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# Evaluating assessment strategies for online group work



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# Background and aims

- Investigating the challenge of implementing an online group project which is:
  - engaging to students
  - fairly assessed
- Context:
  - Distance, part-time learning at the UK Open University
  - The group project in the module: *Communication and information technologies*
- Today's presentation:
  - Background to the group project
  - Research methods
  - Findings and recommendations

The module:  
*Communication and  
Information technologies*

Key facts:

- 9-month part-time study
- Integrates a wide range of technical topics with generic skills development
- 60 credits at level 2
- 400-600 students per presentation
- The assignment for one of the five study blocks is a group project
- Students work in groups of 6-8 for the project

**Block 3: *Creating & collaborating***

**Online collaboration technologies and approaches**

**Large element of group work in the assessment**

Collaborative working in a wiki (50%)

**Creating a group website (40%)**

Reporting on the collaboration (10%)

# Creating a group website



## How WordPress is used

- Groups develop a website for a given scenario & client e.g. a holiday company, a walking club
- They use WordPress, forums, wiki, web conferencing (optional)

## Marks allocated for:

- product (the website); and process (collaboration)
- group as a whole; and individual contributions

## Marked by viewing:

- the website and WordPress dashboard
- discussions in the forum
- documented decisions in the wiki

	Marks for product (website)	Marks for process (collaboration)
Individual marks	30%	30%
Group marks	20%	20%

# Research on the website collaboration

Three key elements were considered for the research:

- *The collaboration*

- how students interact and work together



- *The task*

- what students are required to do/produce



- *The assessment*

- how students' work is graded



# Research method

- Research involved 27 students
  - Six focus groups via web conferencing
  - Some supplementary data via email from individual students
- Open ended questions used to explore students' experiences e.g.
  - Did they enjoy it? Find it rewarding?
  - What were the challenges, frustrations?
  - How did they feel about the assessment/grading?
  - How did they organise, negotiate, divide tasks?
- Focus group data transcribed and coded
  - Coding done by three researchers independently and then together
  - Identified emergent themes
  - Coding scheme agreed with 10 main themes and a number of sub-themes.

# Emergent Themes

## PARTICIPATION

Absent      Active (core)  
Peripheral

## FAIRNESS

Division of work  
Marks

## FEELINGS

Motivation      Frustration  
Reward      Challenge  
Enjoyment

## SKILLS/ABILITIES

Technical      Organisational  
Experience

## RELATIONSHIPS

Friendliness      Dominating  
Personalities      Getting on  
Helping      Social presence  
Group dynamics  
Working with strangers

## TIMING

Asynchronous  
Holiday      Domestic  
Jobs

## TASK

Authenticity  
Product (quality)  
Brief (instructions)

## TOOLS

Forums      OULive  
Wiki      WordPress

## ORGANISATION

Deadlines      Leadership  
Decision making      Timings  
Division of work  
Meetings

## TUTORS

# Main findings

## *The collaboration*

- For the majority, the group project was an enjoyable experience.
- The collaboration was the most challenging, and yet most rewarding, element of the project.
- It was a cause of anxiety for some students.
- Cooperation rather than collaboration



*It was lovely that the collaboration actually worked and its sort of part of the modern world, collaborative work, and think it was a very good lesson to learn.*

*So I sort of went into this thinking 'Ah this is going to be terrible' but it was actually a really positive experience for me [...]*

*I was very tense during whole collaboration process [...]*

# Main findings



## *The task*

- Most students were proud of their final website and would have liked to showcase it.
- The tools were intuitive and easy to use
- They wanted the website to be 'authentic'.
- Tasks were frustrating for *more* technically experienced students (e.g. limitations of WordPress).

*I'm aware of the full functionality of WordPress and to be perfectly blunt the functionality that the OU provide is very limited which is certainly frustrating...*

*I would have liked to have seen all of the groups' pages just to get a feel at the end for how we did and compare that to other groups whose sites we hadn't seen*

# Main findings

## *The assessment*

- There were mixed opinions on whether group assessment is fair.
- Students would have liked to know what marks others in their group were awarded.
- Some students felt they were 'carrying' others.



*I would have liked to know whether or not these two people that did not contribute or decided to contribute later in the assignment got zero, because that was the condition of the marking scheme*

*only two of us did any work and we had to try and drag the others through*

## Considerations for the future

- Need ways to identify/support cases of student anxiety
- Achieving a balance between authentic tasks and realistic expectations of students.
- Enable students to showcase their work, in order to increase motivation.
- Consider the balance of marks between group and individual aspects.
- Ensure that the grading principles are transparent to students.
- Do we want cooperation or collaboration?



# Thank you

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