Does Group Work Spark Creativity?

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Abstract

The question as to whether group activities stimulate student creativity has generated considerable interest in educational circles for decades. This paper addresses the impact of teacher creativity and group work may have on stimulating creativity amongst entrepreneurship and marketing students in enhancing their knowledge base and employability upon graduation. An historical overview of group work and creativity in an educational setting is presented. The review aims at stressing the importance of educators’ roles in providing conducive classroom environments for creative learning in Entrepreneurship and Marketing disciplines. A conceptual model is proposed subject to future empirical testing to reflect and highlight the authors’ methodologies and techniques enhancing students’ creative abilities. Finally, this paper utilises the experience of a group of multi-award winning and acclaimed authors with regard to their research, creative teaching and learning exchanges in linking students with the broad community.

Introduction

Group work is recognised as part of the fibre of higher education and has been found to present a set of mixed outcomes (Burnett and Pettijohn, 1999). While the higher education sector is increasingly expected to produce high level of outcomes, resource pressure drives tertiary educators to economise their time and efforts. Given the increasing pressure to “produce” research output, time spent on marking assignments and/or exams needs to be carefully weighed against other priorities. Despite criticisms to the contrary, group assessment is likely to effectively manage marking quality and volume for large classes. As university academics are committed to prepare students to gain employment, the practice of working in groups to complete large, complex tasks can be advantageous for a graduate’s skill set (Mutch, 1998). Winning, managing and satisfying a diverse client base involves significant peer input. Group work can serve as a de-facto work experience for students. Group work allows more complicated, high level tasks to be assessed. Entire marketing campaigns can be produced to better mirror industry practice, positioning graduates to assimilate into a competitive corporate culture.

The social learning and peer network aspects of group work are effective and lasting learning structures (Vygotsky 1966). Students in groups draw from a pool of complementary skills, learn from each other while completing an assignment. This collaborative process valuably approximates industry processes used to manage multiple clients concurrently. Skills honed by carefully navigating many personality types and working styles form basic management training.

Many student groups lift their performance through the Pygmalion effect (Jussim and Harber 2005) to meet higher standards required to gain a good result (or comparative ranking) when the same task is set for multiple groups. Students’ competitive nature and grade driven behaviours can actually enhance the standard of assessment completion, particularly if an audience showcase is a component of marking criteria. Community and industry liaison is easier, if case study results
are of industry standard. Good quality work reflects well on the students, the academic facilitating the industry liaison and universities as a whole.

**Literature Review**

Although research into group work and creativity has its beginnings in the 1950s, it is still debatable whether creativity is found within a person, a product or a process (Petrowski et al 2000). There is consensus however that group creative work is both novel and valuable (Mayer, 1999) as communities move forward in an ever-competitive world. Early works tended to be psychologically based highlighting the importance of teacher behaviour in developing a classroom environment conducive to creative learning. For example, a US study by Esquivel (1995) found that “teachers who show a humanistic philosophical orientation, have developed their own creative competencies, and implement specific creative methods and techniques in their classroom are more effective in enhancing students’ creative abilities than teachers who follow more traditional instructional approaches”. Alas, this passionate approach was often criticised as too teacher focused with students becoming only as creative as their masters and failing to venture outside their comfort zones.

The latter half of the 1990s in Australia was a period when some tertiary institutions introduced creativity and innovation type courses into their curricula. Again criticism was rife as many of these courses missed the mark and only focused on training the traditional manager. In this context, Lubart (2001, p298) noted that there is a basic difference between “creative and noncreative process and how process-related differences may lead to different levels of creative performance”. Along similar lines, there has been a huge variation in the way creativity is understood, taught and perceived by students in different faculties. The study by Suanpang et al (2004) found that business students' expectations of using statistics in their professional work impacted on the sorts of things they choose to focus on when learning. Another area to receive much scholarly attention in recent times is how group work should be assessed. A recent paper by Donnan et al (2008) reported on a national project, Doing Group Assessment, led by the University of Canberra and funded by the Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education Inc., (now known as the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC)). The scope of the paper included communication, film and theatre studies. The specific focus was: Should a common group mark be awarded or should marks reflect differential inputs of group members? What emerged was that discipline context, assumptions and cultures overlay the strategies used to determine individual and group marks.

At the post graduate level in Australia, it is also argued that traditional methods of teaching and assessing creativity are not very effective in linking graduates with community and employer expectations. The most effective strategies use integrated delivery approaches to create flexible learning environments with premiums on individual time management and practical application of learning (Beattie et al 1997).

Despite this research, a lack of tools, textbooks, large class sizes, differing cultures and approaches makes the teaching of creativity that little bit more frustrating and difficult. Against the above backdrop, this paper seeks to develop a conceptual model capturing the possible drivers and outcomes that sparks creative teaching in the tertiary sector from both
teachers and students perspective. The proposed model, (Figure 1) will be quantitatively tested in the next research by the authors.

Figure 1: An exploratory model of drivers and outcomes of creative teaching

THE DRIVERS

Educator:
- Skills
- Integrity
- Passion

Students:
- Commitment
- Aptitude
- Integrity

Curriculum:
- The structure
- The theme
- The philosophy
- Faculty approach
- Assessment

Moderating variables
- Size of class, culture and learning environment

THE OUTCOMES

- Student Learning
- Generic & employable skills
- Student and staff satisfaction
- Creative thinkers

A reflection of creativity across two disciplines at the University of Canberra

The following two discipline areas at the University of Canberra where students have posted extremely positive unit and course evaluations will be used in future research to test the above model with both qualitative and quantitative data collected from a range of tertiary institutions.

Entrepreneurship

This practically oriented elective course complements a student’s undergraduate degree and enhances their learning experience. Young Achievement Australia (YAA) acts as the facilitator for local business, industry, government and the community to develop the capacities, capabilities and understanding of business for our students. The catalyst for success is using teacher networks to assist in developing individual and group creativity by way of working partnerships with business, education and the community. Using sponsors and business mentors, students experience all stages of a concentrated business cycle. In teams, students take full responsibility for all essential business and marketing processes in their companies. These include selling shares to raise capital and selecting a management team. It also involves planning and implementing quality systems in the key management areas of finance, manufacturing,
human resources and marketing. Students also identify e-commerce opportunities for their concept and develop a business website, plan and annual report, concluding the semester unit by liquidating and paying dividends to shareholders.

Normal course work and assessment is incorporated into the program and students have the opportunity to participate in special events including trade fairs and intensive management skill seminars presented by expert practitioners from the community. Students showcase their achievements in the media and semester end presentations to a wide cross section of the community who are invited to attend, view, listen and help assess student business plan/final report presentations over two evenings. Despite criticisms from some traditional academics that we are heading down a vocational pathway more suited to a polytechnic, more Australian Universities are now recognizing the value of integrating creative practical solutions into their theoretical studies. This is creating a competitive environment where students compete with teams from other universities for the prestigious Young Tertiary Business Person of the Year award; Company of the Year and various state and national awards. Our first year of involvement in 2006 culminated in one UC student winning the regional Young Tertiary Business Person of the Year Award and one UC team taking out the coveted national Business Plan Award at an Aria style presentation awards evening in a very prestigious Sydney hotel.

Two other programs, Student in Free Enterprise (SIFE) and a Student Internship (following a $32,000 Learning and Teaching grant) have also been introduced to engage students with the community. Again, under SIFE, the creative nature of the tasks undertaken and the opportunity to compete with likeminded students Australia wide has given students a greater focus and framework in order to launch their creative instincts and gain valuable employment skills and networks. Other faculties within our university (eg Nursing, Tourism, Building and Construction and Architecture) are making Entrepreneurship a compulsory core unit in their degree structures.

Marketing

The approach taken in the marketing discipline is to inspire students to extend their abilities, and commit to producing work that is beyond the limitations they have set for themselves. To support authentic communication, we construct a learning environment that encourages students to be truly “present”. When students have the confidence to “get real” rather than merely “go through the motions” of attendance and assessment, they are highly creative. What drives educators is making higher education an exciting and fulfilling experience for all students and staff. It provides a “safe place” to take risks and embrace creativity, which adds greater energy and enjoyment to all. In an environment where many use few or no face-to-face encounters, we defend the role of effective “live” lectures. Students appreciate this approach. ‘very stimulating’, ‘fascinating’, and ‘very informative’... Graduates have continued to send accolades after beginning their careers “as my lecturer she never ceased to demonstrate... that you need to have a certain passion, fear and adrenaline to survive in the industry” (Galetta, 1999 original student feedback).

Consumers exposed to advertising messages are often busy, distracted and even hostile, with high levels of advertising exposure and “lived” literacy. Our students mirror this - they are also busy, distracted, goal oriented and sometimes seek the minimum personal input for maximum output (Ellington, 2000, p312). A high level of involvement is the key to engaging the student. It is our job to create an active space for this to happen (Barnett, 1997).
Industry-relevant, “lived” learning is encouraged so students learn to lead (and be part of) a team. Students develop communication campaigns - learning the difference between a campaign and stringing together a few ads. To help students understand campaign theory and practice in a socially and professionally relevant context we wrote a case called *Young, Fast & Dead!* It asks students (P-Plate drivers) what kind of campaigns might stop them killing themselves on the road. In 2006 the case ran concurrently at University of Wollongong (UOW), with pre-service health and physical education teachers. The two cohorts produced 42 campaigns (UC & UOW), with a powerful student response. “Best team work I’ve ever been a part of” “enjoyed the group work… helped me to slow down” (ICC student feedback 2006).

Independent learning allows students to co-design their learning journeys. They “take control” (Candy 2000, p113) as they share responsibility for their own learning with peers. Postgraduate options include a combination of lectures, interactive seminars, “hands on” labs, technical demonstrations, online self-paced components, web accessible instructional “podcasts” and one-on-one editing support spontaneously provided by peer students, or by technical support staff. To complement this we keep a cache of previous assignments to display. Students work best in a collaborative environment where active learning is encouraged, where they are challenged intellectually and stretched to perform creatively (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). Weekly reflective journals can explore student experiences. Immediate general feedback is given on presentations, with hand in the week before allowing considered assessment, moderation and reflection by staff prior to final public presentation. It is apparent to all students whose creative work is outstanding. This is a great leveler and celebration of excellence.

**Conclusion, and Further Research**

To sum up, the findings of this paper are not to be confined to the two discipline areas of marketing and a entrepreneurship. Educators from other discipline areas will also find such group programs, methods, techniques and resources useful in terms of complementing their enterprise and marketing education in their own tertiary institutions. In particular, educators across diverse disciplines can benefit from sharing these teaching/learning resources with other educators committed to creativity and student learning. It would also be relevant to follow subsequent research the authors plan to undertake into student creativity and come up with new ideas and perspectives on this issue. The authors anticipate that the future studies will include quantitative and qualitative analyses into the areas that we have modeled and reflected upon in this initial paper. Furthermore, the authors feel that this initial reflective insight into the world of creative teaching techniques in the disciplines of enterprise and marketing at the University of Canberra will enable other colleagues to reflect on their own techniques and if necessary adapt to meet the demands of our changing global village.

This paper has some limitations that are to be noted. First, the focus of the paper is relatively narrow as the paper is essentially exploratory in nature and has been mainly based on literature and personal experience of the authors. Second, although a conceptual model is proposed, it has not been explored further because of tight space. Future research can be directed towards testing the model with qualitative as well as quantitative data towards deepening an understanding of student learning tied to group work.
References:


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