GROUP WORK IN STAGE ONE ENGLISH FOR SOCIAL, CRITICAL AND CREATIVE BENEFITS

Overview

Module Coordinator: Dr Naomi McAreavey
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Module Title: Literature in Context 1
Module Code: ENG10050
Student Cohort: Up to 400 students from Stage One BA, both BA Arts and BA Humanities programmes

The Background

Literature in Context 1 is a core progression module for English offered to BA students in the first semester of their first year. It introduces students to medieval and early modern literature through the detailed historicized examination of two texts: Shakespeare's The Taming of the Shrew and Chaucer's The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale. These are very different texts in terms of context, genre and form, yet they address a number of overlapping themes and concerns, such as gender, language and power, and students are encouraged to critically explore the similarities and differences between the two texts and their contexts. As well as introducing students to Shakespeare and Chaucer, the module also performs a broader role in supporting students as they transition from second to third level study: this involves welcoming them to their school, college and programme, and helping them understand what it means to study English at university level. The students come to the module with different levels of ability and commitment to English, and of the 400 students who typically register for the module, 300 will continue with English to degree level. The module is delivered by a teaching team of lecturers and (mainly hourly-paid) tutors. There are two contact

hours per week – one lecture for the entire cohort, and one tutorial, each with around 25 students. Given the module's size and central position in the English curriculum, we work hard to ensure its coherence through careful planning, regular module meetings, and continuous review.

What we aimed to do

Our approach to group work in *Literature in Context 1* builds on lessons from an earlier enquiry-based learning project we undertook (Clarke et al, 2009), and we reimagined the group work on the module with the following aims:

- to utilize the social benefits of group work through a small, informal, and contained project;
- to provide a group project that is flexible, creative and enjoyable, and an alternative to the most common way of demonstrating learning in arts and humanities subjects – the essay;
- to train students to be close readers, working in detail with a passage of text, unpacking the layers of meaning in conversation with each other; and
- to offer students the opportunity to enjoy the experience of a collaborative learning environment that will enable them to develop as generous, confident, skilful and resourceful learners early in their academic careers.

In order to achieve this we decided:

- to make more time for the development of the groups and relationships within the groups;
- to lower the stakes for the assessed group work and assess it later in the module; and
- to integrate group work in a more traditional lecture/tutorial format.

How we did it

Groups were assigned a short passage of text from either Chaucer or Shakespeare and asked to adapt it for a modern audience, producing a reading or performance of their passage as an audio or video file ([full details of the project](#)). The project was worth 25% of the overall module grade and was wholly a group grade with no individual component. There were strict attendance expectations. The group project took place over three weeks: in the first tutorial we distributed the project and allowed students to raise questions, make plans, and assign tasks; in the second tutorial we gave students the chance to present their ideas and receive feedback; and in the final tutorial students showed their pre-recorded video/audio clip and discussed their work, also learning from the work of other groups. Written feedback and provisional grades were immediately issued to groups by their tutors. Tutors then nominated their best group projects for consideration for an overall module prize, based on the assessment criteria. In the final lecture we showed the best work and presented prizes to the overall winners.

The project allowed students to engage critically and creatively with the texts, but for us the *process* was as important as the *product*. For this reason, groups were established in the very first tutorial, long before the formal group project was introduced. We aimed for six students per group, four groups per tutorial, with students assigned randomly to groups. Students were invited to introduce themselves to their groups and then (as an icebreaker) agree a group name. The groups were then sent off on a 'treasure hunt', visiting the school, locating the main office, gathering important information from the notice boards, and ultimately finding the 'treasure' (sweets) at the module coordinator's office. The treasure hunt didn't take much time but gave the students the chance to work and laugh together as groups, away from the formality of the classroom, and gave us the opportunity to welcome our newest students to our school. Students worked informally in these groups in subsequent classes but the formal project was not introduced until Week 6, by which stage they knew each other reasonably well and were used to working together. (For more on setting up group work see: Brame and Biel, 2015; O'Neill, 2013).

How it went

Attendance and engagement spiked during the weeks dedicated to the group project and there was a positive energy in class with students appearing interested and excited about their work. Some groups produced fabulous work that far exceeded our expectations (see the winning project, 2017-18). Tutors found the delivery of the group project relatively straightforward, and the grading and feedback process was timely and efficient since for each tutorial group we were assessing four group projects during class time rather than twenty-five individual assignments outside of class. For the module coordinator, the administration of the group project was smooth (and helped by the fact that the majority of tutors had taught on the module before and were familiar with the format). A few complaints from groups about members not pulling their weight came to light during the semester and, if the students were unable to resolve the issue themselves, they were dealt with by the tutor or module coordinator.

Module feedback in 2018-19 suggests that students recognized the benefits of group work, with 73.5% of students agreeing that they learned from other students, and 79.4% agreeing that they had developed some team-working skills. The top ten teamwork skills and qualities identified by students were (in order of importance): (i) communication, (ii) cooperation, (iii) organization, (iv)sharing ideas, (v) negotiation and compromise, (vi) delegation, (vii) leadership, (viii) time management, (ix) individual accountability, and (x) friendship. Underlying the appreciation of their cultivation of such generic skills was the students' understanding that they were also developing discipline-specific competencies through sharing their own ideas, listening to others, and negotiating a shared approach to the project. One student, for example, describing what they gained from the group work, wrote: 'I made very good friends and learned about their perspectives on both *The Taming of the Shrew* and *The Wife of Bath*'; another admitted: 'I am more open to other interpretations of the texts'; and yet another commented on the benefits of 'Listening to other ideas and developing a greater understanding of the text due to various interpretations'. These are exactly the principles on which the tutorial or seminar form, so common in the teaching of Arts and Humanities subjects, are designed.

Students also shared some of the main challenges they faced in group work. By far the greatest

difficulty was finding a suitable time and place to meet (not unsurprising for students on a complex programme like the BA). But they came up with creative ways of dealing with this, largely by maintaining contact through social media but also through the judicious distribution of work between group members. This was recognized as an effective approach even when students were able to meet regularly, with one student writing: 'Roles were important because everything can't be done by Committee. E.g. one person wrote the script and we added to it which worked well for us'. There were complaints about freeloaders and rumblings about some group members not pulling their weight. For some, this was a source of resentment. Others framed the experience more positively, pointing to their own self-sufficiency, resilience, and ability to manage difficult people. Some students overcame their own reservations: 'The group work was a huge learning experience for me not from a team-working point of view rather as a mature student fitting into a very young environment. What was very initially extremely disturbing for me turned into an enjoyable experience. My group was fantastic. Everyone pulled their weight. Age became irrelevant'.

Student feedback suggests that there are some issues we can address through project design, such as making more class time available or extending the duration of the project. We might also look into the issue of fairness, perhaps by requiring a contribution log from each group member rather than requesting this only when problems arise. But this is refinement rather than overhaul.

Overall, we are satisfied that the group project does important work in facilitating social learning – a process through which students learn from each other and deepen their engagement with the module.

Resources

Winning project 2017-18: An adaptation of *The Taming of the Shrew* 1.2.48-74 (Such wind ... happily in Padua) https://media.heanet.ie/page/fbe6cdc12902883cc1224f8f6ebbd64d (included with permission from Neasa Brennan, Ryan Craig, Aisling McAree and Niu Zhuo).

References

Brame, C.J. and Biel, R. (2015). *Setting up and facilitating group work: Using cooperative learning groups effectively*. Retrieved 27 March 2019 from http://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/setting-up-and-facilitating-group-work-using-cooperative-learning-groups-effectively/.

Clarke D. et al (2009) 'Literature in Context: Enquiry-Based Learning for First Year Students', *Working with English* 5. Retrieved 27 March 2019 from https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/english/documents/working-with-english/volume-5/clarke-dillane-long-mcareavey-pattwell-literature-in-context-enquiry-based-learning-for-first-year-english-students.pdf.