Engaging students in group work to maximise tacit knowledge sharing and use

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1. Introduction

Group-working has now become firmly established in higher education (Gregory & Thorley, 1994; Lejk, Wyvill, & Farrow, 1997; Li, 2001; Strauss & U, 2007) and is used across multiple disciplines for a variety of purposes (Gregory & Thorley, 1994). Among the numerous benefits ascribed to the use of group-work within higher education, are that group-work provides opportunities for the transfer of student skill-sets (Livingstone & Lynch, 2000) and as with other forms of peer-learning, for the sharing of knowledge, ideas and experiences (Boud, 2001).

The authors of this paper regularly make use of group-work in their teaching at both undergraduate and post-graduate level. When we do so, it is with the intention that students will share and learn from both the practical skills, and personal insights that they possess. Successful knowledge transfers of this kind are reported in the pedagogic literature (see for example, Cresswell, 1998; Livingstone & Lynch, 2000; Plastow, Spiliotopoulou, & Prior, 2010). The authors are firmly in favour of group-work, agreeing with Gregory and Thorley’s (1994, p. 20) statement that:

Groups provide opportunities that cannot be realized through individual learning situations. They provide expertise from the rest of the group not available to the solitary individual…The group is a place where individual views of reality can be challenged and new insights obtained from debate.

Yet despite this enthusiasm for group-work, we note that student perceptions can vary (Hillyard, Gillespie, & Littig, 2010) and so too, in our experience, can the degree to which students work well together, share knowledge, complete set tasks and...
achieve their learning objectives. Numerous factors can impact the group-work process, including differences in group composition with respect to gender, local versus overseas students (Gordon & Connor, 2001; Sampson & Cohen, 2001b), culture and religion (Sampson & Cohen, 2001b), peers not liking each other (Sampson & Cohen, 2001b) and concerns over free-riding (Sampson & Cohen, 2001a), with the latter being a problem that is well documented in the pedagogical literature (Maiden & Perry, 2011). Furthermore, readers of this journal will be aware of recent research (Woods, Barker, & Hibbins, 2011) that provides insights into, and guidelines for managing multicultural group-work.

Given that these factors are concerned with students’ interpersonal relationships it is unsurprising that a common dilemma is on what basis to allocate students to groups (Huxham & Land, 2000) and we assert that the choice is crucial, agreeing with Robson’s (1994) contention that the success of group-based exercises requires the formation of groups in which participants feel willing and able to contribute. Within this paper the authors present findings from an Higher Education Academy (HEA) Wales Enhancement Fund project conducted May–July 2011 that addresses the issue of group-allocation for group-work when the objective is to maximise knowledge sharing, focussing in particular on the interpersonal trust relationships that exist between students. In doing so we have provided answers to the following four questions that we contend have implications for both theorists and practitioners:

1. To what extent are students willing to share knowledge and use that gained from others during group work?
2. What are the motivators and barriers to these behaviours?
3. Are students’ interpersonal trust relationships an important antecedent of these behaviours?
4. Is there one best method of group-allocation to maximise knowledge sharing and use amongst students during group-work?

The importance of interpersonal trust as an antecedent to knowledge sharing has received considerable attention within the knowledge management literature (see for example, Eppler & Sukowski, 2000; Holste & Fields, 2010; Lucas, 2005; McDermott & O’Dell, 2001; Nonaka, Toyama, & Konno, 2000; Viitala, 2004) but relatively little within the pedagogic literature. In this study, we have adopted concepts from the knowledge management and psychology literature to answer our research questions. These concepts and a review of the relevant literature are presented below.

1.1. Knowledge and knowledge sharing

Within the knowledge management literature, ‘knowledge’ is judged to be a key organisational resource (see for example, Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Sewell, 2005; Waller & Holland, 2009). While a variety of typologies have been proposed, the distinction between tacit and explicit knowledge has been argued to be the most common and practical (Pathirage, Amaratunga, & Haigh, 2007). Tacit knowledge is highly personal, hard to formalise, and hard to share with others. Included within this category of knowledge are such things as subjective insights, hunches and intuitions (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). By contrast, explicit knowledge is formal and systematic, being easily expressed in words and numbers and shared in such forms as scientific formula and universal principles (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995).

This study examines students’ behaviour with respect to sharing cognitive and technical tacit knowledge with each other during group-work. Cognitive tacit knowledge ‘consists of schemata, mental models, beliefs and perceptions... The cognitive dimension of tacit knowledge reflects our image of reality (what is) and our vision for the future (what ought to be)’ (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995, p.8).

Examples of such knowledge within the context of business and management education include beliefs about the way businesses are and should be operated. More generally within the context of group-work, examples of cognitive tacit knowledge include students’ beliefs about the way the group should operate and the tasks of the group approached. Technical tacit knowledge ‘embraces the kind of informal and hard-to-pin-down skills or crafts captured in the term “know-how”’ (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995, p.8). Examples of relevant technical tacit knowledge within the context of business and management education include verbal and non-verbal interpersonal communication skills, such as active listening and persuading others.

While there is an evident benefit to the sharing of both cognitive and technical tacit knowledge, numerous barriers have been reported within the knowledge management literature. The majority of these involve people and their interpersonal relationships, including power relationships, personal relationships, personal likes and dislikes (Cook & Cook, 2004), and apathetic attitudes towards knowledge sharing (Alwis & Hartmann, 2008; Wang, 2006). Some authors have gone so far as to suggest that effective tacit knowledge sharing only takes place voluntarily (Ehin, 2008). It is noteworthy that similar problems are reported within the pedagogic literature.

1.2. Interpersonal trust relationships and knowledge sharing: a review of the pedagogic literature

The concept of trust is multi-faceted (Holste & Fields, 2010; McAllister, 1995) and McAllister (1995) distinguishes between affect- and cognition-based trust. The former is grounded in care, concern and mutual emotional investments made by individuals working together, whereas the latter is grounded in the notions of dependability, reliability and professionalism.
As highlighted above the importance of creating trust between parties as an antecedent knowledge sharing has been emphasised within the knowledge management literature. However, to the authors’ best knowledge, no studies have focussed directly on willingness to share and use tacit knowledge during group work or other peer-learning activities.

Despite this, the importance of trust is made clear by numerous scholars. For example, Robson (1994, p.40) states that ‘Group-based exercises depend upon the formation of groups within which the participants feel willing and able to contribute’ and in the same work goes on to suggests the use of ice breakers that will build trust and openness between group members. Further, Sampson and Cohen (2001b) highlight that one of pre-conditions desirable for fostering peer learning is the existence of a climate of trust, or that trust can be established, and making clear that it is acceptable to make mistakes and seek help.

In addition, Matveev and Mil ter’s (2010) study of 114 students from two American universities provides empirical evidence in support of the view that trust is of importance to group work. Twenty-six percent of students surveyed cited issues including communicating with and learning to trust team members as challenging, while 61% identified trust as an important aspect of team effectiveness.

The specific importance of cognition- and affect-based trust is highlighted in a discussion by Sampson and Cohen (2001a) who state that among students resistant to peer-learning, an unwillingness to accept that they or their peers have anything valuable to offer each other, and peers not liking each other are common reasons for this resistance. In addition, trust was a central issue for adult learners who collaborated online (Smith, 2008) and a persistent issue in a later study was the lack of trust between peers with respect to the skills and knowledge that those peers possess (Smith, 2010), highlighting the importance of cognition-based trust.

The potential importance of affect-based trust is highlighted in a study conducted by Remedios, Clarke, and Hawthorne (2008). Their study found that differences in culture impacted students’ willingness to contribute to discussions as they were concerned about losing ‘face’. It is possible that were affect-based trust present between students that this would be less of a concern. Further, it has been reported that students have trouble working with strangers, and while students reported high-agreement with the statement that they would prefer to choose their own groups at the outset of group-work, this agreement fell by the end of the group work (Lejk & Wyvill, 2002). Again, this evidence suggests the importance of affect-based trust, and interpersonal relationships more generally. In addition, a factor that may affect students’ level of interpersonal trust is the amount of time they have spent with each other. A number of researchers suggest that trust is created over time and is often developed through iterative processes (Huxham & Vangen, 2004; Lyons & Mehta, 1996). This suggests that second and third year undergraduates (and a selection of returning postgraduates) may exhibit higher levels of interpersonal trust.

Given the dearth of relevant studies within the pedagogic literature, our study was undertaken to provide insights into this currently under-researched topic and to provide recommendations for pedagogic practice.

2. Research method

All students within the Business School were contacted by e-mail in May 2011 and invited to participate in focus groups. A small incentive (ten pounds) was offered for participation. We recruited 32 undergraduate and postgraduate students, whose demographic characteristics were diverse including both male and female students, of varying ages, from Britain, Europe, India, China and other overseas countries. Details are provided where available.

We arranged 6 focus groups by year in June. Each was facilitated by two researchers, one of whom (Author) led the discussion while the other made observations of students’ behaviours. The discussion was semi-structured, with questions about positive and negative experiences, sharing skills and beliefs, allocation methods and ways of improving group work. All sessions were recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were coded both by hand and using NVivo version 7. Following each focus group, the discussions were transcribed and observations aggregated, and a thematic analysis of the data was performed to enable comparison of viewpoints within and across groups. The transcripts were read by all three authors and each of the emerging themes were discussed and agreed. Here we focus on sharing knowledge and skills and group allocation.

3. Results and discussion

Participants were asked whether they had experiences of sharing their skills, beliefs, values and ideas (reflecting technical and cognitive dimensions of tacit knowledge) with others during group work. They were then asked whether they believed it was easier to engage in these types of knowledge sharing with group members they were close to, perhaps friends with, or those who they perceived to be competent, reliable and hard-working (loosely reflecting the concepts of cognitive and affect-based trust). Three common themes emerged: first, participants across all year groups had limited experience of sharing skills; second, they were more frequently engaged in sharing their beliefs, values and ideas and this was seen as a positive aspect of group work; third, while interpersonal relationships were seen to impact upon the degree to which knowledge sharing took place, the major contributing factor was participants’ motivations and desired outcomes for their work rather than their interpersonal relationships.

3.1. Sharing of skills

Participants across all year groups highlighted that they had limited experience of sharing their skills, or having others share their skills with them during group work. Those who did report the sharing of skills did not describe sharing skills that
can be classified as technical tacit knowledge as they lack the complexity and embodied nature associated with this type of knowledge. Commonly reported skill transfers included showing a group member (or being shown) how to use a software package, help with academic referencing and one participant described being given help in the construction of a balance sheet. In addition, a number of participants highlighted that while they may not have learnt skills from others, the experience of group work was useful in teaching them social skills.

Postgraduate – Focus Group 1:

Participant 16, Female, China, Age 25: Think it is very difficult to share the skills for example we have a group for say presentation someone might be quite good at preparing for the script, somebody may be good at searching information, someone will play the role of presenter so everybody has different skills and if we turn it around. Example if different person plays another role giving the presentation but he’s not quite good at that it might be problem so yes maybe it’s quite good sharing knowledge is easier rather than sharing skill (Emphasis added)

Participant 19, Male, Britain: I’ve shown someone how to use software programmes

That more complex skills were not shared is unsurprising; it is well known that the sharing of skills is time consuming and difficult (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995) and as students have multiple assignments and possibly extracurricular commitments it is likely that they may not have been able to find time to do so. Also, as the above excerpt suggests, numerous participants felt that it was more conducive to the success of their projects to allow each group member to complete the tasks that they were most competent at.

Furthermore, the structure of group work tasks was often seen to be a barrier to the sharing of skills (and also often a barrier to the sharing of beliefs, values and ideas). The following is indicative of many of the comments made:

Postgraduate – Focus Group 1:

Participant 19, Male, Britain: Group work can be good for sharing skills and there is nothing inherently wrong with it, I think the problem is the structure of group-work and usually on the assessment side of things, how it is assessed and that can cause imbalance and probably the wrong type of focus so you don’t really get the benefits from group work that group work can bring to the project and instead you just get some of the problems

While participants had completed a variety of group assignments, most participants described working on a group report or presentation, which, once they had assigned work into different sections, were pursued somewhat independently with little consultation with each other. While this may been seen as negative, participants expressed the belief that being able to draw on the skills of others to complete their group assignments was a positive aspect of group work:

Second Year – Focus Group:

Participant 5, Female: Although there is a task given, you don’t have to do every single thing, you can divide it in to little groups of people, so… I can do the introductions, so at the end you know you just do each part and put them all together… so I think that’s a nice thing

Similarly, a number of overseas students highlighted that it was useful to work with British students as they are able to benefit from their grasp of the English language, and in return are able to offer skills which they felt these students lacked (particularly mathematics):

Second Year – Focus Group:

Participant 4, Male, Overseas Student: It’s a good way to share my own skills, like Asian… Chinese or Vietnamese they are good at calculating numbers so like they can do the question about mathematics, they can figure it out. British is good at English and do the comments and this is very important (Participant 5 laughs and agrees)

Although a lack of time and a focus on achieving the best assessment score are viable explanations for the lack of skill sharing, a number of other explanations may be offered.

First, an important environmental consideration for the encouragement of knowledge sharing of this type is that individuals spend time together, within shared spaces (Eppler & Sukowski, 2000; Nonaka & Konno, 1998; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). If participants divide work in the way described, and then proceed to work independently and separately from each other, the opportunity for knowledge sharing is lost.

Second, the authors of this paper have assumed that participants in the focus groups possessed (and perceived themselves to possess) skills that were relevant and worth sharing with their colleagues prior to engaging in group-work activity. However, it is not clear that participants did possess such skills, and if they did not, then necessarily the sharing of skills could not take place.

Third, while group-work and other activities undertaken by participants at University may have provided the opportunity for the acquisition of skills, it is unclear whether these could have been usefully shared with colleagues. The groups within which participants undertook their group-work activities were comprised of other students studying the same modules. Thus, it is likely that any skills acquired, and the level of mastery achieved would be similar amongst all group members and so not usefully shared.
3.2. Sharing beliefs, values, ideas and opinions

As Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) note, the subjective and intuitive nature of tacit knowledge requires it to be converted into words or numbers so that it can be shared. To examine participants’ experiences of sharing cognitive tacit knowledge, they were asked about their experiences of sharing their beliefs, ideas, values and opinions with others during group work. In what follows, such activity is termed knowledge sharing since it is through such discussions that cognitive tacit knowledge held by an individual can be made explicit. However, the authors note that not all offerings made by participants during such discussions will necessarily be expressions of their cognitive tacit knowledge.

Participants regularly described sharing beliefs, values and ideas with others during group work as a positive experience and that this took place with greater frequency than the sharing of skills.

Third Year – Focus Group:

Participant 12, Male, Britain, Age (mature): Group work is refreshing it’s an opportunity to see others experiences and I was impressed with their positivity - it was fun

Participant 10, Male, China, Age 21: It’s good to share ideas and help others

However, this type of knowledge sharing was also described as difficult and this is unsurprising. It is well known that groups go through a storming stage in which beliefs, expectations and preferences for ways of working are shared and negotiated, often involving significant conflict (Tuckman, 1965). Importantly, such a process is seen as vital pre-cursor for establishing group norms and subsequently working effectively together.

Second Year – Focus Group:

Participant 3, Female, Britain, Age 21: It’s difficult to work in a group with people especially if we all have separate beliefs of something because they vary so much from attitudes from experiences. because you can use them as sort of tools in order to progress whatever your doing, beliefs are so strongly set that you can’t really have someone arguing with you in a group which then it makes it really awkward in a group

Participant 6, Female: I think in that case you have to hold back some of your thoughts because you have to meet everyone half way basically

A third perspective on this form of knowledge sharing was that it is not particularly valuable for learning about course content or the group work assignment but what is of value is learning about others’ personal experiences. Participants again highlighted that the way in which they chose to structure their assignments and complete their tasks independently led to a lack of opportunity for knowledge sharing:

Postgraduate – Focus Group 1:

Participant 16, Female, China, Age 25: Yes because I am taking the course of MBA so lots of students have work experience with different cultures and backgrounds so it is a good opportunity for them to share their experiences of their industry and their expertise

Participant 19: For personal experience I agree it’s not something you can easily get from a journal and find or go and read in a book, it has to come from other people so yeah

Participant 14, Male, India: There may be some area to share, some opportunity to share personal experience but it is not necessary it should provide always because in some of the work there is no meetings. In one of my experience there is only one meeting for my group work so it is not providing any opportunity to share personal experiences

Although concerns surrounding the value of knowledge sharing during group work were only raised occasionally, this does provide one explanation of barriers to knowledge sharing. If students hold firmly to the notion that any relevant information can be derived from other sources, then they may be unlikely to engage other students in discussion. If true, this appears prima facie to be an argument that group work is non-essential. Yet we would argue that by placing students in groups, particularly those which are randomly assigned or engineered, it gives them more opportunity to come into contact with students from different backgrounds than may otherwise occur. This was also raised by participants during discussion of methods of group allocation.

A theme running through the discussions of sharing skills, beliefs, values and opinions was that knowledge sharing often did not take place (or was reduced) because participants’ groups were dividing work between them and pursuing their tasks independently. This prompted the facilitator on each occasion to ask students about their motivations for group work to determine whether participants involved in group work were more concerned with benefitting from the experience of group work, or if they were focused on attainment.

The majority view across all year groups was that their focus was on achieving the highest possible marks, although others highlighted that the experience was nonetheless important.

Second Year – Focus Group:

Facilitator: When you undertake group work are you focussed on the mark at the end or on the experience of working together?
Participant 6, Female: Group work I think is mmm at the end of days just to get marks you know, for the marks is the crucial part (The other participants nod in agreement)

Postgraduate – Focus Group 2:

Participant 20, Male, Britain, Age 28: Best mark
Participant 23, Male: Marks
Participant 21, Male: Marks first

Postgraduate – Focus Group 3:

Participant 24, Female, India, Age 24: I am focussed on having fun (she smiles)
Participant 28, Male, India, Age 25: Well we need to get the work done but also need to enjoy the group
Participant 27, Female, Overseas student, Age 24: I want to maintain academic performance but I also want to enjoy the group work. There is an opportunity to learn lifelong skills, and University can be an incubator for that
Participant 26, Male, India, Age 27: Yes, acceptable academic performance, but it has to be fun or the work will suffer
Participant 25, Male: Getting the work done but gelling also

This understanding of participant motivations is important as it provides vital context for participants’ views on interpersonal trust-relationships and preferences for group allocation methods.

3.3. Knowledge sharing and relationships

Throughout all focus groups, participants expressed different views on the issue of sharing knowledge with those they were close to and those they believed were competent, reliable and good at the work; participants highlighted both advantages and disadvantages, suggesting that the relationship between affect- and cognition-based trust and knowledge sharing is complex.

Third Year – Focus Group:

Participant 7, Female, China, Age 22: I’d rather work with someone who is good… my friends might be free riders and I care about my marks
Participant 8, Female, China, Age 23: Yes, I agree with that
Participant 11, Male, Overseas student, Age 21: I rather with work with friends, it’s easier to push them it’s more comfortable
Participant 12, Male, Britain, Age (mature): It’s best to start off choosing friends and if they don’t perform, next time you chose people who will perform. The natural inclination to go with friends because you trust them but if you don’t know how they’re going to perform it’s best to go with good people

In some of the discussions, participants expressed the belief that it was easier to share knowledge with those who they felt close to, while also commenting that it may be difficult to share knowledge with those who were seen as competent. However, participants also felt that it was more appropriate to gain knowledge from those who are competent – and this is an intuitive and rational choice:

Second Year – Focus Group:

Participant 6, Female: Yeah, people you like better, you are more comfortable you can easily share what you ever you want to say, if you dislike a person it might come across in very different way in a more negative manner because you have that like… towards them
Participant 3, Female, Britain, Age 21: Well if people are good at what they do then you can usually see that and it might make you take step back, but people you like you are obviously going to be a lot more comfortable, but it’s a little more difficult to say ‘actually you’re wrong’ if you like a person because they might take it on a personal level
Participant 4, Male, Overseas Student: I rather share with people I like
Facilitator: So let’s turn it round and ask who would you think it is easier to learn from?
Participant 6: I think it’s both in this case mmm because if you can see that someone’s good at the work you will be more trusting of their opinions or whatever and if you like them it will be easier to learn from them
Participant 5, Female: I think I can learn more from people who are good at the work. It depends whether the person I like is good at the work or not good at the work

These discussions revealed that participants’ interpersonal relationships were important factors in their experiences and perceptions of knowledge sharing during group work, yet no particular consensus emerged. This resonates with the
knowledge management literature, which highlights the importance of both affect- and cognition-based trust for knowledge sharing and use (Holste & Fields, 2010; Lucas, 2005).

3.4. Perceptions and experiences of group allocation methods

Huxham and Land (2000) identify three broad methods by which educators can allocate students to groups: i) allowing students to self-allocate, ii) allocating students randomly and iii) allocating students according to demographic factors to create the most diverse groups possible. While participants were asked about their preferences and experiences of the three methods, the discussion mostly concentrated on self-allocation and random allocation. Few participants expressed opinions on the third method, and tended to treat it as being synonymous with the second.

The discussions of different group allocation methods revealed that participants’ preferences for group allocation depended on three broad considerations; the first was their desired outcomes of group work; the second was the point in time at which group work was undertaken; and the third were the various problems and issues associated with group working detailed throughout this report.

Postgraduate – Focus Group 1:

Participant 19, Male, Britain: At the start of the year it might be difficult picking other people for the group work and in those situations maybe it’s better that it’s either randomly assigned or distributed [engineered], but my personal preference normally is to be able to pick colleagues because otherwise you feel a little bit like you’re rolling dice with your degree or you’re in a lottery or something and when you’re coming to do a course you’re here for a reason, you’re paying money and you don’t want feel like you’re gambling with your grades. (Emphasis added)

While participants had different experiences and perceptions of the allocation methods, the majority agreed with the sentiment expressed by Participant 19 (above) – that being placed in a random or engineered group allowed them to meet new people, but also contained an element of chance, or luck that meant their performance in assessments might be, to a large extent, outside of their control. Those who focussed on attainment described a preference for self-selection, as did those who were concerned about the potential negative impact of working with those they did not know. The following is representative of comments that were expressed across all focus groups:

Third Year – Focus Group:

Participant 11, Male, Overseas student, Age 21: I Prefer student assigned [self-selection], randomly doesn’t really make sense

Participant 12, Male, Britain, Age (mature): I think assigned is the best solution as it is the only solution where the student has input (Others nod and vocally express agreement)

Postgraduate – Focus Group 1:

Participant 18, Male, China: Yeah, in theory we should have group selected randomly but I would know some people who are good at something and from my point of view I would want to achieve as highest mark as we can so maybe want to chose good people in my group so I can get a higher mark so maybe I would chose, pick by myself

Participant 17, Female, India Age: 24: I have an opportunity to pick my own so I’m going to take it (The rest agree that they would now self-assign)

However, a number of participants who opted for this method noted that it was potentially unfair as the most able and competent students were likely to work together. The fairest option was perceived to be allocating groups randomly:

Postgraduate – Focus Group 2:

Participant 20, Male, Britain, Age 28: People weigh each other up – it [student-allocation] works but leaves the weaker people. Good from individual point of view but not overall

Participant 23, Male: Yes I agree it’s better for me but not overall

Participant 22, Female, European, Age 23: I prefer it, but it’s not necessarily good for me – I could learn way more from tutor allocated

Participants who described wanting to learn from the experience of group work, most often opted for the random allocation method:

Postgraduate – Focus Group 1:

Participant 18, Male, China: Yeah I would prefer the randomly selected because for example, from year 1 to year 3 you’re doing group assignment with all your friends, I don’t think you can learn as much as with new people, I think you can learn from the group work it’s not really beneficial to find some group friends and doing all assignment together for three years. You can’t learn as much from the group work, you kind of lose the purpose
Participant 16, Female, China, Age 25: In this case would say maybe it depends on different personality because I am the one who is always willing to meet different people, new peoples so I chose random

Postgraduate – Focus Group 3:

Participant 26, Male, India, Age 27: Multicultural and other differences in a group can give more chance to learn

Participant 31, Male: And err... we can choose by ourselves the group members, so we chose err those students that are from the same country. I think that this maybe changed for some way because since I think it is better to have students from different countries in your groups, so it needs to be arranged maybe by organiser to err to assign different students to different groups, not to select by themselves

Students spontaneously congregating in ethnically-similar groups is known as ‘clustering’ (Davies, 2007). As Davies argues, clustering may not be conducive to learning as it tends to lead to a stifling of discussion or (worse still) discussions in the first language and avoidance of English entirely. He recommends that this can be overcome, or at least addressed in part, by insisting on a mixture of ethnic groups but allowing students to join groups in pairs, i.e. two Chinese, two Indonesians, two Welsh, and two English etc. This preserves the advantages of ethnic group clustering and minimises the disadvantages. Furthermore, such an approach may preserve some of the benefits of self-selection and engineered allocation methods highlighted, arguably providing a sense of ownership and reducing the perception that group work is a ‘lottery’ while also providing an opportunity for mixing with individuals from different cultural backgrounds.

Ultimately, while it may be desirable to randomly allocate or engineer groups to provide the opportunity for knowledge sharing within diverse groups this is only so if participants are willing and motivated to share knowledge in this way. For the majority, this was not the experience they described.

4. Conclusion

4.1. Implications for pedagogic practice

The analysis of participants’ discussions of preferences for group allocation did not provide any rationale for adopting any one method of group allocation to maximise knowledge sharing amongst students. Preferences for group allocation depended on three considerations: their motivations and desired aim of group work; the point in time in which the group work assignment took place; and their perceptions of the implications of the three methods.

Importantly, while those who were primarily focussed on exchanging views and ideas with others, and more generally learning from the experience of group work, favoured tutor led allocation methods, those who were focused on attainment preferred to self-select their groups. Given that for postgraduates these views were also dependent on the point in time in which group work occurred, it is clear that it is untenable to recommend one particular method of group allocation.

The authors contend that the most equitable way to proceed with group work is for educators to make multiple allocation methods available and then allow individual students to choose the method that they feel is most appropriate to their needs. For example, in a given class, one set of groups may be comprised of students who have opted for self-allocation, while another set may be comprised of students who have chosen to be allocated randomly. It is contended that this returns a degree of ownership to students, and provides the best possible opportunity for students to work with like-minded colleagues to pursue their own aims and fulfil their individual needs through their group work experiences.

4.2. Implications for the business and management community

If the students in our sample share commonalities with other business and management students then there are a number of important implications for the business and management community. In particular, employers may find that newly recruited graduates have limited experience of sharing their skills with others and may fear the negative consequences of sharing their ideas and opinions with others. More generally, as this study highlights, students often resort to silo-ing their workloads during group tasks. Employers may find that students lack the necessary skills and the experience required to work effectively within teams. To raise students’ awareness of the importance of team-working skills, employers might emphasise their necessity in job descriptions and person specifications. Employers may also need to be prepared to further develop these skills in new graduate employees.

References


