



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



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 23 September 2012

Received in revised form 18 February 2013

Accepted 12 August 2013

Keywords:

Group
Peer
Learning
Knowledge
Sharing
Tacit

ABSTRACT

We investigated how students' interpersonal trust relationships impact on their willingness to share knowledge during group work and whether there is one best method of group allocation to maximise knowledge sharing. Through focus groups with 32 undergraduate and postgraduate students, we found: i) participants had limited experience of sharing skills; ii) they were more frequently engaged in sharing their beliefs, values and ideas; iii) while interpersonal relationships impacted upon the degree to which knowledge sharing took place, the major contributing factor was participants' desired outcomes. Participants identified different advantages and disadvantages for the same allocation methods depending on their motivations for attending their courses. We conclude that the most equitable approach to group work is to allow students to choose the allocation method most appropriate to their needs. Findings can assist educators in making informed decisions about group work to increase student engagement, and support cognition-based trust to enhance knowledge sharing.

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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

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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 'encompasses 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.

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