

Case Study

Title:	Team-working and Peer Assessment: The assessment process as an aid to effective learning in creative group project work
Keywords:	Team work, group learning, self and peer assessment, design practice
Abstract:	'Team-working' is a level two module undertaken by 45 Interior Architecture and Interior Design students at the University of Teesside. The aim is for students to work together in small groups to simulate design practice. Such collaboration encourages the sharing of learning approaches and provides students with opportunities to develop team leadership skills. Self and peer assessment in group work can ensure a greater sense of fairness in the marking and enhances student understanding of assessment criteria and learning outcomes, helping them become more effective learners throughout their courses of study.

Introduction

This module was developed a number of years ago for spatial design students initially as a response to some poor work placement experiences reported by tutors and students. Once difficulties in assessing placements and guaranteeing parity between those undertaken was also considered it was decided to replace this with a studio-based module. Therefore, to be able to ensure similar learning outcomes were met the Team-working module was designed to introduce students to group learning activities as well as replicating some of the issues of the practice, but in the more controlled and observable environment of the university studios. Students work on this project for approximately twelve weeks in terms two and three of their second year; this is far enough into the course so that they can benefit from already having developed the personal skills and confidence for such a project. They work to a design brief in practice teams of about six in number with the project culminating in a critique where their team projects are presented in front of tutors and their peers from the other teams.

The Briefing process

Initially the module is tutor led with a briefing that sets out the nature of the project. In some years this has been a live project with a real client, for example a local industrial estate wanted to re-brand itself as a business park to appeal to tenants from more creative industries so they required a vision for the new site. However, when there isn't a suitable live project a brief with a conceptual element is provided because this allows a broad range of solutions and, therefore, a greater call for team decision-making and dialogue.

Once the project has been explained the students have one week to work alone on initial research and to develop individual ideas and opinions. In the second week they have a further tutor led session on the issues and nature of team working. This presents models of existing practices and the variety of team roles, titles and responsibilities that they may wish to include. For example each team is encouraged

to have a chair, a project manager, a head of design, a head of research, etc., ideally so that each team member will have a leadership role for part of the project as well as a variety of team worker roles under another's charge.

The final part of this second session consists of choosing the teams themselves. Each team has approximately six members and these are chosen as fairly and randomly as possible by simply picking names out of a hat. After initial resistance to being parted from friends, students have actually been very receptive to mixing with others and overall there is a positive benefit to the course and studio atmosphere from the formation of new friendships and often even the break up of cliques. The students then physically move into their teams and undertake personal skills audits and exercises to find out what type of team member they are and, if they wish, they can use the results of these to help them decide their group roles. The tutor then withdraws from the room and the teams can begin to work together to plan their projects and negotiate roles and responsibilities.

Organisation and formative feedback

Apart from the final critique the remainder of the module is student-led. Students must convene and conduct one official meeting each week and the tutor will be invited to this by email with attached agenda, but can take a passive, observer's role unless requested by the team to contribute. Students quite rapidly appreciate the value of the meeting for making and then documenting decisions and each team member can report back on the progress of their own area of responsibility and also on any general matters such as attendance. They can also reflect on their progress through the project manager and formally set goals to be achieved for forthcoming weeks. It is important to spend some time after each group meeting feeding back on how it went and more importantly enquiring how useful it was for them and whether there are issues they would like to include in future. The students themselves often crave a more rigid structure and firmer leadership from the chair and project manager and hearing this provides team members with permission to try this.

One of the key strengths of art and design learning and teaching in a studio environment is the frequency of formative feedback and it is naturally important that after each team meeting more traditional tutorial sessions still take place. These consider and discuss each group's design concepts, research, presentation ideas, etc., and although these are more informal, feedback from this can still be recorded at the following week's meeting.

Many teams do work without any problems for the duration of the module, however, invariably each year some conflicts, arguments and disagreements do arise. These can be used to positive effect and can help students to understand how and when to compromise and occasionally undertake techniques of conflict resolution and often the tutor is called upon to act as mediator. The most common issues are related to non-attendance and perceptions of disparity in the workload and students can be very vociferous if they detect unfairness.

There are some important issues to bear in mind in terms of resolving and mediating. It is important not to include too many rules for teams to follow but to empower teams to regulate their own agreements of acceptable behaviour and, if they wish, agree disciplinary procedures. Tutors should therefore aim to assist the team to find its own solutions and ask what they would like to happen and their proposals to resolve group issues. However, the tutor must recognise that team conflicts can be deeply upsetting to some students and that occasionally a more active role is required to accomplish mediation.

In very extreme circumstances of non attendance or unacceptable behaviour a team member can be removed from a team, but only after attempts to mediate by both the

team and tutor have been repeatedly unsuccessful. These students then have to complete the project as individuals and instead of documenting team meetings must instead complete a report reflecting on team work issues.

Self and Peer Assessment

The summative assessment is by critique and each team is allowed thirty minutes to present and answer questions. One of the most vital elements of the team project is the inclusion of self and peer assessment so students can reflect on their own contribution to the team and also voice their opinions on their co-workers and it is essential they have confidence that a sense of fairness will prevail in the marking process. Therefore there are three elements to the student contribution to the marking process all contained in pro forma feedback sheets supplied to the students. They are also assured that their marking will only be seen by tutors and any comments used in feedback will remain anonymous.

Firstly students write up their own contribution to the project and reflect upon what they have achieved, what their duties and responsibilities were and how well they felt they met their objectives. They also consider their own abilities as team players and how they performed throughout the module. This self assessment element tends to be very measured and reflective and since the introduction of PDP modules students have become much more able to evaluate and articulate their own capabilities. For example many recognise areas that they can improve and they are increasingly conscious of the relationship between what they do on a module and the learning outcomes to be met.

Secondly the students assess their peers, initially in terms of issues of attendance, duties and the roles each team member undertook, they are then asked to evaluate how well they performed these tasks. A comments box is provided so that students can provide written feedback and observations to qualify their marking. Student comments have been, on the whole, very fair, supportive and perceptive and they clearly recognise team members whose contributions and efforts deserve particular reward. When a team member legitimately assesses another as poor they are often especially rigorous in their comments to justify this and very measured in how they phrase remarks aimed at members perceived as making lesser contributions. Each year some personal negatives will occur, but animosities are very easy to distinguish from genuine observations and can be disregarded.

Finally each student feeds back on the other teams and they grade their projects in relation to the assessment criteria and have a small comments box for limited written feedback. Whilst student feedback for other teams may not exactly mirror tutor marks it has proved to be remarkably similar in terms of ranking and they are not afraid to employ the full spread of the marks.

Conclusions

There are clearly a number of benefits and issues to consider associated with both self and peer assessment and team working:

Students have the opportunity to learn from each other and share their skills and strengths, this is especially true when observing the learning methods and processes that other students utilise.

Students play a much greater part in the critique, rather than being passive observers waiting for their turn to present, they tend to engage and they ask more questions to help inform their assessment.

Peer pressure and the collective responsibility of group work can have a beneficial effect on poor attendance and overall students can clearly be seen to raise their work

rate.

Students not only develop skills in articulating and visualising their ideas to a group of peers but they also discover the need to evaluate the work of others and through compromise, persuasion and diplomacy to achieve the best team solutions.

Team roles not only allow each participant to develop their interpersonal skills but can also be used to develop and apply leadership skills as they take responsibility for parts of the project. These real life skills are highly valued by employers and are a key element of interior design practice.

Students extend their professional skills by holding business meetings and appreciate the value of recording their decision making. The ability to document the process is also important for documentation and external examination purposes

Concerns about how group work could influence degree grades and worries students might have about being victimised or unfairly treated need to be addressed very early in the project during discussions about team meetings and self and peer assessment.

The use of self and peer assessment familiarises the students with the marking process, and illustrates how consideration of the learning outcomes and assessment criteria can be beneficial to their future assessed work.

The group work element does reduce the marking load of the lecturer, but the use of self and peer assessment introduces additional administrative effort. To work successfully this module requires a great deal of supplementary planning, front loading the work considerably, however the benefits to student learning make this an indispensable tool for creative fields of study.

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