Group-Work in Sport Management: Does it Do What We Say it Does?

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20-minute oral presentation (including questions)

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Group work in university teaching has been credited with improving communication, teamwork, empathy, problem solving, time management, and preparation for the world of work in a supported environment (Davies, 2009; Leberman & Shaw, 2012).

Leberman and Shaw’s (2012) research outlined recent graduates’ experiences of group work in their university courses. Although some had not enjoyed group work in their degrees, they recognized that it was essential in preparing them for the world of work. Group work has been credited with promoting ‘deep’ and ‘active’ learning (Ruel et al., 2003; Waterston, 1998), developing problem based learning skills (Dolmans et al., 2001); and employability (Maguire and Edmondson, 2001). Teachers can benefit from group work too, as it can be a good way to manage large class sizes (Davies, 2009). As a result of these positive attributes, I was keen to employ group work in my 3rd year sport management class “Sport Management and Strategy”.

The purpose of this research is to outline the process of developing the group project, review some of the benefits and shortcomings to this approach, the changes that were made, and reflections on group work as a teaching aide. This reflection was informed by critical reflective practice (Kane, Sandretto & Heath, 2004) in which university teachers are encouraged to recognize the impact of their knowledge, skills, personality, relationships with students, and research/teaching relationship on teaching. I undertake this process with a view to contributing to teaching quality in the university sector.

I will show how my first iteration of the group task was ill-conceived, poorly structured, and did not provide clear enough outlines and potential outcomes for the students. Consequently, it achieved few, if any, of the objectives highlighted by Davies (2009). Indeed, teaching evaluations suggested a high level of frustration for the students. I addressed these shortcomings. Having attended an Ako Aotearoa (higher education workshop) on group work, I revised my philosophy on group work and its organization. Based on Johnson and Johnson’s (1984) model of cooperative learning, I developed a group project, and more importantly, a process around the project, that incorporated cooperative learning principles (Johnson & Johnson 2009). These are promotive interaction, positive interdependence, accountability, interpersonal and collaborative skills, and group processing. This research will lead to a positive impact on teaching quality as it demonstrates the importance of self-reflection and will offer an opportunity for teachers to examine their own practice.

The first initiative of the revised group project was to engage in clear pre-instructional decisions. These included embedding the group work project in the course from the start of semester. This ensured that students had the time to create a sense of ‘team’ around their group and engage socially. Further, the benefits of positive interdependence were thoroughly explained and structured into class activities before the group work started. The students were monitored throughout the semester and were given ample opportunity to report back on the strengths and weaknesses of their group. Any such claims were supported by notes from their group meetings that were signed by all group members. Further successful and unsuccessful strategies will be outlined in the presentation.

The students responded favourably to the revised programme. I adopted the programme for a third year, with the same criteria and assessment. It was in this most recent rendition that I began to reflect on the usefulness of group work for all students and, in increasingly competitive environment, began to realize that the top students were not being given enough opportunity to showcase their skills. I have not yet determined how I will resolve this but will present preliminary ideas.

This research contributes to the knowledge regarding group work in university education. While I acknowledge Johnson and Johnson’s (2009) claims about the benefits of cooperative learning, I also outline some of the shortcomings of this approach. I reinforce the need for careful planning for group work, as benefits cannot be taken for granted. In addition, it shows the benefit of consistent reflection on teaching approaches to ensure that, even if a
programme works in principle, it is still critiqued to ensure the best possible outcome for our university students. Looking forward, I outline some strategies for further development in group work that will enable students to show their skills as individuals more clearly.