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Comments and Rejoinders

Two issues in educational research: A response to “Reviewing education concerns”



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ABSTRACT

Two educational issues raised in [Korstanje's \(2012\)](#) recent review are addressed in the current rejoinder. First, dual roles occur when researching one's own teaching and may result in demand characteristics by involving one's own students as participants. Findings may therefore be biased if students respond in a socially desirable manner to questionnaire items. Different methodological strategies for minimising this problem are discussed; for example, by considering the wording of instructions and methods used to administer questionnaires. Second, the role of rewards and punishments in students' interpersonal efforts to work together in groups can be interpreted from different theoretical perspectives. Drawing from social interdependence theory ([Deutsch, 1962](#)) recommendations for encouraging cooperative, rather than competitive, group working are made.

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1. Introduction

A recent review focused on a paper I published in Volume 9 (issue 2) of the Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism (JHLSTE) entitled “Student-Initiated Group Management Strategies for More Effective and Enjoyable Group Work Experiences” ([Cumming, 2010](#)). I thank the author ([Korstanje, 2012](#)) for the positive response he gave to my study, acknowledging its contribution to the literature, and recognising the practical value of the findings for higher education. The review raises two main issues that have provoked me to carefully think about by my study specifically, as well as pedagogical research more generally. In the spirit of further advancing the discussion started by Korstanje, I will address each issue in turn.

1.1. Issue #1: dual roles

In his review, [Korstanje \(2012\)](#) criticises academic staff who conduct research with their own students. However, occupying the dual role of lecturer and researcher is common, particularly for staff members who as part of their professional development explore pedagogic issues by taking a scholarly approach to their teaching activities. This approach is consistent with recommendations made by the UK's national professional standards framework for standards in teaching and supporting learning in higher education ([Higher Education Academy, 2006](#)), and encouraged as part of registration Higher Education Academy-accredited professional development courses (e.g., post graduate certificate in teaching and learning in higher education). To increase research-informed teaching and enhance the student learning experience, for

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example, the standards framework advocates academic staff to incorporate research and scholarship into all areas of teaching activity, including leading the enquiry.

It with these matters in mind, and to fulfil partial requirements of the PG Cert course offered by the University of Birmingham where I am employed as a senior lecturer, I undertook a study to provide insight into the development of effective group work experiences by examining group management strategies initiated by students. The results demonstrated that students who more frequently engaged in strategies (i.e., goal setting, use of a time line; as well as discussion of group dynamics, roles, conflict resolution and individual expectations) were more likely to perceive their group to be effective, enjoyed working in their group more and believed they learned more about how to work together. Further, I also established that development of the group process and task cohesion were mechanisms by which the group management strategies improved collaborative work.

The focus of my study was on empowering students to help themselves to have better group work experiences through an enquiry-based learning (EBL) approach. However, I also recognise the role of the tutor (i.e., myself) in leading the workshops designed to support their group work and the majority of lectures of the module. I was well-known to the students involved in the study, and this cohort described me as approachable and enthusiastic about teaching in the year-end module evaluation. I was also experienced in delivering the module after having contributed lectures to 6 previous iterations and had recently re-developed the semester-long written coursework that formed the bases of the group work. Thus, as a familiar staff member who already had an established rapport with her students, I found it very easy to ask them to complete a package of questionnaires to evaluate their group work experiences. I acknowledged this issue to a certain degree in the paper's discussion by cautioning readers that the study's result might have differed if less experienced or familiar individuals had led the EBL workshops.

However, [Korstanje \(2012\)](#) also raise another valid point I had overlooked in my discussion of the study's limitations. That is, the results of research carried out by individuals with the dual role of both tutor and researcher might be biased due to undergraduate students responding in a socially desirable manner. According to [Nederhof \(1985\)](#), social desirability reflects a tendency for individuals to present themselves in a favourable light (e.g., students trying to make a good impression on their tutor through the responses made in the questionnaire) resulting in over-reporting of desirable behaviours and under-reporting of undesirable behaviours. Korstanje described this problem as students responding to what lecturers want to hear and not necessarily what they really think. I attempted to minimise social desirability by keeping questionnaires anonymous and confidential, and students therefore knew that their responses were not connected to actual performance in the coursework or module. I also indicated in the instructions that there was no right or wrong way to answer the items. Moreover, some of the items were negatively worded to prevent an acquiescence bias (i.e., the tendency to agree with others because it is perceived as being easier to agree rather than disagree; [Bowling, 2005](#)) and none were written in a threatening way that might have provoked a socially desirable response. By combining these strategies within my methodology, my aim was to reduce any existing demand characteristics within the sample.

Future research might try to further combat social desirability by including validated measures such as the Marlowe–Crowne Social Desirability Scale ([Crowne & Marlowe, 1960](#)) to help identify whether data has been contaminated by this type of bias. As it is often seen as a measurement issue, researchers can then choose to remove or adjust scores for participants who score highly on social desirability and therefore have more confidence in the validity of their data ([Nederhof, 1985](#)). Another approach would be to reduce social cues by having students complete the questionnaires individually rather than in groups. Because data collection involves an interaction between the respondents and the questionnaire administrator, it is not surprising that previous studies have shown increased socially desirable responses when the questionnaires are completed face-to-face rather than by post ([Bowling, 2005](#)). In my study, the questionnaires were presented in a traditional paper and pencil format and administered by me in a lecture situation. Alternatively, I could have asked someone unconnected with the teaching and less familiar to the students to play this role (e.g., a post graduate student or research assistant). Another more impersonal approach would have been to ask students to complete the questionnaire over the internet or return the completed paper questionnaire by post. By doing so, however, I might have compromised item response and the overall return rate of the data in favour of reducing social desirability. Given the low sample size, I opted to administer the questionnaires in person to maximise the amount of data collected and to be readily available if students had any queries about the items. Regardless of the questionnaire administration method, however, I agree with [Korstanje's \(2012\)](#) recommendations for researchers to acknowledge the degree of familiarity existing between them and their participants.

In sum, academic staff engaging in teaching-related research as part of their professional development should be aware of how their dual role as both tutor and researcher might compromise the quality of data they collect with their students, including problems with socially desirable responses to questionnaire items. However, steps can be taken to avoid such biases by carefully considering who administers the questionnaire, and where and how it is delivered, including the instructions used, the format of the questionnaire and wording of the items.

1.2. Issue #2: other influences on group cohesion

The second issue raised by [Korstanje \(2012\)](#) concerns the role of rewards and punishments in group work. Behavioural learning theory suggests that cooperative efforts occurring between individuals are driven by extrinsic motivation to achieve rewards. For cooperative learning to be effective, incentives are necessary to encourage group members to work

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