Good Practice Guide

Assessment of Group Tasks

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Context and key issues

Results from a brief audit of the journal *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, the teaching and learning guides from selected universities, and projects sponsored by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council indicate that formal group assessment tasks typically include assignments or projects and presentations allotted to groups with two or more members; and that these are common practice in many disciplines in both undergraduate and postgraduate courses. There is research evidence that group-based assessment *can:*

➢ support students to learn through peer interactions and develop desirable social, intercultural and employment skills, and

➢ assist staff to manage the logistics of assessment in large classes.

However, it is also very clear that these benefits are not guaranteed, largely because of common concerns around:

➢ group composition and management, and

➢ the perceived equity of the grading scheme used for summative assessment.

Planning, implementing and evaluating assessment of group tasks therefore involves some important decisions. Key questions guiding your decisions and some suggested strategies follow.

PLANNING

1. What <u>educational</u> reasons do I have for considering the option of group assessment?
- Assessment goals need to be aligned with the desired learning objectives of the course;
- Groups may be better suited for solving problems in real-life or life-like contexts where key variables are poorly defined and clearly beyond what an individual could achieve
- Identify where your planned group assessment is located in the degree program. Look for the types, complexity and frequency of other group assessment to help identify both the past and future group-based activities of your students;
- Design tasks that require group members to make complementary contributions that require critical evaluations, thereby limiting opportunities for plagiarism; and
- Consider how the contexts both provide and limit opportunities for group work – face-to-face / on-line; on campus / off campus; duration of the group work.

2. How might I think about the size and composition of groups?
- Both 'group size' and 'group composition' should assist members to achieve the intended learning outcomes of the course, and must be inclusive and equitable;
- Identify your students' prior experiences with group work – use smaller groups (e.g. 2-3) for students less experienced, and larger groups (e.g. 4-6)) for students more experienced with group work;
- Decide the appropriateness and autonomy of systematic groupings (e.g. *you* determine the groups based on achievement levels) versus self-selected groups; and
- Ensure that allotted roles and workloads enable each student to make equal contributions to the group work.
- Explain to the students, how group composition and size support them to achievement the assessment goals.

3. How might I design the assessment task?
- Using summative group assessment will encourage students to take their group work more seriously;
- What are you assessing - *process(es)* or *product(s)* of group tasks or both?

> ➤ decide, communicate and reinforce whether 'effort' (evidence-based approaches to how well the students work together in achieving their goal) and/or 'endpoints' (what they produce) are being assessed.

> ➤ if processes are being assessed, ensure these reflect course objectives but don't contribute to grade inflation (over-estimated academic achievement) because they represent 'gift marks' not reflecting academic achievement; and

- Use explicit criteria and standards (rather than relative, normative grading) to encourage collaboration.

4. *What grading schemes might I use?*

- There are many variations in how grades are awarded e.g.
  - ➤ all members receive the *same* grade for their processes and/or products
  - ➤ members receive *individual* marks for their processes and/or products
  - ➤ members receive some *individual plus some shared* marks for their processes and/or products
  - ➤ marks are allotted by you, with or without some self- and or peer-assessment which may be anonymous
  - ➤ the final marks may be moderated (calibrated) by you or assistant markers;
- Aim for a simple but fair scheme – each method has advantages and disadvantages; and
- Clarify criteria and standards with students – these might even be jointly constructed between you and students.

IMPLEMENTATION

1. *What do I need to know about the dynamics of groups?*

- Groups formed for assessment may function differently from 'informal' or 'study groups';
- Effective groups develop through phases – *forming, storming, norming, performing and informing* which correspond to these behaviours – clarifying expectations, being polarised around issues, harmonising, constructively producing and reporting on their achievements, respectively; and
- Groups which function as 'teams' will demonstrate all these features – shared goals, equal sharing of role responsibilities, collaborative behaviours, meaningful interaction and the ability to monitor their own performance.

2. *What are the roles of my teaching staff in assisting groups?*

- Specify the roles of tutors and markers, what experience levels they need, how they will be trained and how their contributions will be monitored;
- Develop appropriate learning-teaching activities aligned with the intended learning outcomes and assessment requirements;
- Provide assistance and constructive feedback to support group performance – especially important for inexperienced students e.g. first-year classes;
- Preparing a checklist of milestones and a timeline may assist groups meet assessment goals; and
- Design and communicate alternative processes and outcomes (e.g. group products, deadlines) if group membership changes (e.g. students fall sick or leave) or if groups become dysfunctional. These might be negotiated with group members.

3. *How do I manage freeloading?*

- Carefully appraise instances that appear to be "freeloading". These may be real and deliberate, but might also be accidental or situational – use multiple sources of evidence to diagnose before responding;
- Try to prevent freeloading by careful attention to the task design, group composition and member roles and delivery that supports students to apply these skills – listening to others, providing constructive feedback, negotiation skills, developing an action plan; and

- Provide opportunities for groups and staff to share progress and problems based on their action plans.

EVALUATION

1. Why do I need to evaluate group assessment?

- Implementing group assessment can be risky – quality learning, and student and staff morale may be compromised – so evaluation will help you focus on and improve key educational and management goals; and
- evaluation will help you grow professionally through systematic documenting, sharing and developing of case studies. These might also be disseminated through workshops, seminars, conferences and scholarly publications.

2. How might I evaluate my use of group assessment?

- Appraise the quality of teaching by using Griffith University's 4-step P-I-R-I cycle (*Plan-Implement-Measure-Improve*). The 'measurement' step is where a range of complementary data inform how to improve the next cycle of planning;
- Use GU standardised and customised evaluation forms;
- Support students to appraise their own progress and share these self-evaluations with you. This will develop their ability to reflect upon relevant professional standards and the gaps between these and their own learning; and
- Invite colleagues (e.g. within your discipline and GIHE) to advise on each step; then inform students, tutors and markers of your findings.

Selected References

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GIHE Good Practice Guide on Assessment of Group Tasks was prepared by Dr Roger Moni. Find out more about GIHE resources to support your teaching at: www.griffith.edu.au/gihe