A GPS for Group work: Providing the best route to a successful group work experience for enabling students.

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Abstract:

This paper seeks to examine how to support mature aged students to develop group work and self-reflection skills, whilst developing social connectiveness. Ideally, this will enable students to develop skills required to be successful in undergraduate nursing/midwifery studies.

We have developed an approach that introduces group work early in Semester 1 to engage our students based upon first year experience (FYE) principles and effective support of learners from low socioeconomic status backgrounds to integrate curricula and co-curricular learning experiences and to create a sense of belonging in the university. By providing students with resources and evaluation tools this will enable student's to develop group work and self-reflection skills to succeed. We also hoped that the broad experiences of the students would be able to help them work effectively in groups. Our premise is to enable group work to be the vehicle for learning not the learning.

Introduction:

The University of Newcastle (UoN) has the largest open access tertiary preparation program for mature aged students in Australia, with over 2000 students enrolled in the Open Foundation program. Students enrolled in the program are drawn from a diverse range of backgrounds: 36% of students identify as being from low SES backgrounds, 64% are the first in family to attend university and 60% are female. Mature aged students returning to study require assistance in the transition from their adult roles into their new student role (Dawson, 2007).

At UoN, a large number of students choose to study undergraduate nursing after successfully completing Open Foundation (Burgess & Relf, 2014). Developing the ability to work successfully in a group is a skill that these students will require not only for their academic career, but also in their later professional life (Smith & Rogers, 2014). Developing the ability to be self-reflective about one's skills and knowledge is also a necessary part of being a successful student and nurse (Jackson et al., 2014).

Group work is one type of assessment method that can be used by university academics to help develop these skills in students and encourage peer learning. However, group work has long been a source of anxiety for undergraduate students, both around its implementation, use and assessment (Smith & Rogers 2014; Willey, 2014). We wanted to develop a best practice teaching strategy that develops students' group work and self-reflection skills whilst reducing the anxiety around assessment. Use of the online Self and Peer Assessment Resource Kit (SPARK) has been shown to engage students in group work and reduce the anxiety around it (Willey, 2014). Group work in combination with SPARK scaffolds the development of group work skills against a specific set of criteria. It enables students to develop and improve

their learning and judgement by engaging them in reflecting on their own and their peers' contribution. Using SPARK, students are able to receive feedback to inform their future learning (Willey, 2014).

Peer learning is an effective teaching and support strategy to engage first year students, particularly those from low SES backgrounds, in their tertiary studies (Devlin, Kift, Nelson, Smith & McKay, 2012; Thomas, 2010). Kift, Nelson & Clarke's (2010) first year experience principles (FYE) are equally applicable to students entering tertiary enabling programs, as to students entering first year undergraduate studies.

The aim of this pilot study was to develop a workshop to help students navigate the way through their re-introduction to study and allow them to participate in group work so that it would contribute the development and transition of their identify from that of an adult role to that of a student role. Being mindful of this, a pre-group work workshop was developed for the students to participate in prior to the commencement of their group work.

What did we do?

Prior to starting group work in Week 3 of Semester 1, students participated in a workshop designed to provide strategies for working in groups. During the workshop students were introduced to the normal stages of group development and to situations that may occur as a natural part of working in a group. After the completion of group work in week 6, students were asked to reflect on their own, and their peer's contributions to group work using SPARK (Willey & Gardener, 2009).

A questionnaire containing closed and open ended questions was developed to measure students' experience of group work prior to and after completing group work. The questionnaire was administered to the students after the completion of the workshop, but prior to commencement of group work, and one week after group work had been completed.

Mean values of responses to the closed questions using the Likert scale were analysed using SPSS version 22. Open ended questions were analysed using thematic analysis as described by Braun & Clarke (2008).

Did students find the workshop beneficial?

Although 91 % of students agreed that the work shop was beneficial prior to commencing group work, after group work only 78% of students agreed that the workshop had helped them (Table 1). The change in attitude to the benefit of the workshop appears to be linked to the students experience during the group task. Some student's comments indicated that they already had group work skills or that no issues emerged during their group task.

> *"Not really our group was amazing so there were no dramas", "already have group skills", "as a mature student I was already aware of the importance of working in a group".*

Student feedback indicated that the workshop provided students with strategies to manage conflicts that may have arisen during group work.

> *"It has definitely made me feel more confident and excited to start; "Yes, because all students were provided with the same info &tips - making [developing] awareness", "Yes, it gave us clear views as to what to expect, and how to overcome difficulties"* and *"Yes, an outline on what needs to be done to be a successful group".*

Many students found the workshop enabled them to work efficiently as a team with one student commenting "*It did help with conflict resolution*".

	Pre Group work	Post Group work
Group work workshop beneficial	91%	78%
Group workshop not beneficial	2%	10%
Themes:		
Benefitted from collaborating and learning from others	53%	57%
Issues with personality conflicts	49%	31%
Social benefits (meeting new people)	47%	44%
Time management (others and self)	31%	55%
Equal contribution by all team members	28%	23%
Developing confidence/interpersonal skills in group work	7%	4.5%
Lack of confidence/anxiety over group tasks	6%	
All team members worked well together		7%

Table 1: Main themes from thematic analysis of pre- and post- group work workshop feedback.

What did the students have to say about their group work experience?

Prior to and after completion of group work, students thought that group work was socially beneficial, enabled them to learn from others and enhanced their teamwork skills (Table 2).

Survey question	Pre group work survey (n = 146)	Post group work survey (n = 86)
Socially beneficial	4.1	4.1
Helpful to my learning	3.9	3.8
Improve my self-confidence	3.8	4.0
Improve understanding of course material	3.8	3.9
Engage me in learning	3.9	3.9
Help gain problem solving skills	3.8	3.7
Enable critical thinking	3.8	3.8
Enhance communication skills	4.1	3.9
Enhance teamwork skills	4.2	4.0
Enable me to learn from other	4.2	4.0

Table 2: Mean values for pre- and post- group work student survey responses.

The main themes from the thematic analysis of the pre- and post- workshop surveys are presented in Table 1. Prior to commencing group work, the main themes emerging around group work were it would be socially and academically beneficial and there may be issues with personality conflicts and time management (Table 1).

After completing group work, there were some changes in the attitudes of the students towards group work. Students found group work more successful than they were expecting in relation to collaborating with, and learning from, others (Table 1). There were fewer personality conflicts than expected (Table 1). However, students found that time

management became an issue (Table 1). Prior to group work only 31% of students expected time management to be an issue. After completing group work, the theme of time management was mentioned by 55% of students, indicating time management had become a major concern for students.

> *"Making time when we are all free", "Meeting times and different schedule", "Trying to meet up as a whole group" and "Trying to set times/days to meet that suited everybody".*

Collaborating with other students increased from 53% to 57%, and is reflected in the student's comments about the best aspects of group work.

> *"Everyone worked together to achieve a common goal", "getting people's opinions/views and meeting new people", "Getting to know others [students] in the course", "Everyone putting in their own opinions to come to a conclusion or help others who didn't understand" and "getting a big topic covered better".*

What the students have to say about SPARK?

90% of students surveyed thought SPARK was beneficial because if allowed them to analyse their own and others contributions to the group work, enhanced their reflective skills and provided a fair assessment of all group members contributions.

> *"Being able to 'Rate" members on something other than academics. Their contributions and attitude towards other", "It's beneficial because each person is given a fair mark dependent on their contribution", "Being able to put comments/marks to people without them knowing and seeing what other people think of yourself without showing your identify is a great way to get insight", "It forced you to be honest about yourself and others performance".*

	Post Group work
Enhance my learning and/or develop reflective practise	21%
Provides fair contribution mark to group members	16%
Enabled analysis of all participants individual and group contribution	45%
SPARK beneficial	90%
SPARK not beneficial	9%

Table 3: Survey results and thematic analysis of benefits of using SPARK.

Future directions

The aim of this pilot study was to introduce group work early in students' academic career and that it would contribute to student's forming social networks and becoming a community of learners. In future we plan to investigate student's perceptions of group work with and without SPARK, after completing the workshop, to investigate if there are real benefits to a student's experience of group work in the first year.

Were student responses about group work influenced by presentation of the workshop prior to answering pre group workshop questions? Would the pre group work survey be better administered prior to the delivery of the workshop? Will this will enable a better understanding of students perception of group work prior to any strategies been provided?

Will this approach encourage a positive experience of group work for students and promote social connectiveness? Is there scope for this approach to be a model for the introduction of group work early in the first year of a student's academic career?

How can we better use SPARK to improve the student's experience of group work and their self-reflective capabilities?

Broader Relevance: We propose this model could be adopted to enhance a student's experience of group work whilst developing group work and self –reflection skills. We feel this model is particularly relevant when group work is first introduced to students from diverse education backgrounds.

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