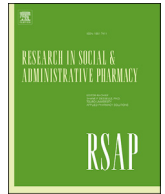




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## Professional identity development: Learning and journeying together

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Pharmacy students start to develop their professional values through engagement with the course, practice exposure, staff and fellow students. Group working is an element of pedagogy which draws on the social aspects of learning to facilitate knowledge and skills development, but its potential role in facilitating professional identity formation has as yet been under researched.

**Objectives:** This study aimed to explore the potential of mutual learning through group work to contribute not only to academic knowledge and understanding, but also to the development of students' professional values and selves.

**Methods:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 17 home and international first year undergraduate pharmacy students in a UK School of Pharmacy, to explore their experiences of interacting for learning with other students on the course.

**Findings:** Thematic analysis of the interview data highlighted four main benefits of mutual learning, which are that it: promotes friendly interactions; aids learning about the subject and the profession; opens the mind through different opinions and ways of thinking; and enables learning about other people. Through working together students developed their communication skills and confidence; reflectively considered their own stance in the light of others' experiences and healthcare perspectives; and started to gain a wider worldview, potentially informing their future interactions with patients and colleagues. Some difficulties arose when group interactions functioned less well.

**Conclusions:** Opportunity for collaboration and exchange can positively influence development of students' professional outlook and values. However, careful management of group working is required, in order to create a mutually supportive environment wherein students feel able to interact, share and develop together.

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## 1. Introduction

Throughout their education, pharmacy students are embarking on the journey to become professionals. They are developing a sense of their personal and professional values, beliefs and ideas through their engagement with the course, the pedagogy and practice exposure, and their interactions with faculty, staff and fellow students. These dynamic and continuous interactions will enable them to develop and construct knowledge about their subject, their profession, others and themselves. Although there is no commonly accepted definition of 'professionalism' or 'professional identity' in relation to pharmacy or indeed to other healthcare disciplines, these terms are both used to encompass attributes that are generally considered important in a healthcare practitioner, including, for example: having integrity, being patient-

centred, showing compassion, being a good communicator, being meticulous.<sup>1–4</sup> Although some elements of professionalism can be and are explicitly taught and practised within the undergraduate curriculum, many aspects depend upon the acquisition through other means of personal, as well as professional, values and behaviours.

Health professionals' identity formation, which is not static, but constantly undergoing reformation, depends largely on social and relational factors.<sup>5,6</sup> Group work is an element of pedagogy which draws on the social aspects of learning, as well as upon the range of skills present within a group, and is seen as a means of fostering collaboration, teamwork and leadership; student interaction, communication and engagement; enhancing students' intellectual, personal and professional development; and encouraging deeper learning.<sup>7–9</sup> When the process functions well it can produce affective benefits such as participation, belonging and involvement, but conversely can be a source of conflict, tension and frustration

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due to differing expectations and ways of learning and clashes of personality.<sup>10–13</sup> Working with peers inevitably highlights some of the issues in dealing with 'difference'. Although a rich environment for being challenged and stimulated through different approaches and ideas, it also risks reinforcing power differentials, oppressive practices and stereotyping if unchecked.<sup>9</sup> As graduates and professional pharmacists, students of pharmacy will serve a diverse population of patients and work in multi-professional, multi-skilled and multi-cultural teams. Enabling them therefore, through their undergraduate education, to develop a wider appreciation of people and healthcare practices, beliefs and approaches has current and future value both for them as individuals and for the good of the profession and society.

Studies on the role of intercultural learning within healthcare are limited. However, work has shown the potential of multicultural group working - whereby culture is understood as 'difference' rather than necessarily nationality - to act as a platform upon which students can share perspectives and experiences, on a professional as well as a personal level, helping them to enhance their intercultural communication skills, learn and understand something of others and their worlds and perspectives, and appreciate and reflect upon different healthcare practices and approaches.<sup>14–17</sup> In this way, students are entering their 'community of practice'<sup>18</sup> as they negotiate with each other their ways of understanding and becoming health professionals.

This study therefore aimed to explore the potential of mutual learning through group work to contribute not only to the development of academic knowledge and understanding, but also to the development of students' professional values and selves.

## 2. Methods

This study concerns how the social aspects of learning are interlinked with students' development of personal and professional selves. It therefore employed a qualitative approach to understanding student experiences. The research was carried out with students on a four-year undergraduate Masters course in a UK School of Pharmacy, which has a relatively high proportion of international and ethnically diverse students. The course contains a range of group activities in all years of the course, such as group discussions of cases, group presentations, and working in simulated pharmacy environments. The population of first-year pharmacy students is likely to vary considerably in their previous experience of working in peer groups, and especially so within an internationalised course, due to different educational and pedagogical norms.<sup>19,20</sup> Many of the activities are in School-allocated groups (which change each semester); fewer are student-selected. Assessment is conducted almost entirely on an individual basis. However, the culmination of group work is in the fourth year of the course, most of which is dependent upon collaborative working and learning, and which thus feeds into preparedness for assessment.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 17 first-year students during their second semester, which explored their experiences and perceptions of interactions with others, particularly through group work. The sample, consisting of 7 British, 7 international, and 3 British (other heritage) students, represented 10% of the first year cohort. Participants were recruited by volunteer sampling. The researcher addressed all first year students at the start of a lecture, to explain the study and its purpose, distributed information sheets and asked students who were willing to sign up to participate. Information and sign-up sheets were given to all students, which they were asked to return at the end of the lecture, whether offering to participate or not. This was done so as not to draw any distinction between volunteers and non-volunteers. The

information provided was followed up by e-mail and mutually convenient times for face-to-face interviews arranged.

Participants were interviewed individually. Before each interview, each participant was given the information sheet to read and a consent form to sign. These made clear that participation was entirely voluntary and that the choice to participate, or anything said during the interviews, would have no bearing upon marks or progression. Interviews were audio-recorded and notes taken at the time. The study was reviewed and approved by the School of Pharmacy Research Ethics Committee.

The data were analysed inductively<sup>21</sup> in order to identify themes of common significance emerging from the data, which related to the research question. This was done by coding the interview data by hand. Firstly, transcripts were read to gain a sense of the whole. Secondly, relevant words and ideas expressed by the students about their experiences and views of learning through group work were identified. Thirdly, these words and ideas were grouped into categories by looking for areas of congruence. Transcripts were then re-read in the light of these emergent categories in order to check meaning and context. The final step was to identify the overarching themes which arose from the clustering of these categories.

## 3. Results and discussion

The thematic analysis of the interview data gave rise to four main themes describing aspects of students' collaborative learning. These were that group working: promotes friendly interactions; aids learning about the subject and the profession; opens the mind and shows different opinions and ways of thinking; and enables learning about other people.

All students could see the benefits of working in School-assigned rather than self-selected groups, and most expressed a preference for this. The themes help to explain the reason for this preference and illustrate how students begin to develop aspects of their professional learning through working together.

### 3.1. Promotes friendly interactions

All students found group work valuable in enabling them to get to know other students. It helped them, particularly in their early days of the course, to find people with whom they felt comfortable and could befriend.

*Making friends is not something I find particularly comfortable or easy – but I've made friends on the course through being in groups. You end up talking to people and because I've seen them before I can sit with them again.*

Students were generally positive about the benefits of group working, particularly in School-selected groups, so that all were put into similar, unfamiliar situations. This feeling of being 'outside one's comfort zone' even seemed to help some students appreciate the similar situation of others, so be more inclusive. There was a feeling that having to work closely with others simply helped the course feel friendlier, generally aiding interactions, because students mixed with those that they would not otherwise have done.

*[Group work] is helping a lot, because now I'm seeing all these international students [from countries] I've never seen before and now when I pass them we smile or wave. I wouldn't necessarily sit next to them in lectures, but I know you and it's nice.*

Students could see clearly the tendency within the course for

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