Chapter VIII
The Validity of Group Marks as a Proxy for Individual Learning in E-Learning Settings

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents recent research on group assessment in an e-learning environment as an avenue to debate contemporary issues in the design of assessment strategies. The underpinning research measured individual students’ contributions to group processes, individual students’ influence on their peers’ topic understanding of the related curriculum content, and the influence of the overall group experience on personal learning in an e-learning environment designed to act as a catalyst for the group learning. As well, the learning objectives fundamental to the project work were tested individually as part of the final examination. Further, the authors complemented the quantitative aspects of the research with focus group interviews to determine if students perceived that the e-learning environment helped attain the group learning objectives. The authors found that e-learning does not necessarily enhance deep learning in group assignments. They also found that the attainment of group learning objectives does not translate to the attainment of the same individual learning objectives. The chapter provides comment on the relationship that may exist between students’ perceptions of the e-learning environment, the group project work and e-learning group dynamics.

INTRODUCTION

Having students work together in small groups, on some common assignment task is part of most fields in university teaching (Biggs, 2003; Laurillard, 2002; Lejk, Wyvill & Farrow, 1997; Ramsden, 2003; Wen & Chin-Chung, 2008). Claims in support of using group work have ranged across
pedagogical activities such as providing for practice in group skills, preparation for professional life, the fostering of learning related interaction, and even the reduction of teachers’ marking loads (Bourner, Hughes & Bourner; 2001; Gammie & Matson 2007; Goldfinch, Laybourn, MacLeod & Stewart, 1999; Higher Education Academy, 2008; Sharp, 2006; Steensels et al., 2006; Thorpe 2008). Such activities can involve groups from three or four students up to larger teams of perhaps a dozen students. The work undertaken by those groups can range from some small defined task that could take days, through to large scale multi-faceted projects that might take an entire semester (often 13 weeks of full time study), and consume the bulk of the study time that a student has available within a single enrolment unit.

With the growth of E-Learning across the higher education and corporate learning sectors globally, there is now a plethora of ‘tools’ available that can act as catalysts to promote group learning opportunities—for example proprietary and open source learning management systems such as Blackboard and Moodle; discussion groups (e.g. bulletin boards) permit group members to post information for the other members of the group to view non-synchronously; online chat forums permit group members to meet virtually and discuss their progress synchronously. More recently online social networking technologies and interactive spaces (e.g. YouTube, MySpace and wikis) as well as virtual real-time environments (e.g. Second Life) have been explored and used by teachers and learners to meet educational goals (Miller & Lu, 2007; Boulos, Hetherington & Wheeler, 2007; Elgort, Smith & Toland, 2008).

In this chapter we focus on the alignment, attainment and testing of group and individual learning objectives. While this takes place in an E-Learning setting, we conclude that such an environment is not crucial for this purpose. In our context, the E-Learning that took place was part of a ‘blended’ learning strategy. The E-Learning that took place was in the ‘background’ so to speak, facilitating weekly discussion and debate required for students’ group assignments using ‘chat’ and bulletin boards. Ultimately, while it aided the attainment of the group learning objectives, we did not investigate the impact of the E-Learning environment on group dynamics. As such, this chapter’s focus is on a comparison of individual versus group assessment in an E-Learning supported environment.

Over the last five years we have studied whether group learning assessment is valid and whether E-Learning acts as a catalyst for group learning. This chapter, which is a synthesis of our prior work, provides evidence that E-Learning does not necessarily enhance deep learning in group assignments and that the attainment of group learning objectives does not translate to the attainment of the same individual learning objectives. It suggests the obvious: that an E-Learning environment per se does not automatically lead to the attainment of deep learning objectives. It also raises implications for further work in relation to group dynamics and E-Learning supported group work in classrooms.

An important caveat is that our study is somewhat limited since we focused on e-moderation in forums and chats, which may not be representative of the learning and assessment potential of social networking techniques. It is feasible that the use of different technologies in the same assessment setting may create different group learning opportunities or lead to different conclusions.

**BACKGROUND: STIMULATING GROUP LEARNING IN AN E-LEARNING ENVIRONMENT**

The contextual setting that informs this chapter is a postgraduate unit of study undertaken over a 13-week academic semester, in which the majority of the students over time have been full-fee paying international students who are also in