



Understanding nursing students' perspectives on the grading of group work assessments



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ABSTRACT

Grading group work assessments so that students perceive the grade to be fair to all group members is sometimes challenging. This is particularly important in a higher education environment that is increasingly concerned with student perceptions of teaching quality and satisfaction. This article reports on research that compared undergraduate nursing students' perceptions of two different approaches to the grading of group work assessment.

A survey design was used to identify students' perspectives and preferences for different group work assessment methods. Participants were undergraduate bachelor of nursing students from a large, metropolitan university in Australia. Data analysis indicated that the perceptions of students around group work assessments changed little as they progressed across the program, although students who had experienced the calculation of individual grades for a group assessment preferred this approach. Many believed the grading of group assessments penalised good students and were less reliable than individual assessments. Students maintained the belief that teamwork skills were essential for the registered nurse role.

In conclusion group work assessment should only be used when it is the best assessment method to demonstrate student learning of specific objectives. The weighted mark approach is the group work assessment grading approach of choice.

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Introduction

Group work is about assisting students to learn more effectively (Li, 2001) and/or develop the skills required to work as a team which is considered an essential attribute in many workplaces (Willcoxson, 2006). The ability to work as a member of a team is central to nursing practice and this will continue to be so with the development of increasingly complex interdisciplinary health care approaches.

While the benefits of group work activities have been established for many years the means of assessing group work participation and outcomes has been controversial. Noonan (2012) emphasises the need for group work assessments in nursing programs to be fair so that students are not harmed by them. Elliott and Higgins (2005) suggest the responsibility lies with lecturers of nursing to ensure that group work assessments are structured to

ensure students accept and recognise them as fair. In addition Caple and Bogle (2013) suggest assessing group work will always present significant challenges, supporting the need for additional research in this area. In the educational literature there is evidence of research around students' perspectives of group work and group work assessment (Caple and Bogel, 2013; Orr, 2010), and more specifically, group work assessment in nursing education (Shiu et al., 2011; Elliott and Higgins, 2005) but nothing that compares students' preferences for different grading approaches to group work. This research surveyed students to identify their perspectives on group work and preferences for different methods of assigning grades to group work assessment items.

Background

It is acknowledged that the assessment of group work can be complex and that different approaches have been used to determine students' final grades for group work items. This is a potentially contentious issue for students, that many lecturers who have assessed group work will be aware. Two main approaches are commonly used to assess group work.

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One commonly used approach to grading group work assessments is where all students receive the same grade for a composite piece of work (Nicolay, 2002). All students receive the same grade regardless of their individual contribution to the assessable group outcome.

When students work in a group situation where they perceive the workload has not been evenly shared it can create tension in the group (Noonan, 2012). Students may also believe the grading was unfair if all students receive the same mark (Shiu et al., 2011; Wilcoxson, 2006; Hassanien, 2006; Freeman and McKenzie, 2002). Where the workload is not evenly distributed the weighted mark approach (Based on Goldfinch, 1994 and explained in Lejk et al. (1996) is one possible solution (Sharp, 2006).

Evaluation of group work assessment from a students' perspective is limited. Using a qualitative methodology Orr (2010) identified the complexities inherent in students' perspectives of fairness around group work assessments. Shiu et al. (2011) used peer assessment to moderate marks across the group and evaluated students perceptions of this approach, finding a range of differing perspectives. In addition Lejk and Wyvill (2002) used Likert scale questions to elicit attitude change to peer assessment in information technology students undertaking group assessments. Some of these Likert items formed the foundation for the surveys used in this research.

This research sought the perspectives of two cohorts of nursing students in a bachelor of nursing program around group work and group work assessment processes. One cohort of students was at the commencement of their program and the group work assessment was one of the first assessments experienced. This assessment item required groups of up to five students to develop and present a 20 min 'Power Point' on a stage of lifespan development. The assessment item was worth 40% of the overall mark for the course. This group work assessment was assessed using an approach where all students in the group received the same grade for the assessed piece of work unless students provided feedback to the lecturer that there was a problem. The lecturer then discussed the issues with all the students in the group, including those perceived to not be adequately participating. This is acknowledged as an appropriate approach to the assessment of group work items (Noonan, 2012). Following discussion a penalty was identified that the lecturer perceived to be appropriate.

The second student cohort was in the final year of the program. This cohort of students undertook a group work assessment that required them to work in groups on a specific question, protocol or practice related to nursing. The topic was allocated by their lecturer. After researching the area the students presented their findings to their peers via a 'Power Point' presentation. The assessment was worth 45% of their overall course grade. These students were assessed using a weighted mark approach involving lecturer and peer assessment. These students had experienced the approach used for cohort 1 as beginning students. The best available evidence in the literature was used to assign each student a final mark and grade for the group work assessment item. The assumptions that underpinned the method chosen for deriving final marks were those suggested by Sharp (2006). These assumptions were:

- The overall quality of the work was assessed by the lecturer, not the student, and awarded a percentage of the grade.
- The contribution of each student to the group work outcome was assessed by the students, not the lecturer, and allocated the remaining percentage of the grade.
- Students did not evaluate their own contribution to the group work process.
- Each student evaluated the other students' contribution confidentially.

- Using a simple formula the lecturer calculated each students final grade.

To derive an individual final grade for a student using the weighted mark approach requires the lecturer to mark the final product of the group work activity and allocate it a percentage and a grade. The students were then allocated 50% of this mark with the remaining percentage entering a pool of marks for the group which could be distributed among team members based on participation. Those students that contributed more to the project received more of the pooled marks than those that did less. In effective groups all students participated equally and received the same grade. It was not necessary for all students to participate equally in all areas. A student with strengths in one area might gain marks in that area while another student might gain them in a different area.

Methods

Ethics approval for the project was gained through the university Human Research Ethics Committee. The different groups of students were emailed information about the project and invited to participate in a survey, via a web link embedded in the email. Students were informed that their participation was voluntary and they would not be disadvantaged if they chose not to participate. Completion of the survey was accepted as consent to participate.

Participants

The project targeted nursing students enrolled in two large Bachelor of Nursing courses. One course was at the commencement of the program and one was towards the completion. Both courses had a significant group work assessment component. Both courses included internal and external students. Internal students undertook the course on campus, while external students mainly studied by distance, communicating and accessing most course materials electronically.

Survey

This study had three surveys that were constructed using web-based software. This software was developed by the university to support staff with survey construction, distribution and compilation of results. All surveys contained a short section on demographic information. One survey was administered to commencing students following submission of a group work assessment, and included items about group work and group work assessments. The students in the later course completed two surveys. A pre assessment survey included the same Likert items as the commencing students. A post assessment survey included the same initial Likert items as well as others specifically developed to identify students perceptions of receiving individual marks for group work assessments. As there is little published material on students attitudes to individual marks for group assessments, new questions were developed for this cohort of students after submission of a group work assessment. Questions were designed to meet face validity in that they addressed the areas needing analysis based on the researchers experience using group work assessments in the past. The questions were also shown to a group of experts who were not involved in the research to further demonstrate their validity. This group consisted of a bio statistician, the Head of the School of Nursing and Midwifery and two Program Directors. To determine reliability the questions were piloted using six volunteer students who went through each question individually. The questions were modified as needed and the same students responded to the surveys again a week later.

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