

Group assessments: Dilemmas facing lecturers in multicultural tertiary classrooms

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'Group is good, and group is good for curing all social ills' was the cynical observation of one of the lecturers in this study. Her comment reflects the uneasiness of lecturers at tertiary institutions with the notion that the educational advantages of group assessments far outweigh the disadvantages and that such an approach promotes the integration of minority groups in multicultural universities. In this article, we reflect on the dilemmas facing lecturers in multicultural tertiary classrooms when they adopt group assessment as a means of evaluation and highlight those challenges which often jeopardise the successful implementation of this type of practice.

Keywords: *group assessments; implementation; lecturers; multicultural; tertiary*

Background

There is much research to support the contention that group work, or co-operative learning, is an effective tool for improving academic performance (Johnston & Miles, 2004; Karakowsky & McBey, 2001; Johnson, Johnson & Smith, 1998a, 1998b; Lejk, Wyvill & Farrow, 1997; Zhining, Johnson & Johnson, 1995). Researchers argue that students are involved in tasks that could not be attempted alone; multiple skills are brought to bear on problems and conflicting views are aired and considered (Young & Henquinet, 2000; McCorkle, Reardon, Alexander, Kling, Harris & Iyer, 1999; Gatfield, 1999). Olivera and Straus (2004, p.455) suggest that working in groups "fosters transfer of learning to individuals" and that this transfer can be attributed mainly to the "cognitive elements of group interaction". While the benefits of group work are clear, there is a need to differentiate between co-operative work and collaborative work, particularly when group assessment is involved.

Panitz (1996) contends that lecturers move uneasily between the tenets underpinning co-operative learning and those that support collaborative learning. According to Panitz and Bruffee (1995) an important difference between the two approaches appears to be the teacher's authority. In co-operative learning, teachers assume much responsibility. Bruffee (1995, p.16) notes they 'intervene frequently and randomly in the work of the groups'. In the collaborative approach, group governance 'remains as much as possible in the hands of the students' (Bruffee, 1995, p.17). Bruffee argues convincingly that the former approach, while suitable for students at school, is too restrictive for tertiary students and that the lecturer's vigilance in ensuring accountability undercuts one of the principal aims of tertiary education: that of shifting authority from lecturer to student groups. He points out (1995, p.18) that the controls imposed by co-operative learning 'are likely ... to frustrate and discourage adolescents and adults by leaving in place, unquestioned, the hierarchical social structure of traditional learning'. Bruffee further asserts that 'self-governed peer relationships' are the advantages to be gained from collaborative learning but concedes that such an approach sacrifices "guaranteed accountability". This sacrifice of guaranteed accountability impacts on the process of group assessment and appears to be the reason for the tight control many university lecturers exercise during the group-assessment process. Dillenbourg (1999, p.11) voices the concern that in the co-operative approach, group members really work as individuals and then 'assemble the partial results into the final output'. Collaboration, he contends, means that the

groups work 'together'. Littleton and Häkkinen (1999, p.21) argue that collaborative activity 'involves the construction of a solution that could not otherwise have been reached'. The collaborative approach appears then to demand greater freedom of operation for its members and in return is likely to yield more innovative results.

Dilemmas associated with group assessment

Group assessment is popular because there is a perception that group work and the accompanying assessment is a good way of developing skills for employability (Johnston & Miles, 2004; Pfaff & Huddleston, 2003; Livingstone & Lynch, 2000; McCorkle *et al.*, 1999; Mutch, 1998; Lejk *et al.*, 1997). There is also the perception that this approach benefits the lecturers: that by reducing the number of papers to be graded, the workload of the lecturer will be substantially reduced (Livingstone & Lynch, 2000; McCorkle *et al.*, 1999; Mutch, 1998). However, there are researchers who advise caution in the use of group assessment in tertiary education (Hernandez, 2002; Lejk *et al.*, 1999; Ledwith & Lee, 1998; Baldwin, Bedell & Johnson, 1997), and Mutch (1998) argue that there is also doubt that team work actually develops skills that are useful in the workplace.

Livingstone and Lynch (2000, p.326) point out that there 'is a relatively small body of research on the impact of team-based learning on students, as assessed through their experience or their grade performance'. McCorkle *et al.* (1999, p.109) argue that most researchers appear to accept the necessity of students working in groups to achieve learning objectives, that there is an 'implicit acceptance' that students will develop team skills and at the same time, absorb discipline-related knowledge. They challenge this assumption arguing that 'student group work may not only be inefficient as a pedagogical tool but also undesirable from an outcome perspective'. They point out that group projects are often divided up among students and then cobbled together to be presented. This means that students can have a very good understanding and knowledge of their particular aspect of a project but very little insight into the broader picture. In groups where a few members do most of the work, their less-willing colleagues might have a very poor understanding of all the work involved (McCorkle *et al.*, 1999).

Leki (2001, p.51) paints an even more disturbing picture of a group project she observed. She notes that 'no one looked at what the others had written; no one reviewed the final collated report'. However, as she notes rather cynically, the group received 87%, so 'all was well'. Interestingly, the student magazine at our university rated group assessment as one of the ten most 'sucky' things about the institution querying whether it actually reflects the real world (*debate*, 2004, p.4).

There is also evidence, not surprisingly, that group assessment can lead to student frustration and resentment (Pfaff & Huddleston, 2003; James & McInnis, 2001; Livingstone & Lynch, 2000). Hitchcock and Anderson (1997) contend that small group projects can actually damage individuals and the learning climate. Obviously, the allocation of marks is an important issue, closely allied to that of 'freeloading' (Johnston & Miles, 2004). Gatfield (1999) also concedes that the awarding of marks is a contentious issue but as McCorkle *et al.* (1999) argue, what appears to be more important is student perception that the system is unfair when some students'

marginal participation is rewarded equally with full participation. Once a student has experienced what he/she considers to be unjust treatment, this episode will colour his/her approach to future group work assignments (Livingstone & Lynch, 2000). It seems logical then to assume that if problems arise in groups that share a common language and culture, these difficulties will be exacerbated when members are from diverse language and cultural backgrounds. Volet and Ang (1998, p.6) argue that there is a 'dearth of theoretically based research on learning and instruction in relation to international and multicultural student groups at university'. Furthermore, Leki (2001, p. 42) contends that social and academic interactions between EAL (English as an additional language) students and their first-language counterparts have not been sufficiently considered in the literature and that teachers and researchers have little knowledge of these interactions. One of the results of this lack of understanding appears to be the widespread practice of placing these group projects under fairly tight time constraints. Watson, Kumar and Michaelson (1993) contend, for instance, that the additional difficulties experienced by culturally diverse groups as opposed to homogeneous ones, are temporary. They argue that it hardly seems fair 'to expect newly formed groups with a substantial degree of cultural diversity to be able to solve problems very effectively' (1993, p. 598).

Mills (1997) conducted a study at a New Zealand university which examined the learning and teaching experiences of EAL students, local students and academic staff. She noted that some staff members tended to interpret their experiences with EAL students using 'quite simplistic cultural stereotypes' and referred to 'Asian students in ways that suggested they were a homogenous group' (Mills, 1997, p.107).

Kumaravadivelu (2003) argues that teachers who specialise in teaching EAL students often employ harmful stereotypes. If these teachers who work intimately with such students are guilty of this practice, it is not surprising that lecturers who do not share this group's specialised knowledge fall all too easily into the same trap. Campbell (2000, p.32) contends that teachers are 'far more likely to be monolingual, monocultural and culturally encapsulated than their students'. Strauss (2001) argues that at times lecturers appear to operate on assumptions regarding different cultural groups that verge on stereotyping such as the contention that Asian students enjoy group work because they come from collectivistic societies. Early (1993, p. 346) warns that 'the blanket adoption of group-based work in a collectivistic culture is not appropriate', explaining that it is the type of group which is of paramount importance, not the group context *per se*.

In addition to cultural differences, there are also motivational differences. Many students are international students resident in the country for a relatively brief period of time. Their prime motivation is to obtain a qualification from an English-speaking country to pursue lucrative careers in their home countries. If this can be achieved more easily and pleasantly in a group of people who share their language and cultural values, they are likely to prefer this option.

However, one must guard against using the cultural clash as a convenient explanation for group difficulties. It is all too easy to blame the breakdown of group projects on the passivity of EAL students who do not participate in the group activities. Increasingly, research has indicated that Asian students are not passive learners who wish to be spoon-fed. They want to explore and discover their own answers

(Littlewood, 2000). Kumaravadivelu (2003, p.714) argues that looking at the communication behaviour of EAL students 'predominantly through the cultural lens will result in nothing more than a one-dimensional caricature of these learners'. Culture shock, defined by Brown (1986) as a form of anxiety that results from the loss of commonly understood ways of social intercourse, is obviously experienced by EAL students. However, it is not necessarily restricted to them and will also be experienced by other students and lecturers, albeit in a far milder form. Chrysochoou (2004, p. 4) notes that the idea of culture shock has been criticized because it appears to imply that it is only the problem of newcomers and that while newcomers are attempting to make sense of their new experiences, 'their presence and their actions also transform this (new) environment'.

It is important too, not to see cultural interaction as a one-sided exchange. An aspect that deserves greater attention is the reaction of members of the dominant culture and language group. There are indications of the growing resentment in the ranks of first-language students towards their second-language counterparts. Research indicates that members of the dominant culture tend to become more negative in their attitude towards students from different cultural groups as they move through the university, from the first to the third year of study (Volet & Ang, 1998).

Leki (2001, p. 60) argues that first-language students might position themselves as 'experts, masters or at least the more senior members of the community or practice' and view the EAL students as 'novices, incompetents or apprentices'. This can happen even before groups are formed and can result in some students 'being tacitly bypassed in group formation' (Leki, 2001, p. 48). The obvious result is that EAL students' contributions will be sidelined or undervalued (Strauss, 2001).

One important factor in this negation of EAL students' role in the group is the difficulty that they often experience in expressing their opinions and ideas fluently and articulately in English. The linguistic challenges that EAL students face in this regard have been well documented (Dooey & Oliver, 2002; Bartlett, 2000; Coley, 1999; Aspland & O'Donoghue, 1994). In their discussion of the team process, Deeter-Schmelz, Kennedy & Ramsey, (2002, p.116) cite Katzenbach and Smith's definition of the process as:

a set of values that encourages behaviours such as listening and constructively responding to points of view expressed by others, giving others the benefit of the doubt, providing support to those who need it, and recognising the interests and achievements of others.

This is clearly a process that requires both linguistic and communicative competence.

In this minefield, it would appear that both lecturers and students need to be well equipped to deal with problematic situations that may arise. Unfortunately, as Baldwin *et al.* (1997, p.1393) point out, as far as student peer interaction is concerned, so little is known that 'any recommendations made to date really constitute wishful thinking more than empirically supported prescriptions'. This lack of understanding of peer interaction seems to be exacerbated by many lecturers' ignorance of how group projects should be implemented or their assumption that all students and lecturers share a common understanding of the purpose and process of group projects (Hitchcock & Anderson, 1997). Young and Henquinet (2000) who developed a framework that focuses on the pedagogical purposes of group assessment found that

many participants in the workshops they presented on group projects had not considered the link between their reason for assigning the project and the evaluation method employed.

Bolton (1999, p.235) argues that students are frustrated because lecturers do not provide proper guidance, opting instead for the 'sink-or-swim learning model', despite research that suggests 'team-based experiential learning constitutes an effective pedagogical strategy only when instructors carefully design and guide the process'. Hernandez (2002, p.74) points out that what is missing is 'a comprehensive pedagogy that creates learning environments that are conducive to effective student collaboration'. Moreover, many group-work projects are placed under fairly tight time constraints. Clinebell and Stecher (2003, p.364) argue that such time limits hamper a team's ability to establish proper roles in the group. These limits result in 'normal group development processes (being) sidestepped to meet performance deadlines'. They contend that the fifteen-week semester does not provide enough time for the formation of 'positive social relationships'.

To summarise, it appears that lecturers are increasingly required to implement group assessment, the value of which is being called into question. The system requires them to monitor complex interaction in student groups which are often distrustful of this type of assessment. Additionally, these groups with diverse members are required to work under time pressures to meet inflexible deadlines. It is hardly surprising that the lecturers in our study singled out group assessment as a major issue. Many lecturers have very little, if any knowledge, not only of the practical implementation of the process but also of the educational ramifications of the approach that demands the heavy-handed intervention of a teacher at tertiary level. Yet, if group assessment is to be implemented successfully as part of co-operative learning, such intervention is necessary.

Methodology

In 2004, the year in which both studies discussed in this article were conducted, approximately 23,000 full and part time students were enrolled at the university. The institution does not gather information as to students' first language but does ask for details regarding ethnicity. Approximately 38% of students identified as European, 24% as Asian, 13% as Maori or Pasifika and the remainder either supplied another ethnicity or did not provide details. The initial study sought to investigate the difficulties facing lecturers at the university involved in undergraduate programmes where there is a large mix of EAL students and local New Zealanders (Strauss & U, 2005) in the small classes on which the university prides itself. At first-year level, the class sizes range from 30 -70 students.

At the inception of the initial study, programme leaders of first year degree courses in all the faculties were asked whether staff could be approached to participate in the research. Once they had given their consent, an email was sent out to all eligible staff and 21 indicated their willingness to take part in the project. These lecturers had a wide range of tertiary teaching experience which varied from 3-24 years and represented disciplines in the Faculties of Arts, Science and Engineering, Business and Health. Their participation stemmed mainly from their interest and concerns regarding the diversity of cultures and languages of their students and the consequent

impact on their teaching practice. This initial study revealed that lecturers were particularly concerned about the impact of group projects. The original 21 participants were asked if they would consent to another interview focusing more narrowly on group assessment. 14 agreed to this follow-up interview.

The follow-up study employed a qualitative descriptive design (Sandelowski, 2000) and involved semi-structured interviews with the 14 lecturers. The questions used in the interviews were developed after an extensive literature review and a careful analysis of the group work issues raised spontaneously by lecturers in the initial research project. This semi-structured approach was chosen as it allows researchers to ask the major questions in the same way of each interviewee but at the same time grants them the latitude to alter the sequence and probe for more information (Robson, 2002; Fielding & Thomas, 2001). The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 1.5 hours each.

The interview transcripts were returned to the lecturers to check for accuracy and to verify that they were willing to allow the information to be used in our research. The transcripts were then read by both researchers who independently developed categories which each felt captured the opinions and insights of the interviewees. In a series of meetings, the researchers discussed these categories, most of which were very similar. Where there was a difference of opinion the interviews were re-read until agreement was reached and categories adjusted or discarded. This method is referred to by Patton (1990, p. 464) as 'analyst triangulating'. This analysis allowed us to explore our own and others' assumptions (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and led to the identification of a number of themes such as lecturers' assumptions and expectations regarding EAL students and strategies and challenges in teaching multicultural classrooms.

Results

It became apparent during the course of the interviews that the decision to use group projects for assessment purposes is not usually taken by individual lecturers but is a decision made by teams teaching on a particular qualification. At times it is the result of a policy decision taken by a department or a school. All the assessment projects discussed by the lecturers in this article utilised a co-operative approach and operated within very limited time frames.

As has been discussed, the issues canvassed with the lecturers were based on concerns raised in the initial study and a review of the relevant literature. All the interviewees agreed that the major issues were the ways in which groups were selected for group projects, and the fairness and reliability of the assessment procedure. Despite these concerns, the majority of those implementing group assessment regarded its use as educationally justifiable, although it was clear that some had no choice as to whether they adopted this approach or not. While there was support for its value in promoting learning in the disciplines, most staff viewed it more broadly as preparing students for life, to help develop and enhance their social skills necessary for successful interaction in multicultural societies. Unsurprisingly, lecturers in the Business Faculty were particularly aware of the benefits that might accrue from group projects.

However, there were lecturers who were not convinced that group projects necessarily offered an educational experience superior to more traditional approaches. One lecturer noted that the department in which she worked had decided not to have graded group assessments in the future. She commented that the department's perception was that students are more competitive than they were ten years ago, adding that they had experienced 'some quite disturbing incidents of groups not accepting a student' because the perception was that the student would 'pull our grade down'. She noted that lecturers were not willing to expose vulnerable students, who were at risk because English was not their first language, to this type of rejection.

Less serious reservations were also expressed. One lecturer noted simply that 'certain types of assessment become trendy ... so it's kind of flavour of the week' and another felt that group work was viewed as 'a panacea for all assessment woes'. Even those who strongly supported the use of group assessment were well aware of the challenges associated in administering group projects and viewed its implementation as problematic.

Challenges regarding group selection

As indicated, the way in which the group was selected was viewed as extremely problematic. One lecturer described it as 'fraught ... very, very difficult', particularly where EAL students were concerned. She commented further that a number of these students are:

... at a different stage, uneven, and they're not ready to work in groups perhaps or they're not ready to participate because their English isn't so good, or by the time they've translated the question, things have moved on, or by the time they've looked something up in their electronic dictionary, it's 10 minutes down the track and it's moved on ... for all sorts of reasons they are not ready to do it.

Lecturers are aware of the resentment many first-language students harbour towards projects which involve group members from different language and ethnic groups. It was noted that some first-language students even asked specifically not to be placed in groups with EAL students. In trying to accommodate these different students in groups, lecturers have three choices: they can select the groups themselves, based on their knowledge of the students, assign students to groups randomly or allow the students to self-select. All these approaches are problematic and present difficulties in multicultural situations.

Lecturers who opted for self-selection voiced their concern about what was generally termed 'the leftovers'. They noted that often students did not know each other well enough to make self-selection a meaningful process. This was a particular problem at first-year level as many of the EAL students appear hesitant to make overtures to their first-language peers. One lecturer spoke of students who had to be placed once the groups had self-selected and said that she rarely insisted on groups accommodating students who had not been placed. She admitted that 'we haven't done a lot of that, probably because we've lacked the courage to go there I suspect'.

Lecturers who did not agree with self-selection felt that it was incumbent on them to divide the students into groups although this was no easy task. One lecturer spoke of EAL students' inability to participate successfully in group projects, mentioning 'the

loss-of-face issue, the language issue, the mindset issue ... and the fear - the “them and us” fear’. She noted too that the first-language students are shy and uncertain as to how they should interact with these EAL students. She argued that:

(they) don’t know how to simplify their language, they don’t know how to make points clear, so they just say it again, they say it louder, they say it slower but they say the same thing. And that language issue, that participation issue, that sort of “them/us” divide, I think is hugely important.

One lecturer who had tried selecting the groups herself said that she had come to the conclusion that self-selection is fairest ‘because then people who have strengths are able to go with other people that have strengths and achieve the maximum mark’. One participant felt strongly that not allowing students to self-select was pandering to notions of political correctness:

What are you focusing on? Are you focusing on their learning or are you focusing on your need to be p.c. about everybody talking to each other? So I guess I’ve always found that as a position quite an arrogant one, that’s not my call. If somebody has come to be in my class, I assume they’ve come in to learn the topic but not necessarily to learn how to get along with other people and to learn how to speak English.

Despite these difficulties, lecturers strive to ensure that the groups they select will work well together. Questionnaires are designed and administered to students who are asked to fill in details about their work preferences, study styles, language skills and motivation so that students with similar answers can be grouped together. Some approaches are not so orthodox. One lecturer assigned students to groups according to the four divisions of the signs of the Zodiac, placing the air, fire, earth and water signs in separate groups. This lecturer claimed that the division resulted in the best group work he had ever seen. Others make sure that there is at least one first-language speaker in each group to help with language difficulties. Nevertheless, one lecturer admitted that the way in which she tried to mix the groups was ‘so subjective it’s ridiculous’.

Randomly assigning students to groups was a fairly common practice. Practices included numbering students so that all the ‘ones’ would form a group, as would the ‘twos’ and ‘threes’. Other variations included lecturers offering students pieces of dried fruit and then telling them to find peers who had selected the same type of fruit or telling students to group themselves with those sitting behind or in front of them. However, it was not apparent whether approaches that required more effort on the part of the lecturers such as the designing, administering and interpreting of detailed questionnaires were significantly more successful than the less conventional ones.

Challenges regarding equity and reliability

The other major issue was in the fairness and reliability of group assessment in indicating the strengths and weaknesses of the students. While lecturers were often puzzled as to the best ways to select groups, the equity of the process aroused far stronger feelings. One lecturer summed up the general feeling when she said, ‘I want to make sure that people that are progressing through the degree have got there under their own steam and not on the back of somebody else’.

This concern with freeloading has led to systems being devised to prevent it happening. Students are often required to keep minutes of meetings, lecturers meet with groups regularly to monitor performance and students evaluate others in the group. Many departments have sophisticated and complex systems of appeal when students feel that the group mark does not reflect individual contribution to a project. However, this complex monitoring system introduces challenges of its own and is often time-consuming and difficult for lecturers to implement. For students to participate in the process properly, they need to have a sound understanding of the criteria involved in the assessing of the assignment and the avenues open to them should they be dissatisfied with their marks.

Another cause for concern was the fact that very few of the lecturers we interviewed had had any formal training in group-assessment procedures. Although the university does offer workshops in this regard, most lecturers were too busy to attend them. Others were not offered training through their schools or departments, though there was often informal support from colleagues or inexperienced lecturers might be paired up with their more experienced peers. However, there was concern that this was inadequate. One lecturer was so worried about her lack of understanding of the process that she sought training outside the university.

Discussion

Before discussing issues related to the implementation of group assessment, it is necessary to revisit the views that co-operative group work can be restrictive, both in terms of the way it functions and the results of the interactions. There appears to be a great deal of truth in this assertion and the view of Dillenbourg (1999), Littleton and Häkkinen (1999) that deeper learning might take place and more innovative solutions can be expected in collaborative groups. However, participation in such a collaborative group appears to require some experience with group projects, and a degree of maturity and commitment that is not always found among students, particularly those in undergraduate programmes. This view was echoed by many of the lecturers we interviewed who are uneasy about the responsibility they assume for group assessments. They argue that in the multicultural environment of the university they are constrained to do so as many first year students are not yet able to accept full responsibility for their own learning in a group situation. Lecturers are, however, very aware that by ensuring the accountability which many students demand, they are in essence holding on to authority and not allowing students to assume full responsibility for their own learning.

Our follow-up study identified lecturers' concerns about group selection, and the equity and reliability of the process as major issues. Closely allied with the issue of group selection was the concern that if this process is flawed, interaction in the groups might well be problematic. There were also queries regarding the pedagogical justification for the approach and an awareness that badly designed group assessment projects can undermine teaching and learning. These concerns have all been identified in recent studies (Hernandez, 2002; Leki, 2001; McCorkle *et al.*, 1999; Lejk *et al.*, 1999; Ledwith *et al.*, 1998; Baldwin *et al.*, 1997; Hitchcock *et al.*, 1997). However, there was strong support for the argument that if group assessment is employed correctly, it undoubtedly has the potential to promote better student interaction and

understanding and allow a sharing of different views and knowledge. It can also help universities to cope with increased class sizes and can be used to reduce the marking workloads of lecturers.

Many of the issues identified as problematic apply to groups regardless of whether they are homogenous or heterogeneous in nature. Other formal assessments do not make the same demands on students' ability to work co-operatively; nor are students penalised for the shortcomings of their peers. Because the process is often challenging, research (Hernandez, 2002; Young *et al.*, 2000; Bolton, 1999) suggests that both lecturers and students should be equipped with the necessary skills to deal with potentially exploitive or emotionally damaging situations. In addition, if lecturers are uncertain as to how to administer the group projects and how marks should be allocated, it is unlikely that the marks will be distributed in a way that most students perceive as a just reward for their efforts.

Unfortunately, our findings indicate that most lecturers are under such pressure that they regard attendance at workshops designed to assist them as a luxury they can ill afford. This is of particular concern in light of the fact that many faculties and schools appear to have adopted the maxim 'group is good' and are virtually insisting that group assessment form an important part of evaluation processes. The positive approach that faculties appear to have adopted towards group assessment might also make it difficult for lecturers to challenge the validity of the process.

Consideration of the time factor in group assessment is also crucial. As has been argued in the literature review, this type of assessment cannot be rushed. The study of Clinebell *et al.*, (2003) indicates that students need sufficient time to become familiar with each other, and to set up proper group processes. A group project crammed into a six or even a ten-week cycle is unlikely to be a valuable learning tool. Perhaps allowing a longer time period for students to plan their work and establish effective relationships within the group might be advantageous.

Young *et al.* (2000) argue that lecturers are not always clear about their motives for employing this type of assessment: whether it is really a valid and reliable instrument that will make the assessment process an educational one or merely a politically correct way of 'encouraging' students to mix while at the same time reducing the marking load. It is also a concern that lecturers in our study indicated that they were not always allowed to judge for themselves whether group assessments were appropriate in the circumstances or not. It is unlikely that group assessment will benefit the students if it is overused or employed without careful consideration as to whether it is the most suitable form of assessment. If lecturers wish to implement group assessment, it appears in the interests of best practice that they teach students the requisite skills to cope with challenges that may arise.

However, it is also apparent from the research (Chrysochoou 2004; Leki 2001; Strauss 2001; Volet *et al.*, 1998) that these challenges in the group work process may well be exacerbated by the cultural and/or linguistic differences among group members. It appears logical to assume that negotiating points of concern will be difficult if some group members are not fluent communicators, and lack of understanding as to culturally acceptable conduct on both sides will also increase tension. Ensuring students receive sufficient explanation from lecturers and are given

adequate and satisfactory consultation time before group projects are implemented, is vital. There should be sufficient time for students to be pre-taught how to form and maintain workable groups and they also need to be introduced to strategies to help them deal with conflicts that might arise because of differences in assumptions and expectations.

It is suggested that the nature of the assignment needs to be carefully considered. Research (Young *et al.*, 2000; McCorkle *et al.*, 1999; Mutch, 1998; Hitchcock *et al.*, 1997) indicates that this aspect is not always approached with sufficient caution. It appears unlikely that a lecturer telling students that cross-cultural exchanges will broaden their horizons and better equip them for the workplace will have a great deal of effect on students concerned mainly with the here and now. Perhaps group assignments designed to draw on the knowledge of EAL students of systems, cultures, philosophies and approaches outside the host country might be the best way to persuade first-language students to regard the input of these students in a more positive light. In addition, it appears that lecturers need to be mindful of the pitfalls surrounding the process of team formation and that self-selection, lecturer selection and random selection all present different challenges (Strauss, 2001). Lack of forethought and preparation in drawing up these assessments is a concern, and cultural and linguistic differences cannot be used as a convenient scapegoat where the real difficulty is inadequate planning. Unfortunately, as Campbell (2000) warns, it is relatively easy to change educational policies but it is far harder to change teachers and teaching practices.

Conclusion

Despite the challenges involved in the implementation of group projects, we feel that carefully planned and properly monitored projects do have an important role to play in tertiary institutions. However, adopting an unquestioning stance, as far as the value of group assessment is concerned, serves neither lecturers nor their students well. The challenge for our institutions is to ensure that group projects are a positive learning experience for our students. In the words of one participant, ‘... assessment is to do with fairness and justice and we often forget the big picture and we concentrate on the detail’.

In order to keep this ‘big picture’ in mind, institutions should encourage staff to debate the nature and purpose of cooperative learning and explore which projects best lend themselves to this approach. Lecturers need to realise that such projects need to be carefully selected, designed and implemented and that students need to be sufficiently prepared with both the requisite academic and socio-cultural skills to undertake them successfully.

Further investigation into group assessment practices in order to bring about improved understanding and implementation appears necessary. One of the limitations of this research is the lack of input from the students themselves, in that they were neither interviewed nor surveyed, nor did we have any access to evaluation forms. In addition, to better inform group assessment practices the views and insights of the major stakeholders, the students, need to be canvassed and assessed.

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