

THE PERCEIVED EFFECTIVENESS OF A PRE-GROUP INTERVENTION WORKSHOP FOR FUTURE MANAGEMENT SPECIALISTS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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Abstract: Learning through group work constitutes an integral part of academic teaching and learning. Working in groups extends the frontiers of skills learning and knowledge acquisition, and increases students' chances of employment. However, despite the benefits of group work it is not without its challenges. Insight into some of the benefits and challenges identified from the students' perspective could inform lecturers in higher learning environments on how they could enhance the teaching and learning strategies adopted by the learning institute. This article presents research that aims to determine whether a workshop intervention focusing on group dynamics before the start of modules had enhanced the benefits and reduced the challenges of group work. To achieve this objective, a self-designed questionnaire was administered to students prior to and after the intervention of the workshop. The results are compared and are reported in this article. The findings reveal that while there have been some clear benefits to the workshop intervention, it has not reduced all the challenges related to group work. These findings are discussed and a number of recommendations made on further strategies that could enhance the benefits and reduce the challenges associated with group work in tertiary educational settings.

Key phrases: benefits of collaborative learning; challenges of collaborative learning; group work

1 INTRODUCTION

Many organisations seek and require graduates who possess workplace skills that are learned through teamwork, and that they can apply in the workplace (Benvenuti 2010:10). Organisations need employees with higher-level thinking skills who are able to work with others to solve problems (Maiden & Perry 2011:451). Today, self-managed teams are frequently found to be responsible for key functions in organisations (Hernandez 2002:74), and there has been an increase in cross-functional and/or interdisciplinary team activities (Deeter-Schmelz, Kennedy & Ramsay 2002:120). Benvenuti (2010:10) observes that the work environment has become team-based and that collaborative learning is therefore high on employer agendas. Group work in the work environment has been linked to a variety of benefits such as increased productivity, efficiency and quality, as well as job satisfaction (Harvey & Brown 2006:278).

Universities recognise the benefits of group work learning and build group work into academic studies, particularly for postgraduate students (Sweeney, Weaven & Herington 2008:119). This research provides insight into some of the benefits and challenges of group work before and after a targeted group-dynamics workshop

intervention for students registered for the Bachelor of Commerce Honours degree, at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Therefore, the aim of this study was to determine whether a workshop intervention, before the start of modules using group work, would enhance the benefits and reduce the challenges of group work.

The findings of this study identify the perceived benefits and challenges to effective group work from a student perspective, and may therefore be of value to those involved in designing and implementing teaching and learning strategies. These findings therefore contribute to enhancing higher-learning strategies adopted by learning institutes and in turn may help prepare graduates to take their place in the employment market.

This paper is divided into two main sections: a literature review and an empirical section. The literature review provides an overview of collaborative learning and group work, with particular focus on the benefits and challenges of group work and recommendations for improving group functioning. The second section is devoted to the research methodology, and the analysis and discussion of the findings. The findings are presented as phase 1, prior to the group work workshop intervention held before the start of the semester; and phase 2, after the workshop. These are then compared to determine whether the workshop intervention enhanced the benefits and/or reduced the challenges of group work for students.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

This section includes an overview of collaborative learning and group work, the benefits of group work, the challenges of group work, and recommendations for improving group functioning.

2.1 Collaborative learning and group work

The terms “collaborative learning”, “co-operative learning”, “teamwork” and “group work” will be used interchangeably. The many definitions of each provided in countless studies make it almost impossible to define these terms precisely. This is confirmed by Resta and Laferrière (2007:66), who state that “it must be acknowledged that collaborative learning is a complex concept and not a clearly defined one. There is no universally adopted meaning of the terms ‘collaborative’ and

‘cooperative’ learning or agreement on precisely what their differences or commonalities is”.

Cooperative learning is a commonly used method of instruction across educational levels (Akindede 2012:6; Maiden & Perry 2011: 45; Pauli, Mohiyeddini, Bray, Michie & Street 2008:47; Sweeney *et al.* 2008:119), and is often the preferred method of instruction. Yet, while employers and academics value this collaborative, active, teamwork-based learning style, students place equal value on being individually active. The value students assign to active learning is diminished when working with others, as students prefer activities that they perceive will improve their exam performance, which is individually based (Machemer & Crawford 2007:28).

2.2 Benefits of group work

In a study by Slavin (1980:337), it was found that cooperative learning techniques improved academic achievement. For example, for low-level learning outcomes (such as knowledge, calculations and application of principles) cooperative learning techniques appeared to be more effective than traditional learning techniques, to the degree that they use structure, focus, individual accountability for performance and a well-defined reward system.

Slavin (1980:337) found that for high-level cognitive learning outcomes (such as identifying concepts, problem analysis, judgment and evaluation), the techniques that focused on a high degree of student autonomy and participative decision making yielded better results than traditional teaching. In a more recent study, Baumberger-Henry (2005:243) found similar results to those of Slavin (1980) and concluded that cooperative learning was at worst as reliable as traditional methods of teaching.

Various studies have identified the specific benefits of group work, some of which are listed below:

- **Comprehensiveness:** Students are involved with multifaceted projects, and can take on larger, more complex projects better in groups (Benvenuti 2010:9; Levin 2005:11; Williams, Beard & Rymer 1991:48).
- **Realism:** Group work emulates the workplace and its problems more closely (Allen, Atkinson, Morgan, Moore & Snow 1987:83; Henke, Locander, Mentzer &

Nastas 1988:8; Swaray 2012: 290; Williams et al. 1991:48). More and more organisations are using interdepartmental teams aimed at achieving high customer-service levels (Darian & Coopersmith 2001:128) and group work allows students to experience more complex, near-applied work experiences.

- **Communication skills:** Group projects improve written, oral and presentation skills (Akindele 2012:7; Gupta 2004:70; Williams et al. 1991:48) by providing students with valuable public-speaking experience, and thereby addressing the common call from businesspeople that new graduates need good oral communication skills (Crosling & Ward. 2002, Jackson, 2008).
- **Interpersonal skills:** Collaborative learning allows students to practise interpersonal and group management skills (Williams et al. 1991:48), improve their ability to work effectively with others (Hernandez 2002:80), and develop skills that will equip them for the workplace and lifelong learning (Akindele 2012:6; Ballantine & McCourt Larres 2007:132).
- **Cooperative learning:** Group work settings allow students to teach and learn from one another (Hernandez 2002:80; Levin 2005:11; Swaray 2012:285; Williams et al. 1991:48;).
- **Multicultural experience:** Woods, Barker and Hibbins (2011:65), found that respect for, and understanding of the cultures of other group members is very important to effective group work, particularly in a multicultural setting. Group work creates an awareness of different perspectives that could be influenced by a person's cultural background (Williams et al. 1991:48) and therefore learning takes place in a representative social context (Levin 2005:11). In the South African context this is beneficial in enhancing development and transformation (Becker 2005:216).

2.3 Challenges of group work

Despite these benefits, group work presents the following challenges:

- **Reduced learning:** Bacon (2005:260) found that students learned significantly more project-related content when working individually than they did when working in a group, and put forward specialisation of labour as an influencing

factor. The efficiency required to meet deadlines and achieve high performance in project teams may result in performance goals taking precedence over actual learning (Drusket & Kayes 2000:348).

- **Inadequate rewards:** Group productivity may be affected if individuals do not feel that they are adequately rewarded for their efforts (McCorkle, Reardon, Alexander, Kling, Harris & Iyer 1999:108). Shepperd (1995:131) developed a model that shows low effort in groups as a result of low motivation from individuals who view their contributions as “unrewarded, unneeded or too costly”.
- **Integrative learning problems and specialisation of labour:** Not all the students will perform all the tasks and so most students will miss some learning opportunities (Bacon 2005:255). In a previous study Bacon, Stewart and Stewart-Belle (1998:70) assume that given limited resources, a student will attempt to minimise labour input to achieve a given output.

Individuals may also have little appreciation for, or understanding of, the sections done by their colleagues, with individual pieces being ‘stitched’ together and the combined output submitted. As a result, students only learn a fraction of that which is intended by the lecturer (McCorkle *et al.* 1999:109).

- **Free riding:** Free riding is often cited as a problem associated with group work (Bacon 2005:262; Benvenuti 2010:7; Levin 2005:100; McKinney & Graham-Buxton 1993:405; Sawaray 2012: 290). As Benvenuti (2010:7) explains, group work is often problematic, with some group members carrying a far greater load while others do very little. This arrangement may be due “to choice or in response to other members’ efforts or lack thereof”.

McCorkle *et al.* (1999:110) acknowledge that “students realise that they must do something to participate, but marginal participation is often rewarded equally with full participation”. Students’ tendency to free-ride will increase with their perception of a lecturer’s lack of strength in group administration and with a weak likelihood of being caught and punished.

Free riding becomes a more significant problem for larger groups than for smaller ones, and towards the end of a project or semester where class trade-offs may be

made (McCorkle *et al.* 1999:110). Students tend to view their education as divisible, with performance in one class being unrelated to performance in another class (McCorkle *et al.* 1999:110).

- **Group fractionation:** Poor communication can result in factions forming within the group or the isolation of certain individual members, which in turn leads to negative group experiences (Pauli *et al.* 2008:56). Rafferty (2011:10) argues that language barriers and cultural uncertainty can lead to conflict within culturally diverse groups.
- **Group conflict:** Group conflict often occurs as a result of the above factors and leads to the underperformance of groups (Akindele 2012:6). Cohen (2010:58) notes that conflict *per se* does not have to be destructive in that students often avoid overt conflict and thus do not work through conflicts in a constructive and potentially beneficial, manner.

2.4 Team-building workshops

Various recommendations have been made for improving group work. Kapp (2009:142) suggests that lecturers can intervene to improve the ability of students to work together effectively in teams through a targeted team-building intervention. Bowen (1998:97) states that team-building workshops can create a broadened perspective on the potential benefits and values of team membership, and can also encourage further exploration of aspects that are usually overlooked in teams preoccupied with task completion. Naidoo and Ortlepp (2010:18) advise that group dynamics should be dealt with in such training prior to group work. Workshops should address the need for appropriate attitudes towards group work.

Courses involving group work could be more effective if more teamwork principles and skills were dealt with (Chakraborti, Boonyasai, Wright & Kern 2008:852; Naidoo & Ortlepp 2010:16; Woods *et al.* 2011:66). An example would include skills related to: conflict handling; role clarification and giving constructive feedback. This is supported by Deeter-Schmelz *et al.* (2002:121), who acknowledge that training sessions dealing with teamwork skills can improve team effectiveness.

The literature indicates both advantages and challenges to collaborative group work in education. Various authors (e.g. Chakraborti *et al.* 2008:852; Deeter-Schmelz *et al.* 2002:121; Naidoo & Ortlepp 2010:16; Teo, Segal, Morgan, Kandlbinder, Wang & Hingorani 2012:483) have recommended some form of intervention prior to the start of courses involving group work to improve the benefits and reduce the challenges. Thus this research sought to determine whether a workshop intervention, before the start of modules that use group work, enhances the benefits and/or reduces the challenges of group work.

3 WORKSHOP INTERVENTION

The group workshop intervention formed part of the empirical research and consisted of a one-day workshop focusing on the principles and practices related to effective teamwork. The workshop dealt with issues such as the importance of working with others, the benefits of group work, the examination of mental models related to team functioning, individual and group reflections on past group work experiences, and principles related to dealing with conflict constructively.

The workshop attendance was compulsory, and all Bachelor of Commerce (Honours) students who were registered in 2011 at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg campus, attended the workshop.

4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This is a pre and post-intervention study that consisted of two phases over five months. The purpose of the first phase of the empirical study was to determine what students perceived to be the benefits and challenges of group work based on their experience as undergraduate students.

The second phase was conducted at the end of the semester, to determine whether the workshop intervention before the start of the modules had enhanced the benefits and reduced the challenges of group work.

4.1 Research question and objectives

The focus of the study was on the students' perceptions of group work. The importance and benefits of group learning are evident from the literature study and the

question that arises is: will a workshop intervention, before the start of modules using group work, enhance the benefits and reduce the challenges of group work?

In order to answer this question, the following objectives were set to guide the research:

- To explore what Honours students perceived to be the benefits and challenges of group work prior to the workshop intervention
- To determine whether the workshop intervention before the start of modules had enhanced the benefits and reduced the challenges of group work.

4.2 Research design

This pre and post-intervention study compares data that was collected over a period of time, and provides an account of the change and development that arose from the workshop intervention. The study contains quantitative and qualitative aspects.

4.3 Sample design

A census of all Bachelor of Commerce (Honours) students who were registered in 2011 at the University of KwaZulu-Natal was deemed appropriate in this study. Forty-three students were registered for this programme.

4.4 Data instrument

The questionnaire consisted of twenty-nine questions, including five-point Likert response questions rating scales and open-ended questions seeking explanation for answers to other questions. Students' answers provided insight into the perceived benefits and challenges of group work before and after a targeted group-dynamics workshop intervention.

4.5 Data collection

The first phase of the primary data collection for the research consisted of administering a -survey questionnaire before the workshop intervention. The purpose of the questionnaire was to determine what students perceived to be the benefits and challenges of group work. The results of this study are included as phase 1.

The second phase of the study consisted of administering an updated version of the questionnaire used in phase 1, after the workshop intervention at the end of the first semester. The purpose of the questionnaire was to determine whether the workshop had provided benefits or reduced the challenges of group work as experienced by the students in the semester following the workshop on group work.

The results of this study are included as phase 2. Both the face validity and content validity of the questionnaire were checked by ensuring that the items included in the questionnaire were clear and understandable and that the measures included a sufficient and representative set of items that drew on the concept.

4.6 Analysis of the data

A total of 43 questionnaires were handed to the students registered for the programme. In the first part of the study, 14 of these were completed (a response rate of 32.6%). In the second part of the study, 26 of these questionnaires were completed (a response rate of 60.5%). The fixed response questions in the completed questionnaires were coded and the responses captured in SPSS. Descriptive statistics were used to explore the data collected and to summarise and describe those data.

Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis. Braun and Clark (2006) describe thematic analysis as the identification and analysis of themes which may be inductive (observed in the data) or deductive (analysed in terms of some theoretical framework). For this research inductive thematic analyses was employed with three researchers checking the data to ensure trustworthiness of the themes extracted.

5 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

This section presents the results of the analysis of the data obtained from the pre- and post-intervention study. This section is split into two sections, namely the profile of respondents and the descriptive findings of the empirical research.

5.1 Profile of respondents

TABLE 1: PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

Phase 1 of the study (n=14)	Phase 2 of the study (n=26)
The majority of the students ranged between the ages of 20 and 23. Only one student was 30 years old.	The majority of the students ranged between the ages of 21 and 23. Four students were aged 24 or 25.
Twelve of the students were female.	Twenty of the students were female.
The demographic representation consisted of six white, five Indian and three African students.	The demographic representation consisted of five white, seven Indian and fourteen African students.
Twelve students were registered for Honours in Marketing and Supply Chain Management, and two in Human Resources Management.	Twenty-one students were registered for Honours in Marketing and Supply Chain Management, and three in Human Resources Management.

Source: Researchers' own construction

5.2 Results and discussion of the empirical study

When presenting the findings from the questionnaires it is important to note that the frequencies do not equal the number of respondents (n) due to multiple responses being possible from each participant. Frequency of responses are labelled as such in the tables and presented in parentheses in other presentation forms. With regard to content analysis, themes were extracted from the findings, and these were verified by the three authors concerned.

5.2.1 Benefits of group assignments

In both phases of the study students were asked to rate, on the scale from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (5), the following skills/characteristics which are developed and enhanced by group work (see Table 2). Mean scores and standard deviation are used to rank the factors.

TABLE 2: SKILLS/CHARACTERISTICS DEVELOPED AND ENHANCED BY GROUP WORK

Phase 1 (n=14)		1	2	3	4	5	Mean	SD*	Rank
Phase 2 (n=26)									
Listening skills (n=20)	Phase 1	7	5	1	1		1.71	0.914	7
	Phase 2	5	12	2	1		1.95	0.759	1
Ability to work with others	Phase 1	9	5				1.36	0.497	1
	Phase 2	6	13	4	3		2.15	0.925	2

Phase 1 (n=14) Phase 2 (n=26)		1	2	3	4	5	Mean	SD*	Rank
Ability to make decisions (n=25)	Phase 1	3	9	2			1.93	0.616	14
	Phase 2	6	12	4	3		2.16	0.943	3
Planning & organising (n=25)	Phase 1	7	5	2			1.64	0.745	6
	Phase 2	4	13	6	2		2.24	0.831	4
Research skills	Phase 1	4	8	2			1.86	0.663	12
	Phase 2	6	12	3	5		2.27	1.041	5
Time-management skills	Phase 1	7	4	2	1		1.79	0.975	9
	Phase 2	1	17	7	1		2.31	0.618	6
Analytical skills (n=12) (n=25)	Phase 1	4	4	3	1		2.08	0.996	16
	Phase 2	5	10	7	3		2.32	0.945	7
Ability to identify problems	Phase 1	7	6	1			1.64	0.842	5
	Phase 2	3	15	4	4		2.35	0.892	8
Ability to communicate within a group (n=25)	Phase 1	10	3		1		1.43	0.852	2
	Phase 2	3	15	2	5		2.36	0.952	9
Leadership skills (n=25)	Phase 1	7	7				1.5	0.519	4
	Phase 2	4	12	5	4		2.36	0.952	10
Ability to find solutions (n=25)	Phase 1	8	5	1			1.5	0.650	3
	Phase 2	2	15	4	4		2.40	0.866	11
Openness towards the ideas of others	Phase 1	6	7		1		1.71	0.825	8
	Phase 2	3	14	4	5		2.42	0.945	12
Motivational skills (n=13) (n=25)	Phase 1	4	7	1	1		1.92	0.962	13
	Phase 2	6	5	10	4		2.48	1.046	13
Tolerance (n =13) towards others (n=25)	Phase 1	6	6	1			1.86	1.099	10
	Phase 2	5	10	3	6	1	2.52	1.194	14
Trust in group (n=13) members	Phase 1	5	4	4			2.14	1.167	17
	Phase 2	3	11	4	7	1	2.69	1.123	15
Conflict (n=13) management (n=24)	Phase 1	6	6	1			1.86	1.099	11
	Phase 2	1	8	11	4		2.75	0.794	16
System for penalising non- performing members (n=25)	Phase 1	6	3	4		1	2.07	1.207	15
	Phase 2	3	8	8	3	3	2.80	1.190	17

1 = strongly agree; 2 = agree; 3 = neutral; 4 = disagree; 5 = strongly disagree.

SD = Standard Deviation

Source: Researchers' own construction

The findings in Table 2 deal with the skills respondents believed they had developed from group work.

After the workshop intervention it was found that the ranking of the skills students perceived they had learned had changed when compared with the findings from the first phase of the study. The *skill of listening*, which before the intervention ranked 7, was ranked 1 after the intervention. The *ability to work with others* ranked 1 before the intervention, but 2 after. The *ability to make decisions* was ranked 14 before, but ranked 3 after. In contrast, *the ability to communicate within a group* ranked 2 before compared with 9 after, and *the ability to find solutions* ranked 3 before and 11 after.

It is interesting that although *the ability to work with others* was still identified as an important skill developed through group work, after the intervention students believed that *the ability to listen to others* was an important skill developed, while *the ability to communicate with others* was relatively less important. This seems to indicate that the group work intervention taught students the importance of listening, rather than only putting forward their own views, in order to work well with people in group contexts. This may be partly due to the difference between group work at undergraduate level and group work at Honours level.

At undergraduate level these students would have been the better performing students and thus may have needed to 'tell' others what to do in order to 'work effectively' with others, whereas in the Honours programme they are in more evenly matched groups academically, and have learnt to listen and learn from others as part of effective team functioning. The need for mutual respect and to 'listen' to group members was something emphasised in the intervention as an approach that can lead to positive synergy. Being open to the perspectives of others is also recognised in the literature as being important in group work (see Woods *et al.* 2011:65).

The findings also indicate that the group work intervention helped to develop specific skills important to group functioning in an academic as well as organisational setting. These included decision making, planning and organising, research, analysis and time-management skills. These are particularly important skills in a business environment.

5.2.2 Challenges to group work

Respondents were asked to indicate the factors limiting the success of group assignments.

Phase 1

Numbers in brackets represent the number of times the particular theme was mentioned by respondents. *Free riding* is clearly perceived as the greatest inhibitor of effective group work (11), with group members exhibiting a *poor work ethic* (7) or *not attending meetings* (2) as aspects reflecting free riding. This finding corresponds with the literature (e.g. Bacon 2005:262; Benvenuti 2010:7; Swaray 2012: 290). Pauli *et al.* (2008:55) describe non-attendance as a motivational or commitment problem.

Naidoo and Ortlepp (2010:16) found this factor to have the greatest effect on group performance, with respondents indicating that this was a negative factor. *Timetabling constraints* (2) and *lack of understanding of the tasks* (2) were also mentioned. *Inappropriate task division, too large a group* and *too many people trying to lead* were all mentioned once. The non-contribution is therefore perceived mainly to be the result of a lack of work ethic.

Phase 2 *Time and workload pressures* (8), *free riding* (including poor work ethic, non-attendance and non-submission) (8), *interpersonal conflict* (including *uncooperative group members* and *lack of respect*) (6) and *poor communication* (5) were identified as the main inhibitors of effective group work after the intervention. *Timetable clashes* (3) and *sub-standard contributions from some members* (2) were also mentioned. These findings from the second phase of the study support the fact that while there are considerable practical constraints to effective group work, such as time and workload pressures, two major factors inhibiting effective group work relate to attitude towards work and respect of other's opinions. This is in line with the findings of Benvenuti (2010:7) and Bacon (2005:262).

5.2.3 Conflict within a group

One of the challenges of group work is that it can lead to conflict within a group, which in turn leads to negative group experiences (Pauli *et al.* 2008:56). The questionnaires therefore specifically asked respondents about this challenge. The majority of the students (12 during phase 1, and 20 during phase 2) indicated that they had

experienced conflict within the group. Conflict management within groups was also a major theme of the workshop intervention, and respondents were asked about their strategies for dealing with conflict before and after the intervention.

In phase 1 of the study, the most common strategies for managing conflict when it occurred was to *discuss the problem openly and thus come to a mutually agreed upon resolution* (3), and to *confront and deal with the problem immediately* (2). Confronting the issue, discussing it and seeking a mutually acceptable solution are strategies requiring effective communication skills. As Pauli *et al.* (2008:56) indicate, poor communication can often lead to the development of factions within the group and ultimately to negative group experiences.

This aligns with the findings presented in Table 2, which indicate that the ability to communicate in the group was the second most commonly cited skill developed in group work. Other strategies for managing conflict include: *attempting to apply reasons and sensitivity to the issues* (2); *calling for the lecturer's assistance* (2); *focusing on the task and ignoring the conflict due to pressing deadlines* (1); and *providing the person with a warning when sub-standard work was produced* (1).

After the intervention of the workshop (phase 2 of the study), eight (40%) of the respondents who had experienced conflict indicated that their strategy for managing conflict when it occurred was to *discuss the problem openly and thus come to a mutually agreed upon resolution*. Only 25% of respondents had opted for this solution prior to the intervention. This is in accordance with the findings above that the intervention seems to have helped students realise the need to manage group members' behaviour through open discussion so as to achieve the group goals. In this way the respondents' perceptions and strategies in relation to dealing with conflict and the free-rider problem seem to be in line with an appreciation of the widely accepted phases of group development, namely, forming, storming, norming and performing (Gido & Clements 2003:325). Other strategies for managing conflict include: *ignored it* (4); *tried to resolve the issue with individual and then went ahead as s/he did not change* (2); *tried to resolve it calmly* (1); and *penalised the individual* (1).

A variety of particular events or activities causing conflict were addressed in this research. For each of these respondents were asked about the strategies they used

to deal with these. The following strategies adopted for: non-attendance by a group member; non-submission of contributions; and submission of sub-standard work discussed under the sub-headings form part of conflict within a group.

5.2.3.1 Strategies adopted for non-attendance by a group member

Naidoo and Ortlepp (2010:15) found that the most significant negative factor affecting the effectiveness of group work was lack of group member attendance. A variety of strategies were adopted by respondents in relation to a fellow group member not attending meetings.

During phase 1 respondents generally gave *non-attending members a chance to contribute and improve their group behaviour* (8). This allows students to practise interpersonal and group-management skills, as observed by Williams *et al.* (1991:48). Other strategies adopted by respondents were: *contacting the non-attending members and asking them to provide an explanation* (2); *giving non-attending members a warning, e.g. attend the meeting or face expulsion* (2); *decide the proportion of mark to be allocated to the offending member depending on their contribution* (2); *reporting the person to the lecturer* (1); and *taking over doing the work the person was supposed to prepare* (1).

In contrast with the findings prior to the intervention, where respondents gave non-attending members a chance to contribute and improve their group behaviour, after the intervention the majority of respondents *continued with the group work without them* (12). In some cases *members waited for the person to arrive* (3) and *non-attending members were penalised* (3). Other respondents indicated that *this was never a problem as they had agreed that they would let each other know if there was going to be a problem beforehand* (1); or they *called to check and then encouraged each member to make the group work a priority* (1).

Even though after the intervention the respondents were aware that everyone needed to get involved, when faced with time pressures they continued with the assignment without the missing members. It could therefore be concluded that the development focus reflected in the earlier findings shifted to a task focus in order to meet deadlines.

5.2.3.2 Strategies adopted for non-submission of contributions

Another free-rider behaviour causing conflict in groups is the non-submission of contributions. A range of strategies were adopted by students in relation to fellow group members not submitting their contributions.

The main theme before the intervention indicates that stronger members *pick up the work of weaker students* (5), with *limited consequences for the individual* (i.e. free riding occurs) (2). Three respondents indicated that the offending members were penalised (3) and *two respondents indicated that the person had been reported to the lecturer* (2). Other strategies adopted for non-submission of contribution include: *the better performers in the group did the person's work* (1); *the group verbally disciplined the person and gave a warning* (1); *excluded the person from the group* (1); and *tried to encourage the person to perform to expected standards* (1).

The findings in phase 2 of the study are similar to those prior to the intervention and thus it appears that a group work intervention has not reduced this challenge. The main theme here indicates that *stronger members pick up the workload of weaker students* i.e. free riding occurs (4). Thus again, the task focus takes over from the developmental orientation as assignments have to be completed to meet the deadlines. Stronger students generally take on the work not completed by others so as to ensure a good mark on which they depend. Because a mark is allocated to all group members equally, irrespective of an individual's actual contribution, free riders get away with unequal participation and this causes some resentment in the group. Only three respondents indicated that they had *penalised the non-performing member*. In a related question, only five respondents of the 26 agreed that students had done an equal amount of work towards a group assignment.

Other strategies adopted for non-submission of contributions include: *provided a deadline for submission* (1); *contacted the individual before informing the lecturer* (1); *the group assisted the person to complete their contribution*; and *sanctioned the person by not speaking to him/her* (1).

Because a task focus is a reality in postgraduate studies and the actual workplace, this aspect needs to be given specific attention in the design of the actual assignment and perhaps any future pre-module intervention.

5.2.3.3 Strategies adopted for the submission of sub-standard work

The strategies adopted by students in relation to a fellow group member submitting sub-standard work before the intervention were as follows.

Non-performance leads to others carrying out additional work. Group learning is not perceived to be as high a priority as good results, a perception that may require further study. With regard to the final product prior to the intervention, nine students indicated that they *had to rework weaker students' work*. The remaining six students indicated that they only *sometimes had to rework weaker students' work*. Two respondents rated other members' contribution as *below average* and indicated that *group members with higher abilities helped the person to improve his/her work* (2). Other strategies for dealing with non-performing students include: *did nothing and submitted the work as it was* (1); *all contributed to each other's work* (1); and *asked the student to improve his/her contribution and resubmit it* (1).

Again, as found prior to the intervention, after the workshop intervention non-performance led to others carrying out additional work. Nine respondents indicated that they *completed the work for them*, six respondents *worked with them to redo their contribution*, and six respondents *requested that they redo their contribution*. Three respondents indicated that they *had discussed each person's contribution in the group and together decided on the best way to deal with each*. This could be attributed to the better students' aiming to achieve high marks. It appears again that a task orientation is more dominant but the findings here do seem to imply evidence of respondents' attempts to develop the non-performer in order to get them to improve their work in order to add value. Ten of the responses above show a developmental orientation.

6 CONCLUSION

The findings from phase 1 of the study indicate that students recognised that group assignments exposed them to teamwork. Some of the perceived benefits of group work that were identified include learning to work with and communicate with others as well as find better solutions and develop leadership skills. Thus the focus was on communication and interpersonal skills development, as discussed in the literature. The main challenges identified that led to negative group experiences were free riding

(including a poor work ethic and non-attendance), timetable clashes, and lack of understanding of the task. Some of the skills that were developed and that enhanced group work were listening skills, the ability to work with others, the ability to make decisions, planning and organising skills, and research skills.

The main findings in phase 2 of the study indicate that after the group work intervention students were more inclined to listen to and work with others, and to practise specific skills important to group functioning such as decision making, planning and organising, research, analysis and time-management skills. These are particularly important skills in a business environment. Key challenges were identified as time and work pressures, free riding and interpersonal conflict. After the intervention there appeared to be more willingness on the part of group members to discuss conflict within the group and to deal with the issues that cause conflict; however, when it actually came to completing tasks, free riding still occurred and groups under time pressures reverted to a task orientation. Thus, while the intervention may have made respondents aware of the benefits of a developmental approach and of conflict resolution, the realities of multiple assignments to submit and tight deadlines meant the intervention did not actually give participants the skills to eliminate free riding, one of the greatest challenges to group work and causes of conflict.

As seen from the above discussion of the findings, while there were some clear benefits to the workshop intervention, it did not reduce all the challenges related to group work. A number of recommendations are therefore suggested:

- It is recommended that in future the nature of workshop be designed in such a way that in addition to sensitising students to issues such as group dynamics, it also deals with the actual skills that can enhance a group's functioning. We therefore suggest that the workshop be extended to two days and be more skills-based so as to provide students with exposure to practical skills and strategies that can be used to deal with the specific types of challenges found to be prevalent in this study.
- It is suggested that lecturers adopt an experiential learning approach to group work and include a structured reflection process after group assignments. Such a process could include each group reflecting on the following areas: the

strategies that were used and that contributed to the group's positive performance; the strategies that were not effective; what should be done differently next time; the role each person played and how effective this was; and the attitudes and behaviours that facilitated and detracted from effective group functioning.

- One-on-one coaching could be introduced where each student meets with a lecturer or senior student and reflects on his/her personal performance in the group as highlighted in feedback from other team members and self-reflection exercises. Specific areas for reflection would be similar to those mentioned previously.

Insight into some of the benefits and challenges identified from the students' perspective, as well as recommendations related to strategies for enhancing the potential learning opportunities inherent in group work, could inform lecturers in other higher learning institutions on how they could enhance the higher learning strategies adopted by the learning institute.

While this article provides a number of insights and recommendations, these should be viewed in terms of the following limitations:

- Only Bachelor of Commerce Honours students were included in the study and therefore the findings cannot be generalised to all students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.
- The focus was on the perceptions of the students, and so the identified benefits and challenges are from the students' perspective. A further study will be undertaken to include the lecturers' perspective.
- Due to the type of research conducted, it was not possible to have a control group to be able to determine whether the changes found could be attributed directly to the workshop intervention rather than to other extraneous variables.
- It is recommended that in future studies, qualitative follow-up data collection be included to explore students' reasons underlying the trends emerging from the quantitative data.

In conclusion, the findings seem to indicate that respondents had developed an appreciation of the need for group members to approach group work with the correct attitude and values—the realisation that good communication skills alone cannot make a group function effectively. In this scenario, attitude clearly does determine altitude. Group work potentially offers a most valuable mechanism for developing these important career skills within the tertiary learning context.

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