

## CLUSTER 1. COMMENTARY

### YOUNG ACADEMICS' STORIES FROM LEARNING TO TEACH: TAKING THE PLUNGE INTO GROUP WORK

Lynn McAlpine, Oxford University (emeritus) and Masaryk University

#### Context

'Group work' represents a large array of activities, which can take place both in- and out-side the classroom. Many instructors are hesitant to try group work since they are unsure how they will handle the issues that can arise, e.g., equity of participation, sharing of responsibility. Students also may be hesitant about the implications (e.g., Burke 2011). So, it was a pleasure to read these two stories, one by Awuah, the other by Tkaczyk. Both explored the potential of group work in their teaching and felt positive about the outcomes based on their evaluations of student learning (in both cases, quasi-experimental). Below I briefly summarize their experiences, then describe some key instructional design concepts – which I then draw on to reflect on their desire to design more effective in-class learning.

#### The cases

*Awuah:* Awuah chose group work (in a course with thirty-two students) as 'preparatory ground for the students to master English terminologies with their mates before speaking up in class'. Students in randomly-formed groups of three to four used concept maps to explore the relationship among subject matter concepts (management). In two classes (twenty minutes each time), they used the concept maps while he monitored student contributions – and posed questions in order to assess the quality of the work. Afterwards in plenary, a member of each group presented the group's work with other members responding to class questions. Finally, students completed a five-minute paper for individual assessment. Awuah used observation and audio-recording (quantity of participation) combined with the individual papers and the group worksheet (learning) to evaluate the impact. His evaluation showed both an increase in student participation (small group) and quality of students' actual learning.

*Tkaczyk:* Tkaczyk teaching a seminar of twenty students shared similar concerns: insufficient student interaction in class discussion. He intended to 'enhance students' active participation, increase their interest in the course and improve on their acquisition of key concepts. He gave groups of five students cards, each with a key subject matter concept, which they sorted based on the required reading. Once finished, members each took turns explaining a concept briefly. Later, in plenary, students added concepts voluntarily to the concept map on the board, explaining the concept and why it was needed. This helped verify that students understood the concepts. To evaluate the effect of the innovation on student learning, he used a minute paper

(similar to Awuah's five-minute paper) and three survey questions. Like Awuah, he found activities in small working groups enhanced knowledge acquisition. *But the innovation did not bring about an increase in participation and interest.*

### **Practice: a design concepts to enhance learning**

When designing instruction, decisions should centre around helping students achieve the desired learning outcome. A critical concern, one often overlooked by teachers, is designing instruction to ensure students have sufficient practice of the desired learning before they are assessed summaratively (McAlpine 2004). By practice, I mean *guided or scaffolded instruction* accompanied by *monitoring and feedback*. Practice can occur in- and/or out-of-class. If in-class, it can be done individually, with a peer or in a small group. The same modes are true out-of-class, with the addition of online or blended interaction. Finally, it can be particularly helpful for both the students and the teacher if students are asked to briefly demonstrate their learning after the practice (e.g., muddiest point, sentence-summary) since this reinforces the learning and provides assessment information to the students as well as the teacher.

### **Reflections**

Both Awuah and Tkaczyk had a clear and similar purpose for their innovations, and drew on sound pedagogical principles in their rationales for using group work. Further, their instructional decisions can be mapped onto the key concepts noted above. They each chose to use in-class group work in which they provided a *structure* (cards, concept maps) to ensure students had enough *guidance* to complete the task effectively: an activity which included first a collective task and then a shift to individual articulation of subject matter concepts. During this time, they *monitored* group discussion and *intervened* as appropriate. Next, they both used plenary sessions to open up the discussion more broadly (more practice), which *reinforced the learning*. Finally, the short assessment activities (five-minute paper, one-minute paper) were designed to be used as formative feedback to the students and data for the evaluation of the innovation. Both cases are excellent descriptions of how the use of sound learning principles and appropriate instructional design can support student learning.

### **References**

- Burke, A. (2011) 'Group work: how to use groups effectively', *The Journal of Effective Teaching* 11:2, pp. 87-95.
- McAlpine, L. (2004) 'Designing learning rather than designing teaching: a model of instruction for higher education that emphasizes learner practice', *Active Learning in Higher Education* 5:2, pp. 119-134.



**Lynn McAlpine** is Professor Emerita at the University of Oxford, UK and McGill University, Canada. She is internationally recognized for her research – conducted in Canada, the UK and Europe – which examines how doctoral students and post-PhD researchers engage in and learn to do research – further, how they navigate their career trajectories both in and outside the academy. She receives frequent international invitations to do workshops and keynotes that explore the implications of the research both from pedagogical and policy perspectives. [lynn.mcalpine@learning.ox.ac.uk](mailto:lynn.mcalpine@learning.ox.ac.uk)