

Abstract

The aim of that research was to try to implement group work in the sessions of two undergraduate modules at the University of West London. At one of the modules the students enrolled came from two programmes across the college, so the purpose of that study was also to investigate how to activate effectively their prior knowledge and successfully implement it in group work activities in order to improve student engagement. The other module consisted of a lot of newly joined students, who did not know the group before. The author was trying different techniques when assigning group work and mainly taking into consideration the individual background of students. A lot of conjunctive tasks were introduced to both groups, which requires are all group members to contribute (Steiner, 1972). Feedback was mainly positive, however there were also some difficulties mainly group dynamics as it can disrupt learning but also the personal motivation of each member of these groups.

Critical incident

Two groups took part in that research: The first group was with Level 5 undergraduate students from two programmes across the college – Event Management and Hospitality Management. It is an optional module which mainly focuses on the MICE event types, which stands for Meetings, Incentives, Conventions and Exhibitions. There are 26 students enrolled to that module from both programmes. Students are from similar background and had similar core modules in the first year of their education, as well as the first semester of their second year, they will still have quite different amount of knowledge related to the topic. The aim with that group was to activate their prior knowledge in a group learning setting. The second group was with Level 4 undergraduate students from Travel and Tourism programme. The class consisted of 43 students and the lecturer knew most of the students from the previous semester. However from January there were 11 more students who joined that class. The aim with that group was to use group activities to help the new-comers feel welcome and include them in the rest of the class. As well as creating a safe learning environment for all, recognising group dynamics and the rationale and importance of induction activities.

Literature Review

Hailikari et al. (2008) define prior knowledge as a dynamic multidimensional entity which consists of different types of knowledge and skills. It is one of the most important factors that influences student learning and achievement. According to Gijlers and De Jong (2004) prior knowledge in collaborative learning can exceed the proficiency and ability of the members involved. The authors further argue that collaboration or group work present potentiality for co-construction of knowledge, opportunities for comparison of alternative points of view, possibilities for new plans, concepts, and ideas. Groups tend to reconstruct and develop members' attitudes, perceptions and values. Forsyth (2014) provides a sample of definitions of groups. Some of these definitions lay emphasis on the importance of the influence, the interaction and the interdependence between members. They focus on the dynamic features of group work (Shaw, 1981; Lewin, 1948). Other definitions imply on the significance of the interactions and the influence between the members, as well as the need to satisfy certain individual needs in each and to possess a common social identity (McGrath, 1984; Cattell, 1951; Brown, 2000). Therefore group work is widely used as a teaching method. Collaboration between members of the group allows students to receive higher individual achievement compared to students who work independently (Liang, 2020). Group work can also contribute in highlighting the students' transferable and employable skills (Ayres, 2014) which is essential especially in the disciplines of tourism, hospitality and events where the output of that education is to deliver fully developed students to the hospitality industry (Green and Sammons, 2014).

Intervention

With the L5 group Belbin team roles were used when assigning group work. Dr Meredith Belbin (2012) believes that every individual possesses a certain pattern of behaviour that defines one person's attitude in relationship to another when assisting in the progress of maintaining a team. An example of the team roles suggested by her are the implementer, the completer or the coordinator. Each of these roles can draw on specific contribution to the group work, but at the same time have some allowable weaknesses. The students choose the members of their teams themselves to avoid disappointment and failure, but all of them were asked to fill in the Belbin Team Inventory behavioural test before starting working as a group. That was also necessary as these groups had to work together through the semester as one of their assignments was a group presentation. The Level 4 students have ranged activities to develop their cognitive and behavioural learning. On the day of the researcher's observation the work to that group was assigned randomly. The topic was discussing a particular type of tourist activities. On pieces of paper the researcher have written the numbers from 1 to 6 as the number 1 was written 4 times, number 2 four times and so on. The lecturer went around the group and allowed each student to pick up a piece of paper. Then the students had to move around to find the matching numbers and to form 6 different teams. Once the groups were allocated different destinations were assigned to each and task has been given.

Data

To evaluate this pedagogical method three different approaches have been undertaken. Firstly the researcher had been observed by fellow colleagues and her mentor while delivering her module. Secondly students were asked for their feedback after session (L4 students) and at the end of the semester (L5 students through the Module Evaluation Survey and throughout the course). Thirdly the researcher had also added her personal reflection on the intervention.

1. Based on the observation of the researcher's mentor, who was observing the group activities with the Level 4 students, it can be concluded that the researcher can encourage group interaction by assigning roles to each member of the teams. However the researcher needs to build further confidence and develop listening in a structured safe environment which develops individual and group cohesion and motivation preparation for industry.
2. Overall students in both groups were satisfied with that pedagogical method. The students from Level 4 found it engaging and even students that generally do not contribute to class discussions were taking place. However at that level students were not that keen to part in group activities if they are not directly related to the assignments of the module. The second group of students were able to choose their groups as one of their assessments was a group presentation. In some groups there were different dynamics which lead to poor communication. However the students admit to the researcher that the poor performance of some groups "it is due to lack of purpose and motivation to study from students" themselves.
3. From personal perspective these activities were enjoyable, especially when the outcome was significant student engagement. However in the future the researcher should allocate more time to plan these activities accordingly, by taking into further considerations the needs of the students involved.

Conclusions

From the research above can be concluded that group work is a significant method that can be used to nurture wider knowledge (Hassanien, 2006) enhancing skills, enjoyment and engagement with the material. At the same time inadequate communication can be a challenge for the group members. It is also clear that if group work is not part of the assessment students find it difficult to engage and participate. Some students are really dreading group work, but if presented and managed accordingly have really positive impact on the learning experience, specifically when it comes to inclusion (Burke, 2011). Roles within group work should be assigned by the lecturer to encourage participation and knowledge transfer. Further research should however be performed to outline how students can be engaged further with group work and particularly in the fields of tourism, hospitality and events industries.

