

Assessing Groupwork in Common Core Courses

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Introduction

Although the use of assessed groupwork in higher education can be challenging, it has a powerful contribution to make to the enhancement of student learning when well-implemented and appropriately assessed. The assessment of groupwork has grown over the last decade, and around half of the Common Core Courses in the University of Hong Kong (HKU) currently make use of it to evaluate students' learning, as a recent analysis of the Common Core Curriculum (CCC) Student Handbook showed. It was also evident that the percentages of courses adopting groupwork assessment were similar across the four CCC Areas of Inquiry (see Figure 1).

Based on interviews with a sample of course coordinators in the CCC, this Briefing identifies six aspects that need to be considered in the design and implementation of groupwork assessment: why adopt groupwork assessment? How are the groups formed? What kind of guidance can be useful? What kinds of group tasks are given? Do all students in the same group get the same grade? How can free-riding be dealt with?

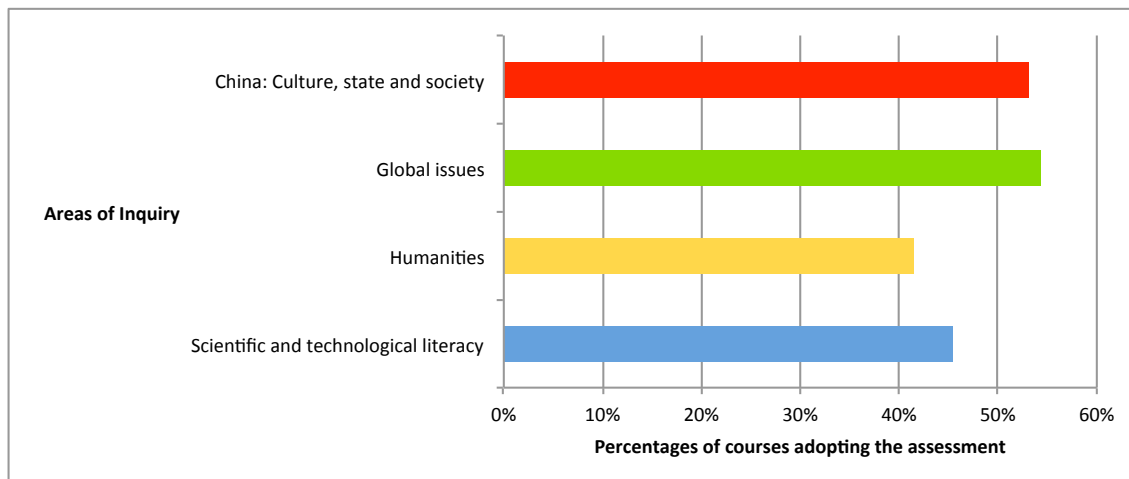


Figure 1 Percentages of CCC courses adopting groupwork assessment by Areas of Inquiry

Why adopt groupwork assessment?

A number of reasons were given during the interviews for adopting groupwork assessment, the most prominent of which is that groupwork is so common in the graduate and professional workplace that students need to start practising it at university in order to develop the necessary collaborative skills. Indeed, many universities, including HKU, list collaborative skills as a key graduate attribute that students should desirably possess upon graduation, and assessing groupwork leads to a learning environment that is closer to real-life situations.

A second reason is related to academic achievement. Several of our informants pointed out that a group of students can go deeper into a topic or take on bigger and more complex tasks than can an individual. A third reason, particularly relevant to the CCC, is that there is a possibility of synergy when students are grouped with others from different backgrounds.

Helping and learning from one another can be very beneficial, especially in studying the kinds of global and interdisciplinary topics that are typical in the CCC.

Groupwork is described in the literature as an effective approach for improving engagement with students, offering collaborative working opportunities, increasing students' academic gains as well as reducing teachers' marking loads¹.



How are the groups formed?

Forming groups is more than simply arranging for students to work together, since factors such as group size and group composition can have a significant impact. In Common Core courses, where tutorials are typically of no more than twelve students, the size of sub-groups generally ranges from three to six students. This relatively small size helps ensure that students have opportunities to interact with one another and make contributions. In some courses, students are randomly assigned to a group or allowed to form groups by themselves. In others, the teacher intentionally mixes students from different faculties in an attempt to facilitate interdisciplinary work. A number of course coordinators have highlighted the benefits of having students draw on their diverse backgrounds and skills to learn from and support each other.

What kinds of guidance can be helpful?

Some Common Core course coordinators have observed some student reluctance to engage in groupwork. One reason could be students fear a loss of control over their grades in groupwork. Explaining to students the benefits of working in a group is therefore usually worthwhile from the outset.

In situations where interdisciplinary work is important, it might also be helpful to explain to students the value of having different views in a

group, and what steps can be taken to handle disagreements and conflicts.

Whatever form they take, the ground rules, working procedures or code of conduct can also be communicated to students before they start to work together. A general rule would be that every student should make regular contributions and display cooperative behaviours. What is expected from the group, with respect to actions as well as outcomes, and how the group is to be assessed, may also be communicated at an early stage to ensure clarity. Some Common Core course coordinators make the assessment criteria and rubrics available online for students.

What kinds of group tasks are given?

Group tasks are generally more complex than individual tasks. Some courses have tried to encourage original and creative outputs from student groups. These may include multimedia products such as a video or a sales pitch as the final deliverables. Other courses require student groups to write in-depth reports with substantial research evidence. These are tasks which would be difficult for an individual to complete or ones which could not readily be divided into constituent parts, and which therefore lend themselves to cooperative effort by groups of students. According to Davies², conjunctive tasks (i.e., ones that require each member to contribute and meet a certain standard) and additive tasks (i.e., ones that are a sum of individual members' outputs) are more desirable for groups than disjunctive tasks (i.e., tasks which easily be accomplished by individuals working in relative isolation).

To support students in carrying out groupwork effectively, a number of courses have put in place intermediate collaborative tasks that gradually lead to the final output. These intermediate tasks are found to be helpful as tutors can provide ongoing support and feedback to each group based on its progress up to a given point. For example, students may be required to complete several worksheets containing aspects related to the final group report; express their thoughts in an online discussion forum through Moodle; and submit an outline about their topic for the teacher to comment on.

1 Gibbs, G. (2010). *The assessment of group work: Lessons from the literature*. ASKe Pedagogy Research Centre, Faculty of Business, Oxford Brookes University. <https://www.brookes.ac.uk/askel>

2 Davies, W. M. (2009). Groupwork as a form of assessment: Common problems and recommended solutions. *Higher Education*, 58, 563-584.

Do all group members get the same grade?

An important question in assessing groupwork is whether each member receives the same collective grade or a different one based on individual contributions. Across our Common Core informants, three major views could be identified:

- all group members receive the same score for the groupwork
- each group member receives a different score based on his or her contribution to the groupwork
- all group members receive the same score for certain shared components in the groupwork together with individual scores for components they undertook alone



For those who follow the same-score scenario, the rationale is that it is often difficult to differentiate among individuals in collective work and that the intention to do so may undermine or weaken the cooperative spirit in a group. Some course coordinators adopting this approach have established monitoring mechanisms so that the grade for a particular individual who completely fails to contribute can still be adjusted.

For those in favour of awarding separate scores to individual group members, the rationale is usually to grade students in a fair manner and to prevent free-riding. Differentiation of grades can be achieved in various ways including through peer assessment, tutors' own observations of individuals' contributions, and students' self-identification of the role taken in the collective work.

As far as the third option is concerned, some courses have incorporated individual assessment elements into groupwork. In one example, students receive the same grade for their group report but are individually graded on their personal performance in the group

presentation. In another course, each student writes a critique or comments on other groups' presentations, which are then individually assessed.

How can free-riding be dealt with?

A challenging issue in groupwork is how to deal with 'free-riders' — individuals relying on other group members to do the work while unfairly getting the credit. Students are understandably concerned about fairness in grades and may feel very anxious if they perceive that their grades will be jeopardized by free-riding³ or 'social loafing' as it is also often called. Our Common Core informants were alert to the problem. Some of them try to keep the size of working groups small (i.e., from three to five) to reduce free-riding since it makes it more difficult for any team member to avoid pulling their weight. The recently increasing use of online learning tools, such as Wiki and online forums, allows teachers to access the digital records of every individual contribution. This creates a new possibility to reduce free-riding, since it becomes clear to students that hard evidence of the quantity and quality of their individual contributions is readily to hand.

Nonetheless, instances can still arise in various Common Core courses of free-riding cases reported by students or through the peer assessment process. When there is suspected free-riding, the teacher may discuss the situations with all students in the same group and try to resolve the problem together. In one reported instance, misunderstandings about an individual's contribution were clarified and all group members agreed to receive the same grade. In others, the teacher's discussions with the group could result in an appropriate adjustment being made to an individual's grade. An alternative to this consultative approach is to ask students to allocate a fixed amount of points to one another, including themselves, according to their contributions to the group's collective work. The teacher can then decide whether it is necessary to make adjustments.

A checklist for designing groupwork assessment

There are a number of aspects most Common Core course coordinators agree to be important despite the fact that the groupwork assessment is conducted in various ways. Below are six questions that may be helpful prompts to reflection when the adoption of groupwork assessment is being considered.

3 For more discussion of free-riding, please refer to Maiden, B., & Perry, B. (2011). Dealing with free-riders in groupwork: Results from a study at a UK university. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 36(4), 451-464.

A checklist for designing groupwork assessment

- ✓ What would be the most appropriate size for working groups?
- ✓ How will expectations and standards be clearly communicated to students?
- ✓ How can group tasks be designed to enable each group member to make a meaningful contribution?
- ✓ Will all group members get the same grade for the groupwork? If yes, what monitoring mechanisms need to be put in place? If not, how will individuals' contributions be differentiated?
- ✓ What steps will be taken to deal with free-riders?
- ✓ In what ways could the assessment help improve students' abilities to work effectively in groups?

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