

Team role theory in higher education

In the third of three articles, **Gillian Smith** and **Pat Yates** reveal the thoughts of their students about team working

This article consolidates the research we presented in the preceding two articles “to investigate whether knowledge of team role theory could be used as a means to support HE students in academic group work and the development of soft skills required by industry”.

The research used Belbin’s (2007) team role self-perception inventory as a vehicle to develop knowledge of TRT and drew upon two data sets referred to as Group A and Group B, concluding that “the development of softer transferable skills was magnified when students had prior knowledge of TRT”.

A third data set, in the form of a focus group, has been incorporated to provide an opportunity to triangulate the research findings. Ghauri and Gronhaug argue that “through triangulation we can improve the accuracy of judgements and thereby results...” So “triangulation... can produce a more complete, holistic and contextual portrait of the object under study” (*ibid*)². This focus group cohort is referred to as Group C.

The key findings in this article are that, to maximise the development of soft skills, individuals need an opportunity to reflect on reasons for engaging in group work. Participants said that clear guidance/facilitation and use of social testing would be useful in supporting the development of groups both in educational and industrial settings.

Group C

Accordingly, 11 final-year students, who had been exposed to group work over a four-year period, were invited to take part in a focus group, to gain insight into their feelings, attitudes and perceptions towards group work, thus providing

an opportunity to gather new data that the questionnaires may not have addressed. Similar to Group B, these students had not completed BTRSPI or undertaken in-depth studies of TRT.

“Focus groups are undoubtedly invaluable when in-depth knowledge is needed about *how* people think about an issue – their reasoning about *why* things are as they are, *why* they hold the views they do.”³ Figure 1 opposite identifies four distinct phases of the focus group process, inferring that, if students remain at stages one and two, original perceptions of group work are reinforced. In this case, the initial feelings about group work and views towards others were negative; however, when students were given an opportunity to reflect upon their experiences, the value of group work was acknowledged. Additionally, the focus group was able to consider potential strategies to improve the experience.

The session was digitally recorded and lasted just over an hour.

Feelings about group work

To generate discussion, the focus group were given an activity comprising a picture of a student who has just been told that he is required to participate in group work for a module they are studying. They were asked to write down what they thought the student in the picture was thinking, enabling them to transfer personal opinion onto the image. This ‘non-threatening approach’ facilitated open, honest and transparent dialogue.

The activity returned 56 negative responses towards group work. Concerns were repeated by the respondents and fell into eight distinct categories, which were then collated (see Table 1 opposite). Ninety six per cent of the responses (categories one to seven) related to their negative feelings about “working with others”. It is

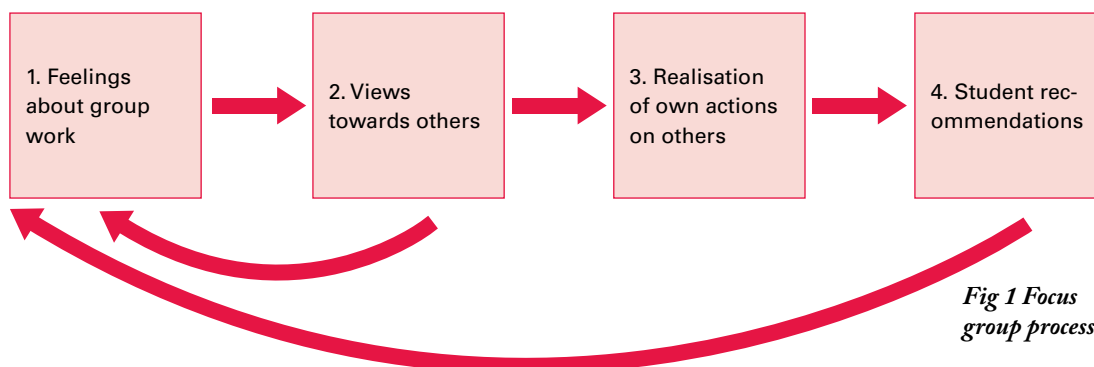


Fig 1 Focus group process

interesting to note that only 4 per cent of the responses (category eight) consider individual responsibility and effect of self on the group. This is a clear indication that the initial attitudes and feelings towards working with others, even after a four-year period of study, were negative.

Table 1 Focus group activity 1

| | | |
|---|---|-----------|
| 1 | Assumption that the standard of others is inferior to their own | 6 |
| 2 | Not wanting to do group work | 9 |
| 3 | Assumption that they will do more work than others | 10 |
| 4 | Assumption that group work will have a negative effect on grades | 4 |
| 5 | Assumption that the work ethic of others is inferior to their own | 3 |
| 6 | Wanting to choose own group | 9 |
| 7 | Need for information about group work | 13 |
| 8 | Reflecting on own group work activity | 2 |
| | Total number of responses | 56 |

Negative views towards others

The negative comments made within the focus group activity were used as a basis for generating further discussion to enable deeper exploration of their attitudes and feelings. Examples of the kind of negative comments made include “oh no”, “not group work again”, “I hope we can choose our own group”, “am I sitting next to any bright people?”

Interestingly, from the beginning of the discussion, the interchange between students began to establish alternative viewpoints in favour of group work. This indicated that, although initial comments were 96 per cent against working with others, when given an opportunity to reflect on attitudes and feelings, this proved not to be the case. For example, “to try and do that on your own [group work] would be near impossible,

I think... you need people... but it depends on what group you end up in” (UCB focus group transcript 15.18). Another student commented: “It generates ideas... but also, if someone is not pulling their weight, you tend to think am I really doing their work for them?” (UCB focus group transcript 18.12.)

This debate continued in the same vein, and the facilitators were able to observe that self-reflection was enabling the students to realise that, although they had negative perceptions of working with others, they were acknowledging that they had also benefited from group work experiences.

Realisation of own actions on others

As the discussion unfolded, there was a transition from focusing on working with others to an acknowledgement that individual contribution also needed to be questioned. Rather than seeing group work as something that is ‘done to them’, they began to explore their ‘own’ responsibilities to the group.

Fallows and Steven⁴, Greenan *et al*⁵, Sutherland⁶ and Siebert *et al*⁷ would identify this as a shift from passive to active learning, an essential element of employability skill development. An extremely revealing example of active learning was when one student stated: “I am also going to throw something out to the group that has just come to me... it is a kind of a reflection of your own people skills... do you not think that people don’t like group work because it kinda reflects their [poor] people skills and it reflects the bad points or even possibly the good points but more often than not the negative points of your own personal skills?” (UCB focus group transcript 38.45.)

This paradigm shift reinforces the importance of group work within HE institutions and the part that it plays in the development of soft skills, supporting Moon’s assertion that “group work is central to many areas of academic and personal development work, from joint work on *critique* and problem solving... to manage the



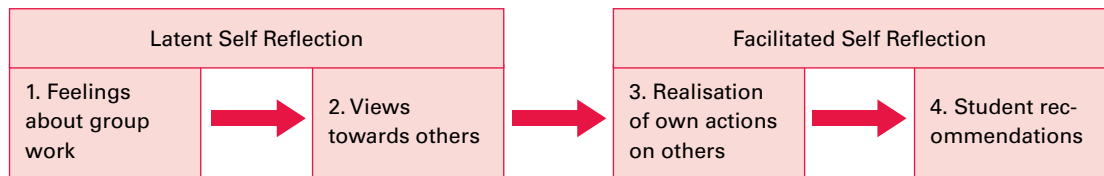


Fig 2 Group work development indicator

challenges to the self in the course of learning”⁸. To further illustrate, one respondent reflecting upon a previous experience stated: “I have stood there and cringed [in a presentation] with what people are saying because they don’t represent how I think or what I want to say... I was equally thinking, you know what, I could have actually helped that person which would help me. I could have maybe done more... in a group environment, you have to help each other.” (UCB focus group transcript 17.50.)

A lengthy discussion ensued about preferred ways of learning/working and how appropriate group work is in industry. The group gave many examples of utilising the experience in terms of being able to communicate with others regardless of age or position, acknowledging that it “opens your eyes to show you what you can achieve through working with other people” (UCB focus group transcript 31.15) and that “you are not going to get on with everyone but sometimes you are going to have to work with them... I think that is what uni tries to do. It tries to get you ready for going out there and being able to form these relationships” (UCB focus group transcript 40.55).

Student recommendations

The students explored the importance of having consistency in terms of guidance and procedure for managing group work. The consensus was that standardisation across modules was important so that students knew how the process was going to be facilitated: “If they [lecturers] could perhaps help us with appointments for our group... allocate group meetings in the lecture... then do a bit of team-building.” (UCB focus group transcript 1.01.09.)

Students also discussed the importance of using tests to develop group work synergy: “Why not have a couple of lectures or a lecturer preparing people for group work and if things go wrong giving them extra strategies, do it formally at the

beginning [of their studies]... the college could actually run some tests to see if they can put the person into groups.” (UCB focus group transcript 36.42.) “But how do you identify what someone is best at? You will need to do psychometric tests then.” (UCB focus group transcript 1.00.18.)

The students’ recommendations support the notion that facilitated self-reflection is advantageous to developing soft skills and their suggestions will be incorporated into our future research.

Conclusion

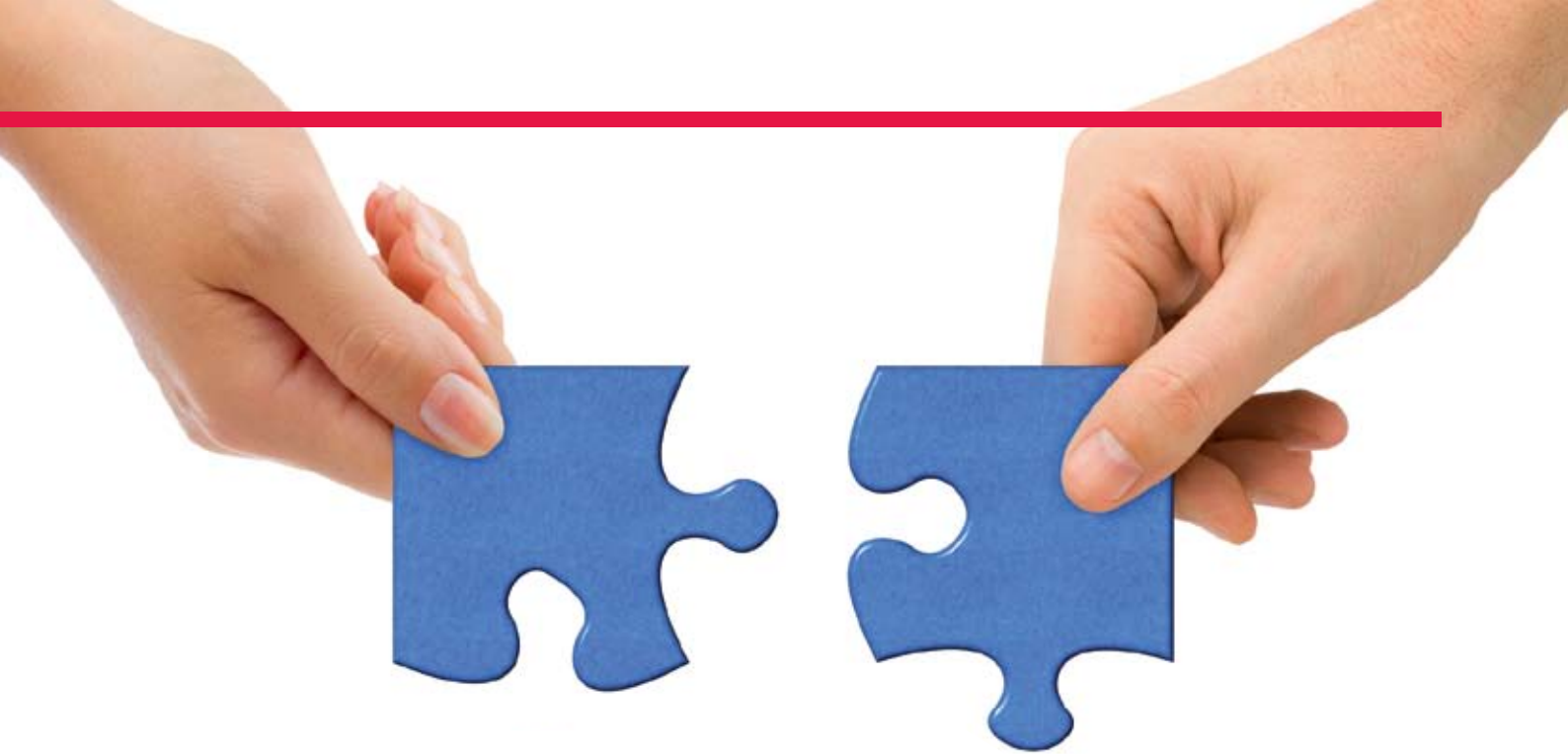
The key finding of the focus group exercise is that taking part in group work will not automatically develop TS as deeper learning does not necessarily take place, thus indicating latent reflection (Figure 2, stages one and two). Therefore, the opportunity and access for facilitated self-reflection is a key influence (Figure 2, stages three and four). This was evident during the focus group discussion, in which students began to question themselves and review their behaviour in previous group work settings. They recognised that, although group work is not always perfect, there are advantages.

Inferences could be drawn of an attitudinal shift in favour of group work during the focus group discussion.

Research summary

Group A stated that knowledge of TRT and BTRSPI improved TS. Similarly, Group C believed that use of the tests would improve the experience of working with others. The differences in terms of skill development between Groups A and B indicate that it is possible to improve the development of groups over shorter timeframes and that it is likely that Group B will arrive at the same learning point over similar timeframes to Group C.

Students’ attitudes to group work are often negative, due to latent self-reflection, and, therefore, the challenge for those with responsibility for developing transferable



skills through group work, especially in short timeframes, is to create suitable learning opportunities that move the learner forward.

Having established a number of common themes from the secondary data – self-reflection, active learning and soft skill development – it is important to note that underpinning all of these is dialogue between the group members. Group C acknowledged the importance of team-building exercises (and referred to psychometric testing or similar) as a vehicle for development opportunities. They also identified that facilitation plays a crucial part during the group work activity.

We now recognise that, for Group A, the BTRSPI and knowledge of TRT were critical features of soft skill development. Sharing information opened up communication channels, giving students an opportunity to discuss strengths and weaknesses, which created better understanding of both self and others. The significance of having an opportunity for facilitated self-reflection is demonstrated in Figure 2 and concurs with the students' recommendations in respect of facilitation. **TJ**

References

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