use educational technology, take time in making an appropriate choice (involving specialist colleagues), and make sure all learners can access the technology easily and – ideally – use it collaboratively.
- Try and make sensible choices about appropriate learning spaces for your face-to-face (and online) sessions. If your learners are going to be working in groups/using technology in class, make sure they have suitable surroundings and resources.
- Allow plenty of time in class for groups to form, bond and to begin working purposefully together. You will need to monitor these processes quite actively!
- If you have external students (for example, from the NHS or other professional contexts), make sure you monitor how effectively they are integrating into their group(s).
- Talk to co-teaching colleagues at every stage; they are a great source of solutions as well as reassurance.
- Devote time early to explaining the assessment task and don't neglect any aspect of this because you assume it is 'straightforward'. It may not be

and learners may be so anxious about the group assessment that they miss things they would otherwise pick up on.

- Explain what you regard as good practice in group work e.g. coming to decisions collaboratively might produce more rewarding results than rigidly apportioning tasks to individuals.
- Be an active moderator on any online forums and try to find as many opportunities as possible in-class to give groups feedbacks on their plans.
- Expect the unexpected.
- If things go wrong with groups, make time to help find solutions but also just to listen and acknowledge upset if that is what is needed.

DON'T

- Assume an uncomplicated relationship between group assessment and team-working in the workplace. There are significant and crucial differences, especially with respect to power relationships in the workplace and the complications inherent in assessment in the academic setting. You should recognise and be realistic about those.
- Schedule group assessments at points of high stress and very high stakes for students if you can avoid it e.g. at the end of their final year.
- Have criteria of assessment / grade-related criteria which make it difficult for markers and students to distinguish between marks awarded for group work and for individual achievement.
- Try and organise and facilitate a group assessment entirely online unless this is unavoidable.
- Assume your learners are 'digital natives' or that they will be able to use any educational technology you recommend/deploy instinctively.
- Underestimate how quickly and how badly group work can go wrong. Remain vigilant for any change in tone in online or face-to-face discussions and have some strategies worked out for how groups who find it tricky to work together might get back on track / work more pragmatically.

- Underestimate how much planned facilitation and scaffolding work you will have to do as module leader/member of the teaching team. Supporting teams to work together takes time, effort and no little vigilance.
- Expect learners to be able to form, bond and work together purposefully in groups entirely in their 'independent' study time. This is unrealistic. Learners often need more not less support when you are expecting them to work in groups.
- Assume external students will be able to integrate into internally composed students groups without additional support / reassurance.
- Assume – if things go wrong – all members of a 'broken' group need are solutions. Sometimes they just need to have their upset that things haven't worked out acknowledged.

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