Developing work-based transferable skills in a university environment

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Introduction

Few issues are currently exciting more attention in teaching and learning in higher education than the student assessment process. Just at the time when academics are having to cope with increasing student numbers against a fixed or falling unit of resource, the focus on competence-based learning is causing a re-examination of assessment practices. Simultaneously, there is a shift towards assessment of students’ transferable personal skills as well as the academic content of what they are studying. All of this is leading to the development of new assessment methods, giving rise to the need for greater than ever ingenuity and flexibility, while still monitoring and assuring the quality of the process (Kemp and Seagraves, 1995).

In the last few years the UK Enterprise Initiative has provided an impetus for change in the way tutors interact with and communicate knowledge to students (Brown and Knight, 1994). There is a growing awareness among educators that it is important to increase student participation in the learning process and to provide a skills-based education as well as one based on academic achievements. This appears to be confirmed by recent analyses of management education which concluded that the educational system ignored important practical and personal competences (Constable and McCormick, 1987; Handy, 1988; Porter and McKibben, 1988).

Many of the new teaching and learning strategies developed within EHE institutions have been designed to ensure that students become more aware of the demands of future employers for graduates who are able to display a range of personal transferable skills. Communication and presentation skills, problem-solving and organizational skills, teamwork and leadership skills have all been incorporated into degree courses. In addition, in many fields of professional training there has been a concern for developing students’ ability to assess and evaluate their own work in ways which are applicable to their future profession (Magin and Churches, 1989). According to Boud and Lublin (1983), “one of the most important processes that can occur in education is the growth in students of the ability to be realistic judges of their own performance and the ability to monitor their own learning”.

From an historical viewpoint the prevalent model for assessment throughout the education system has been one in which “students have little or no input, are often unaware of the assessment criteria and have little recourse regarding the judgements made of them” (Falchikov, 1986). Within the context of the changing climate of higher education, development of groupwork and self- and peer-assessment skills are becoming increasingly important issues in many EHE institutions, reflecting the changing face of the work and social environment as outlined below.

Individuals within an organization spend a considerable proportion of their day working and dealing with groups. As a member of a work group and as a representative of a firm who interacts with various groups both inside and outside the firm, organizational personnel must understand the dynamics of groups and how they can influence the total level of accomplishment. It is therefore important that students have an opportunity to work in groups, in order to experience the behavioural and managerial processes which are exhibited, such as: security and protection; affiliation; esteem and identity; task achievement; member roles and status; group cohesiveness; norms; conflict resolution; negotiation; teamwork and communication (Vecchio, 1995).

With regard to assessment, individuals practise self- and peer-evaluation in many areas of their lives. For example, staff appraisal in an organization requires individuals to reflect on their level of achievement over a specified period and to identify areas of weakness which require further work. At the same time, an increasing number of professional bodies recognize the need for their members to carry out an audit of their development requirements (Barthorpe, 1996; Professional Manager, 1996). In many of the types of assessment that students undertake, they are expected to assess process as well as product, and while the assessment of process is very often best undertaken by a third person (the tutor),
assess the dynamics of the process and carried out a number of exercises in order to understand their impact. Within the groupwork session, students were encouraged to take a more proactive role in the assessment process. This in turn tends to motivate students, who feel they have a greater investment in what they are doing.

It is the intention of this article to examine the approach adopted at the University of Ulster, within the School of Management, to develop a methodology for enhancing work-based transferable skills and encouraging students to take a more proactive role in assessing their performance. Briefly, the aims of the study are to:

- determine the benefits and learning outcomes of group based assignments;
- determine whether there is a development of transferable personal skills through the use of this specific assessment process;
- assess whether group presentations are an effective way of developing interpersonal and presentational skills;
- judge whether the practice of using self- and peer-assessment enhances students’ competences with regard to self-reflective learning.

Methodology

The research approach adopted can be broken down into six phases (see Figure 1) and covers a 12-week period which represents the length of a typical business studies module at the University of Ulster.

Phase 1 (week 1) – a self and peer-assessment process was proposed to undergraduate (16) and postgraduate (10) business studies students, within the context of writing and presenting a group report relating to the application of theoretical business concepts. In all cases, the students had work experience and hence had a knowledge of the typical skills which would be relevant in a work environment. In addition, they had all attended university for at least two years.

Phase 2 (weeks 1-3) – before commencement of the assignment students were introduced to the concepts of groupwork, presentation and assessment skills through a series of participative workshops and formal lectures. Within the groupwork session, students carried out a number of exercises in order to understand the dynamics of the process and to identify the various skills which groupwork can develop. To assess the skills students had to view a customized (amateur) video tape which had been recorded by one of the tutors involved in the study and reflected the subject matter which the groups had to cover. This video provided a variety of delivery styles, and students, through discussion, had to identify those attributes which were important in delivering an effective presentation. In order to provide them with experience of assessment, students were asked to mark a short essay and then compare the mark that they awarded against that of the course tutor. Ample opportunity for discussion of the relevant issues identified from the essay was provided.

During these initial workshops, students were asked to establish the assessment criteria by which the group presentations would be evaluated. It was felt that this would help to engender a sense of ownership of the tasks to be performed, as well as allowing the students an opportunity to develop their negotiation and communication skills through active participation in setting the criteria. Typical assessment criteria included such factors as: visual presentation; content; presentation structure and verbal communication.

Phase 3 (week 2) – students were assigned to groups of three or four students and were allowed to select an appropriate organization-based assignment from a list of contemporary management topics. Over the course of the remaining ten weeks, groups were encouraged verbally to report progress on the assignment and the tutors were therefore able to monitor the process on a continuous basis.

Phase 4 (weeks 3-11) – each group was required to prepare a written report on the assignment topic and also present the findings to their peers. In terms of mark allocation, the presentation was worth 30 per cent (split in equal proportions between the tutor and students) and the group report 70 per cent. These mark allocations were discussed and agreed with the students. The presentations were assessed by the other student groups in the class and by the tutor, according to the criteria developed in phase 2.

Individuals in each group were then required to weight the contribution of all members throughout the project duration. A form was given to each member of the group; completion of this form was confidential and allowed each student to allocate a given number of marks, according to the perception of effort. For example, in a group of three people, 300 marks are available for allocation and if individuals felt they had been responsible...
for a significant proportion of the workload, they might award themselves 120, giving the other two members 90 each. On collecting the total information for each group, a peer weighting could be established for each individual and this was applied to the final group mark (combining the presentation and report). Thus, students had the opportunity to be assessed by their peers as well as allowing provision for self-assessment. Hence, the self- and peer-assessment process provided a mechanism for moderating marks in relation to group effectiveness and individual performance.

Phase 5 (week 12) – on completion of the presentation and assessment of performance, student feedback on the full process was elicited via a questionnaire. The questionnaire covered such topics as identifying the skills developed in the course of the assignment and establishing students’ attitudes to self- and peer-assessment and groupwork. In addition, a series of focus groups were conducted with members chosen from the various courses to obtain further qualitative data on the study and its outcomes.

Results

In order to evaluate the success of the project, all the students (n = 26) who attended the two modules completed a detailed questionnaire. Table I indicates those questions relating to the issues of skill development and groupwork/assessment attitudes and the mean ratings received.

In terms of skill development, it can be seen that the overall marks ranged from 3.2 (problem solving) to 4.2 (communication skills and teamwork), with an average score of 3.7 over the 11 categories identified. Since a score greater than 3.0 can be viewed as a positive response to skill development, the results would suggest that the process adopted to develop transferable personal skills appears to have been successful. It should be remembered that the respondents to the questionnaire had experience of full-time employment and hence a reasonable assumption to make is that they could view the groupwork assignment in the context of carrying out a project in work. Consequently, it is likely that they offer a more critical analysis than students who have not been in employment.

With regard to attitudes to groupwork, a favourable response was obtained in terms of enhancing the learning and motivation of students (3.6) and helping them to integrate more with other students (4.0). Since 17 of the students were part-time and class contact was restricted to one half-day per week, students felt that the group project had the added bonus of improving communication and cohesion even in other modules on the course. The responses also indicated that students did not feel reluctant about becoming a group member (2.0) and that groupwork did not limit student ability (2.2). Students also felt more comfortable with the evaluation system, which through self- and peer-assessment attempted to minimize the effect of group members not contributing (2.3).

Attitudes to assessment indicated that students viewed the preliminary workshops positively and that it increased their ability to evaluate personal and peer contributions critically (3.5). However, they were indifferent to assessing other individuals (3.2) and groups (3.0) and to being assessed by other students (2.8). This would seem to indicate
that students view assessment as being the responsibility of the lecturer and they remain unconvinced that they have the requisite skills for assessment. This is supported by comments made on the questionnaires regarding the assessment process and at the focus groups. For example, one student stated, “very subjective, lecturer has a more in-depth knowledge of the topic and should better appreciate the work completed”. Another student when referring to the marking of the other groups indicated, “I would need to be convinced that standards are being maintained and peers had some sort of agreed benchmark”. This may be perceived as a natural response to the move away from traditional assessment practices, and it is anticipated that as students become more experienced at self- and peer-assessment, their attitudes will become much more positive. Boud (1990) argues that self- and peer-assessment is, “fundamental to all aspects of learning”, and encourages the development of the reflective student, one who has a degree of self-directing independence and who is well placed to become a lifelong learner. This reflects the growing need to give students a more active role in successfully managing their own learning, as well as meeting the needs of industry for flexible, creative thinkers who can transfer their learning and cope with new situations in the workplace.

The results of the project to date would appear to indicate that overall there has been a favourable response to developing transferable personal skills and groupwork, even though some students did feel uncomfortable about evaluating both their own work and that of their peers. Detailed discussions with the focus groups would appear to suggest that further developments of the assessment implementation are required.

Further developments

In terms of the methodology developed, four important areas for future work have been identified based on an analysis of the questionnaires and focus group discussions, and these are outlined below.

Groupwork

With regard to the groupwork process one measure which is proposed is the introduction of a project log, which would be completed by each student group and provide records of meetings, a description of the tasks allocated along with responsibilities assigned to individuals, and a record of tasks completed. Figure 2 provides an illustration of a template for the contents of such a project log. This log would serve a number of purposes, namely to:

- Raise the level of student awareness of the dynamics of groupwork and the complexities of team-based approaches in a work environment;
- Enable groups to prioritize the workload effectively and ensure that it is equitably distributed among group members;
- Provide a more objective method of evaluating the individual contributions of group members.

Table I
Summary of questionnaire results (n = 26)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Development of skills</th>
<th>Mean rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Problem solving skills</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership skills</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research skills</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study skills</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication skills</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time management skills</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentation skills</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer assessment skills</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-assessment skills</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject knowledge</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teamwork</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Attitudes to groupwork

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attitudes to groupwork</th>
<th>Mean rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I learned more through interaction with others</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The groupwork sessions:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Were enjoyable</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helped me to learn</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enhanced my motivation/ interest levels</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helped me to integrate more with other students</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I felt reluctant about becoming a group member</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel that groupwork only suits the non-contributor</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would have learned more working alone on this project</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The groupwork sessions:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited my potential</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decreased my level of ability</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Were a complete waste of time</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Attitudes to assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attitudes to assessment</th>
<th>Mean rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group sessions increased my ability to assess myself and peers in a more analytical way</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I felt uncomfortable about assessing other groups</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would prefer not to assess members of my own group</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I resented being assessed by other students</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes:

a 1 = not at all, 5 = considerably
b 1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree
c 1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree
members with regard to peer- and self-assessment;
• provide a better mechanism for tutors to monitor the groupwork process, so enabling them to assist groups who encounter difficulties.

Presentation
In terms of the presentations, and in response to some very fruitful discussions during the focus groups a number of developments are planned:
• After a presentation and before any formal assessment of the same, the class will be given the opportunity to discuss with the tutor the merits of the delivery style and content. This process should allow students to deliberate on the appropriateness of the presentation criteria which they themselves developed and to understand more fully the key attributes of a successful presentation.
• Each presentation will be recorded on videotape, and a copy will be given to the group involved so that members have the opportunity to view their own performance and critically reflect on it.

Assessment
The results above have indicated that students are uncomfortable with both peer and self-assessment. This is arguably the most demanding aspect of this process for the students and requires a major shift in mindset and culture for the student body. However, it is argued that the practice of encouraging students to become involved in their own and one another’s assessment should be developed. This will act as a means of providing feedback to students and also enhance their capability to judge their own performance, thus providing opportunities to develop skills for learning that will be of value long after leaving university.

The focus groups identified the subjectivity of the assessment process as an area of concern and further consideration suggested two improvements:
1 the introduction of a project log will act as an aid to the peer- and self-assessment process, and provide a more objective approach to understanding the evaluation of individual group members;
2 discussions of the presentations, with the tutor, should enable students to conduct a more effective evaluation, and enhance their assessment ability.

Implications for staff and course development
The project log will provide a mechanism to enable the tutor to take an active role in dealing with group and individual problems. Where conflict arises between group members which cannot be resolved internally, the tutor must be prepared to act as a facilitator. This approach demands appropriately trained staff and has implications for staff development in such areas as team building, conflict resolution and negotiation skills.

The methodology described has only been applied to a limited number of modules within some courses in the School of Management, in final year or postgraduate level. The application of this methodology in other years and across courses requires a planned approach. If students are to develop their learning and assessment skills then they need to perceive a developmental process taking place as they progress through their courses. This demands a dedicated core of tutors who know what has been covered in

![Figure 2](image-url)

Project log template

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date of meeting</th>
<th>Members present</th>
<th>Work completed</th>
<th>Problem areas</th>
<th>Agreed action for next meeting</th>
<th>Group member(s) responsible</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

...
previous modules and are prepared to enhance the process through continuous improvement.

As students’ expectations are raised and as their skills in self- and peer-assessment improve, they are likely to begin to apply those skills to other modules, even those which use the traditional, individual assignment as a method of assessment. Consequently, the long-term implication is that a change in the assessment culture, within the university, will be required. Tutors must therefore be prepared to accept a changing role, as students take on more responsibility for their own learning. This is likely to be a much more demanding role as students will expect more discussion and clarification in terms of, for example, the assessment criteria and feedback on overall performance.

Conclusions

Traditionally, we have conceived of two separate learning arenas: the academic institute and the organization. The university has provided cognitive, intellectual frameworks; the organization or enterprise has taught skills in applying these to the work environment. It is argued that new assessment practices should attempt to integrate these two areas, so that the student’s overall learning experience is enhanced.

In recommending possible improvements to business education Handy (1988), Constable and McCormick (1987) and Porter and McKibben (1988) all achieve remarkable consensus. They maintain that:

- programmes should focus on participants’ needs and be more interactive in design;
- they should offer participants the opportunity to apply theoretical concepts in practical situations;
- curriculum development must focus on utilizing appropriate pedagogic techniques which enhance learning and develop leadership and interpersonal skills.

In addition, Katz (1993) suggests that major obstacles to student learning include a lack of collaboration in learning and lack of opportunity for student responsibility. Too often, as indicated by Race (1995), a “passivity” still dominates learning and “higher education students may still be overtaught”, therefore limiting the development of the highly valued transferable skills. Such an over-emphasis on attaining knowledge assumes that understanding comes later, but perhaps a more realistic or flexible approach would help in advocating personal involvement, by the student, in the learning experience: “I hear and I forget; I see and I remember; I do and I understand” (Jackson and Prosser, 1989).

Undoubtedly, some tutors may be concerned that the group assessment process described may lack some of the precision of marking the traditional written assignment, but this is more than compensated for by the development of transferable skills and an enhancement of the overall learning experience for the students as highlighted by the favourable response to the questionnaire. Certainly, over-reliance on any single form of assessment is questionable and a variety of different forms of assessment, including oral presentations, group projects, self- and peer-assessment as well as the more formal and traditional written submissions, is a better alternative. The controversy on the role of self-assessment is its contribution to grading student work, but when moderated and used as an element of collaborative assessment its potential is significant, providing a shared culture between the various stakeholders in the learning process and helping to strike the right balance between assessment and development.

With such an approach, there will always be a problem of subjectivity and variation in individual preferences and the right balance must be achieved between assessment and the management of the development process. If used correctly as additional techniques, groupwork and assessment can be effective and adaptive in improving many aspects of performance. The aim is to continue this work, to monitor trends in student development throughout the course, while continuing to develop the necessary cognitive and affective skills. However, a parallel need is to monitor the syllabus content and assessment methods, to ensure that students are not merely overloaded with unnecessary innovative methods, which may be just as monotonous and ineffective as the more traditional versions. It is important to recognize that there is potential for competence and incompetence in all teaching methods and programmes. The assessment process described in this article, together with the planned improvements should go part of the way towards achieving the aspirations of both management educators and teaching and learning professionals.

References


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