Evaluating group work

Purposes of evaluation

Evaluating group work can provide valuable information about the degree to which:

• the use of group work enhanced (or otherwise) student achievement of learning outcomes and engagement
• the use of group work enhanced (or otherwise) your delivery and/or assessment of the unit of study

You can also ask more specific questions about:

• the responses of individual students to group work as compared to individual work
• group work processes versus the group work product
• the effectiveness of group work in class and/or out of class to enhance learning
• the appropriateness of group work
• organisational, planning, management and monitoring issues
• strengths and weaknesses of group work and ideas for improvement
• diversity issues (did some students find it easier or harder, benefit more than others and why, what about issues of power)
• the ways in which you explained, facilitated, managed and monitored the groups
• the overall nature of the unit of study

Timing of evaluation

Evaluation can occur at any time during the unit of study program, but it usually occurs at the end of the semester or at the end of the task that is being undertaken and evaluated. Ideally students should be given time to reflect upon their experiences prior to completing any form of evaluation, especially if you desire some specific information about their experiences of group work or have a reflection component within the work being evaluated. It is also important to clearly explain why you are undertaking the evaluation. It’s a good idea to explain all of this at the start of the unit of study and to provide opportunities for students to reflect along the way.

Evaluation can also be built into the requirements of the group work tasks by asking students to complete an evaluation of their own or the whole group's experience of group. This could also be a requirement of their assessment. It is up to you whether or not to allocate marks (see Section Four). Also remember that your ongoing monitoring is also a form of informal evaluation of the workings of the groups.

Methods for collecting data for evaluation

There is no single method for designing or conducting an evaluation; methods can be quantitative or qualitative, formal or informal, formative or summative, self administered or externally administered, or any combination of these. There are advantages and disadvantages to each method and your choice will largely depend upon the purpose of the evaluation and the content, material, practices, tasks or activities being evaluated.
**Questionnaire**: A common approach that involves having students complete a survey either online or in class. You can use established evaluation tools like those provided by the Institute of Teaching and Learning or you can design your own. When designing your own questionnaire, ensure that there is an introduction which explains the purpose of the evaluation, that there are clear instructions for completion, and that the questions are unambiguous. The questions posed can be open ended or closed, or a combination.

- **Open-ended questions**: have the advantage of allowing students to identify what was the most important elements of their experience. A disadvantage is that they may not write much or maybe nothing at all. Examples include: ‘What did you like most about the group work task?’ or ‘The most useful aspect of working in a group was …’
- **Closed questions**: are statements that allow students to rate their agreement or disagreement with a comment or statement by using a Likert scale. For example:

  ‘I found the use of group work enabled me to develop my negotiating skills’

  strong agree neutral disagree strongly disagree

  Students are usually willing to answer these questions, especially if the questionnaires are anonymous. A disadvantage is that they do not give detailed responses or answer ‘why’ or ‘how’ questions. Adding an open ended question such as, ‘Provide reasons for your answer (optional)’ gives students an opportunity to elaborate on their answer if they wish to do so.

**Checklist**: is another method that can provide basic data. An example may be a list of provided unit outcomes (knowledge, skills, attributes, abilities etc) and students circle or tick the ones that apply. Alternatively you could ask students to generate their own list of outcomes. For example ‘Group work provided me with … (you list items, start a list or provide a blank space)

- Autonomy
- Opportunity to get to know my classmates
- Opportunity to work on a ‘real-life’ problem

Students are usually willing to complete these lists but again the disadvantage is that they do not give detailed responses or answer ‘why’ or ‘how’ questions.

**Evaluation handout**: some academics design their own evaluation handouts that can combine a number of evaluative methods and are anonymous, quick and easy to complete. They can take any form, use images, diagrams, comment boxes, or questions and lists as above.

**Interview**: can be done individually or in small groups and provide the opportunity for you to probe for deeper analysis of the process and experience. The disadvantage of this method is that it can be time consuming for both you and the students, and in a larger group maybe some students may be more vocal than others.
Focus Group: uses a facilitative rather than direct questioning approach and is a useful way of having students discuss the process of group work. This method allows students to work off and build upon each other’s answers. The disadvantage is that it is time consuming for both you and the students and there is the added difficulty of arranging a time that will suit everyone.

Practicality of the evaluation process

Before making a choice about evaluation method also consider the following questions:

- What resources are needed to undertake the evaluation?
- What has to be done in order to undertake the evaluation (printing of forms, preparation of on-line questionnaire, ordering questionnaires, arranging interview rooms)?
- What level of participation do you require from the students, tutors, organisations or any other party who were involved in the group work activities?

Uses of evaluation

It is important to consider who will use the evaluations and how it will be used. This is a key part of the planning process which relates to the purpose of the evaluation.

It is also important to reflect upon and consider the methods that have been used to gather information about the effectiveness of group work.