How Group Working Skills are Learned

Carole Mallia and Jeannie Alderdice, University of Nottingham   June 2003
E-mail :   carole.mallia@nottingham.ac.uk   jeannie.alderdice@btinternet.com
Institutional website   www.Nottingham.ac.uk

Results of investigation

In general, our student volunteers preferred to manage their own group dynamics. The following issues arose which are dealt with in more detail in our report:

1. Other group members not pulling their weight annoyed some students, but they were reluctant to discuss it openly, preferring to 'sound off' in their diaries
2. However, the issue of others not participating fully due to illness was treated in a more sympathetic way, and these were dealt with much more openly, or with humour.
3. Leadership issues caused mutterings in the diaries, but were not tackled head on. Some diarists felt others were dominating, others feared they themselves were dominating.
4. Forming personal relationships with other group members was seen as important but not vital
5. Students' initial diary entries tended to be rather negative about themselves. Confidence increased as they took more control, but tended to dip towards the end of the project. Generally they ended on a positive note, reflectingon the value of the project work
6. Most felt that they already possessed group working skills and that the project had either enhanced those skills or that they developed naturally through working with others. None felt that this type of skill came directly from the tutors' input.
7. Most of the students (and tutors) were not keen on writing their thoughts in diaries, but preferred the feedback meetings for raising issues of concern.
8. Tutors felt that keeping diaries themselves and attending the feedback meetings were extremely useful in challenging their pre-conceptions of themselves as teachers, and getting instant feedback from students about their seminars

Contents

How Group Working Skills are Learned

Context

Learning History is the core module at the University of Nottingham for all first year single and joint honours undergraduates (for details see Booth 2001). The first semester teaches new skills and fosters existing skills required for students to actively become historians. The course bridges the gap between school and university history. It is based upon the theory of history as a discipline and uses texts such as Munslow (1997), Carr (1961), Tosh (1999), Jenkins (1991) and Samuel (1994) in order to question assumptions of what historians are and what we do. This is the only history module that has weekly seminar meetings. In these groups of 10-16 students, we aim to provide continuity and stability and give the students the opportunity to work in smaller groups, debate, give presentations, critique texts and explore primary evidence in a safe environment whilst still working in a historical context.

The second semester builds upon these skills by enabling the students to work in smaller groups of 3-6 within the same larger seminar group on a topic chosen by them, but reflecting a theoretical focus rather than just a 'history project' (See Appendix A for examples). There are regular weekly meetings as in semester one, but alternate weeks are given over to individual group meetings with the tutor, for which they must submit an agenda in advance. Whole group meetings address generic issues such as constructing an annotated bibliography, research methods, and accessing primary sources. Apart from initial guidance, the group dynamics are left to the groups to manage with the knowledge that they can consult the tutor at any time they encounter difficulties. This is rarely necessary and the groups tend to manage themselves.

Why do group projects?

- It enables students to work with others using their own initiative, which is a skill they will need in the group seminars they will run and participate in for the duration of their degree
- It helps develop research skills which they will need for their long essay/dissertation
- It gives practice in organising a larger piece of work over time other than the typical 2-3,000 word essay they may be used to
- It is good preparation for life as most employment will involve group work, or at least negotiation with others

What does the group project enable students to do?

- Develop research skills in a safe environment, working with up to five other students, mostly self-directed
- Allows them to take risks. They are encouraged to move outside their current physical and intellectual historical parameters, which are usually based on A-Level teaching and learning. They can use film, make a video, go on visits, etc
- Encourages them to go further afield than the university library for their primary and secondary source material
- They can develop their own primary source material by interviewing individuals and/or developing and analysing questionnaires and surveys
- Develop analytical skills in looking at the strengths and weaknesses of their own material as well as other primary and secondary sources
- Develop the skills needed for working with others, particularly diplomacy as they receive a joint mark for 90% of the work, and therefore have to encourage the slackers and share the workload
- Presentation skills are enhanced with having to give a joint presentation to their seminar group
- Encourages them to be reflective, as they have to submit a portfolio of evidence with their final report, which includes a reflective piece on their presentation

What did we set out to do?

We wanted to see how effective we as tutors are in teaching and developing these skills and how we could improve our practice and make any changes in the light of our findings. Many modules develop study skills individually, some context bound, others more generic and interdisciplinary. However, we wanted to look at group working skills which we feel have not received the same attention. We wanted to challenge assumptions and prejudices about teaching and learning, especially the assumption that we teach *ergo* they learn.

As already stated, the group dynamics are usually left to the students to sort out. We give recommendations at the beginning and stress that 90% of their mark will be a joint mark, and that they will need to plan ahead, share the workload and keep in touch over the Easter vacation. Most of the groups are successful in managing their project, but we noticed that others were obviously struggling. At the end of the semester, the final 10% of their mark is based on a self assessment of their individual contribution and this is where they can articulate any difficulties or problems they may have encountered and (usually) overcome. Sometimes this is the first time the tutors become aware of any problems. Two recent examples mentioned 'We never really gelled as a group' and 'It was left to the two [out of a group of four, two male, two female] of us to organise'.

We have eight seminar groups between us, approximately 100 students, which account for just under half the first years, and we decided we would like to find out more about how the group dynamics worked. We wanted to know if we were teaching relevant skills, or whether these skills were already there and needed enhancing: basically our role as tutors was in the development of group working skills, and how we might need to change or improve to be of help, or even if additional help was necessary.

Methodology

We have both taught on this course for five years and have a similar approach to our teaching. We both strive for student centred learning, whilst providing a safe atmosphere for our students to establish trust and take risks. We positively encourage them to be as creative as possible in their choice of topics for their projects and the way they present their findings. We always strive to empower our students and encourage them to see us as facilitators rather than teachers. This is usually successful by semester two when they have the confidence to take more control over their own learning.

We thought it would be beneficial to track the students' self-perception of group working skills over the semester by talking with them and asking them to keep reflective diaries. Our personal philosophy meant we were attracted to action research, where all participants in the research are equal and share their experiences; therefore as part of the project we would also keep reflective diaries ourselves. In the spirit of equality, we asked for volunteers for the project and received about 15 positive replies.

Action research seeks to be a more inclusive methodology, looking at a problem rather than a hypothesis, seeking to explore and understand a problem through the people taking part in the research, where all become subjects rather than objects of research. We, students and tutors, set ourselves certain rules where all contributions would be taken seriously and responsibilities shared; therefore tutors would not necessarily lead the meetings. We agreed to trust and respect others and value our diversity of experience, to try to ask questions of ourselves and be honest about our feelings, both in our diaries and our meetings with each other. Thus we set out together on our project.

Method

As this was action research, (see Brown & Jones, 2001 for example) we were prepared to change our methods as and when it was necessary. However, this is how we began

- Students and tutors would keep reflective diaries. The diaries would not be read by the tutors until after we had marked their projects so that there were no negative or positive influences on their results from participating in the research
- We would pay them a small sum of money for participating when they returned their diaries
- We would have regular feedback meetings so that we could discuss issues from our diaries without disclosing the details. These meetings would be recorded and transcribed

Getting started

The tutors held an initial planning meeting where we brainstormed the skills we thought the students needed to develop in order to work effectively as a group. We also planned an ice breaking exercise for the first meeting of our volunteers as they would be from different tutor groups and probably would not know each other, but have only their relationship with one of their tutors to begin with. We would then ask them what skills they thought they were going to need and compare their list to ours (See Appendix B for both lists). The project would then be explained to them and we would give some guidance in the form of a handout on how to fill in the diaries (Appendix C). This meeting went well, although not all the volunteers were able to attend.

The feedback meetings

We held five meetings over the semester, and these were sometimes a source of frustration for both of us for two reasons

- The students did not seem to want to discuss the issues of group working but preferred to swap stories about particular lectures and lecturers. They seemed reluctant to discuss their group work, maybe because if there were problems, they did not want to admit to this in front of their peers or because they did not want to seem disloyal to their group members in front of their peers.
- Because we wanted to foster equality, we did not want to act as 'tutors', but to try and encourage openness. However, students being students, they tended to look to us for a lead. We devised various strategies for overcoming this which included sitting in amongst them, passing the tape recorder around as a 'conch' so that only one person spoke, leaving the room, asking one of them to act as chair, but we failed to break down the barriers completely.

We were rather concerned that the diaries might reflect the feedback sessions, so we emailed a reminder to them as to what we felt they should be using their diaries for (Appendix D). For the final feedback session, we devised a prompt sheet (Appendix E) and left them alone with the tape recorder, a couple of bottles of wine and some snacks, hoping to salvage something of our project. Both of these actions went against our ideals of equality and non-positivist research but it did produce results.

The diaries

As expected, some of the diaries had sparse entries, but others were quite reflective, and we were able to obtain some interesting data. Our own diaries were quite similar, although we had not seen each other's. We had both reflected quite negatively about our teaching, yet we both saw each other as a positive influence on the other.

Additional data

As insurance, we devised a questionnaire, which we gave to all our students, asking them to reflect on how they felt their group working skills had developed.

Findings

Unless otherwise stated, the findings are taken from the diaries. We had ten student diaries returned, and labelled them randomly as A-J. The format of the entries has been produced as authentically as possible when using quotes.

1. **Problems they encountered and how they dealt with them**

The problem of **others not pulling their weight** within the group often occurs and we usually expect each group to try and sort it out themselves, which they usually do. They know they can ask us as tutors to intervene but they are usually reluctant to do so. Diary writer A felt that some members of her group would be content with a 40% pass mark and preferred to prioritise other modules, whereas she herself wanted to put more into the project

> *This made me feel angry but I never let this be known and the subject was not brought up. I didn't bring it up, as I did not want to fall out with my group. This was the only real problem I came across during the project and it was not dealt with.*

G also felt frustration in her group. As the only female and mature student who lived off campus, she felt excluded at times and tried to encourage the others through e-mail

> *Not to alarm anyone, but I have emailed twice and I have had no reply. Should I be worried? It would be nice if I had some communication from the others!!*

Others not pulling their weight through no fault of their own seemed to cause a different form of frustration, of not knowing what to do in terms of illness – not wanting to exclude that person from the project, but making sure the work was covered. Two diarists dealt with this in different ways. C was very concerned and a number of diary entries referred to one of her group that had a long-term illness. The group tried to include her as much as possible but didn't want to put too much pressure on her either. Their solution was to allocate her a section of the project that was relevant, but not essential

> *Have redefined the section of our work so hers is expendable should she not be better. Just have to communicate (without doing it too much) and get on with things. Hope she gets better, it must be horrible being ill for so long*

D's diary was humorous all the way through and his way of dealing with a group member's illness was different. The member who was ill had not disclosed the fact to him that she has debilitating condition until nearly the end of the project, and had felt very guilty about falling asleep during meetings where they watched films. He was not aware of her condition when he wrote this entry

> *Group dynamics somewhat strained; 'S' has returned home for the week on account of illness, and if she apologises once more, I may be forced to strangle her! (Just kidding, a group of only two would entail too much work)*

Leadership issues cropped up in the diaries, but tended not to be discussed within the groups. Some were not willing to put themselves forward as leaders, or others would assume the role without discussion. This caused a number of tensions, and most of the diarists alluded to it in some way. A noted

> *During discussions always seems to be natural leader who chairs meetings, always same person.*

She does not make it clear whether it is she or another group member that chairs the meetings, yet it feels like she means another person, but it is nevertheless ambiguous.

J felt it was his natural tendency to take over and was trying to curb that tendency. Within his group there were a number of strong characters, and he and another member tended to make decisions. He felt guilty about this on more than one diary entry; here are two

> *Felt quite bad because it was like X and I were taking over but it had to be done*

Felt as if X and I were dictating what we were doing yet not helping although the group didn't express this I nevertheless felt quite hypocritical

Most diarists mentioned **getting along with others and forming personal relationships** as one of the skills they felt they had to use. Some diarists clearly enjoyed working with a small group of people and remarked about friendship being a positive outcome of their project, whilst others realised that friendship was not a necessary requisite to work well with others. E's team had taken a while to gel, and it was not until week seven that she commented

- now realise you don't necessarily have to be buddy buddy best friends w/team members to be effective + efficient

2. How they felt about themselves and their own skills as team members

There were a number of negative feelings expressed throughout the diaries, and some diarists stated that they had basically used the diaries as a way of sounding off about various aspects of their course, not just the *Learning History* element. However, in general, the majority of negative feelings appeared at the beginning of their diaries.

At the outset, most comments expressed trepidation in the first few weeks, when topics and groups were being finalised, and students had to begin their research and organise meetings. B's is a typical comment

I am not 100% sure what I am meant to be doing. There seems to be so much information that nobody knows where to start. We wanted to do a lot of work together as a group, but are having trouble finding a time that more than a couple of us can meet up, as our lecture and social commitments do not seem to match up.

F felt a little lost at the beginning as she had changed groups from semester one, but soon settled in her group. The second week she commented

..we are finding it so hard to settle on a topic! The project seems so big and I think all the members of my group want different things from it. I hope we can work together OK. It's really hard when people don't turn up for the meetings though hopefully that will change.

Two students both set out optimistically, both enjoyed working in small groups and had been quite quiet in the first semester. After the first feedback meeting of volunteers, C commented

Actually feel quite positive. I think this was for the first time in a while I was sitting with a group of people who had very similar opinions, fears etc to me – key reassurance – the group discussion really helped to reverse a growing feeling of isolation/fear and helped me to evaluate my feelings.

A's first entry was similarly positive

Happy to be working in a group – social creature. I alone won't be responsible for lone project so won't have to take criticism on my own

However, on reading between the lines, both comments cover unease. They both appear to be looking for confidence and security through working with others, as well as developing their own talents.

Most of the diarists gained confidence over the **period of their project** and many commented that they felt more confident once they knew what was expected of them as individual team members and when they had gained more control over their contribution to the whole group. The following is typical of diary entries

> *I am half way through the project now and a real sense of unity has developed within the group → GROUP WORK → maximum potential reached if you are working with people who you want to work with → doesn't work if group members 'loaf' (H)*

There seemed to be a dip in confidence and commitment towards the **end of the project,** mainly because of pressure of other deadlines. After the Easter break, the groups have a few days back and then must give a 15-20 minute presentation of their project, which is worth 25% of their marks. This seemed to be the point where negative feelings re-appeared in the diaries, both before and after the presentations, depending on how successful they felt their presentation was. This is important to them as they are presenting in front of their peers and there is an element of competition, not just in their seminar groups but also across the whole of the first year. E started to panic

> *Help! Am behind 'THE SCHEDULE'! I am last-minute person and everyone else seems to get things done then and there. I am even making excuses not to go to meetings cause I don't want to have to confess I haven't done as much as everyone else - BUT – it is a good incentive to get it done. Usually it's OK to let yourself down but not other people!*

C was very disappointed with her group's presentation. Her diary entry is predominantly negative, but quite reflective on what she feels could be improved, with lessons for the future. The group was using PowerPoint but it took a while to get it set up properly. The presentation itself was too long and the tutor, after giving a time warning, had to stop the presentation at the appointed time, before the group was able to complete their presentation.

> *Oh dear – What a mess: Timing was way out.*
> *Lesson – need full run through and partial practice will not do. Feel bad for X as she had to cut out nearly all her bit.*
> *Personally v. disappointed with how I came across – don't know why it seemed so staid. Something about Learning History? Topic? Nerves caused by not getting computer to work?*
> > *Need: less rigid speech, more ad lib*
> > > *Practice!!!*
> > > ☹

Nevertheless, nine of the ten diaries **ended on a positive note,** some reflecting on the lessons they had learned during this exercise. Many were tinged with relief, but still in a positive way. F's diary entries had mostly been about struggling and feeling lost, yet she ended her diary with this entry

> *Such a relief that it is all over, I really feel that I have learnt a lot, and that having to organise myself and other people, and having to produce something finished at the end had prepared me really well for the long essay next year among other things. Whilst the project has been a lot of work, it was definitely worth it, and it feels so good to hand in something that we were all happy with. It feels like we have achieved a whole lot more than just a completed project. It really came together in the end*

3. <u>Where did they feel their group working skills had come from?</u>

This was a question we put to our volunteers at the first meeting when we discussed the project. Some of them referred to it in their diaries. We also received 50 returns from our questionnaire which went to all our students, and this was one of the questions. We will discuss the questionnaire returns first under the following three headings and then add data from the diaries where applicable

- **Always had them**

Two students felt that their group working skills developed naturally throughout life. Fifteen felt they had been developed in school, and eleven in the family. Other responses included extra-

curricular activities such as team sports, orchestra and performing arts, army training and playing games.

Diary writer A believes that the knowledge she has used for the project came from her, reflecting her background

> *I believe Learning History made us re-familiarise ourselves with skills we already had. I believe that different individuals contributed different skills due to their personality and home upbringing and that this will always be the case no matter what teaching skills are used. I believe this because most of us, in order to get into Nottm have been taught in a reasonably similar way.*

- **Developed naturally as project progressed**

There was a wide variety of responses on the questionnaire when we asked what skills they felt they had developed over the course of the project. The most common were communication, teamwork, leadership, presentation skills, research, computer skills, organisation and co-operation.

The diarists reflected further and some commented on how they were using skills developed in semester one. Three weeks into the semester, B writes

> *The [feedback] meeting today triggered off my mind into thinking about what I have actually learnt this term so far: -*
> *I am starting to realise that I have picked up skills from the first semester and have become increasingly aware of modernist/postmodernist writing.*

He then goes on to give an example of identifying different opinions on a seminar topic he was researching.

Early on in his diary, after the second meeting with his group, H reflected on group working skills

Although it is too early to tell how skills are acquired, at this stage I believe that this type of learning is subconscious. For example, I have found that when working in a group you have to listen sensitively to other people's opinions and views, and although you are not aware of it, at the time, later on you realise that you have developed the skill of communication

- **Came from tutors**

None of the questionnaire responses referred specifically to tutors as a source of their group working skills. However, diarist E felt that her skills were a combination of herself and the tutors

> *Where do these skills come from?*
> *1 – research (priority texts, fast-reading, how to take notes etc)*
> *from TEACHERS*
> *2 – organisation/team relationships/listening*
> *from ME (personal attributes)*

D did not feel the module allowed him to acquire any new skills at all.

4. **Using the diary as a reflective tool**

As mentioned above, we felt the diaries were not being used in the way we had hoped. At the last feedback meeting we asked them to discuss how useful the diaries had been to them (See Appendix E). However there were a few positive diary entries, such as J who liked being able to reflect on the module and give feedback. Most of the diarists found it difficult to write in their journals and used the feedback meetings to discuss issues with others, rather than write on their own.

Some used it **solely for reflecting on lectures**, and others felt they had only written things down when they were **feeling negative**. One student was using it to vent her negative feelings both towards other students and herself (and possibly, by default, the tutors).

In a feedback meeting, G said that she **had not like putting her personal and private feelings into a diary,** knowing that the tutor would read it. She felt that the tutor might be perceived as her psychologist. Her group had used a website to exchange information and G felt that was where her energies were directed, not the diary. However, she was quite forthcoming in the feedback sessions, and her few diary entries were very personal despite her stated reluctance to share her feelings. B felt that he did not work in diary mode and that when he wanted to say something, he felt unable to articulate it in his diary. He was similarly forthcoming in the feedback sessions, yet his diary was one of the most reflective.

F admitted that she wrote the diary **knowing the tutors would read it**, and others in the group agreed. This may have influenced what they wrote. The diaries could have been better in terms of research data if we had looked at them as the project progressed but Jeannie and I both feel justified in not looking at them. We feel the data may have been less revealing if we had, even though the students were aware that we would look at them at the end of the project.

5.   Comments on tutor input

Students tended to comment on the structure of the course, rather than on individual tutors. Some felt that the alternate weekly meetings where the seminar group met together were unhelpful and that they would have preferred more individual group meetings with the tutor. However, H did comment in his diary

> *With group work I think it is clear that you learn more through the group than you do through the direction of the tutor. This is not to say that the tutor is unimportant: ultimately they are there to direct you when you have difficulty resolving a problem within the group. .: TUTOR SUPPORT → good enough → anymore, lose the point of a history degree which is self directed learning.*

6.   Overall feeling about the project and how their skills had developed

When reviewing their project work, the final entries in the diaries were **generally positive** and most saw the value of the exercise they had been forced to perform. Some had actually enjoyed it.

E's final entry lists skills she thinks she has developed and ranks them with a tick (good) or a cross (bad). The good skills include 'definitely better at talking/listening balance' and 'delegation'; the bad include 'organisation' and 'bad final editing/putting together'. Her last entry is a comment on the latter

> *Almost abandoned the hope of making it flow halfway through and just hoped the individual pieces would relate to everybody else's. Luckily they did but it was less a project, more a collage*

 J's last entry was similarly divided into good and bad points, the positive including getting to know new people, having choice, developing historiographical, presentation and intra-personal skills; negative points focussed on the way meetings were held with the tutor. Overall, he really enjoyed the project.

C had been very positive about group work, and despite the setback of their presentation not going to plan, she felt generally happy with the overall outcome. Her final entry reviews her feelings, and lessons learned

> *Result = v. much a group project – is not what I would have done on my own but that is probably a good thing.*

Overall = a positive experience!
Skills -
- *Teamwork*
- *Delegation*
- *Sharing*
- *Compromise*
- *Assuming different positions in a group than usual*
- *Organisation*

Has benefited my ability to work as part of a team and I have learnt form the experience

7. What they feel they would have liked more help with

None of the diarists made direct reference to this, but the questionnaire specifically asked the question. From fifty replies, twenty-eight responded to this question, and the responses were varied. Nine wanted more help with **presentation skills,** although this was a topic of semester one where they were given guidance and the opportunity to make a five-minute presentation with feedback. Three wanted more help on **research skills**, and three on **historiography.** Computer skills, confidence, and essay writing all elicited two mentions. Single aspects were diplomacy, leadership, coping with others, analysis, footnotes, critical thinking and more teaching of the *Learning History* theory.

There was no particular emphasis on wanting help with group working skills; they appear to have managed to work through it themselves, or at least to perceive that they should. Many of our students have similar backgrounds in that they have been brought up to co-operate and get along with others, not to rock the boat, so maybe they would see it as a personal inadequacy rather than a skill that needs developing when things do not go according to plan. This is something we wish to look into further in our research.

8. Tutors' reflections

We both kept reflective diaries, but did not read each other's until the end of the project. This was not deliberate, but each week after our teaching sessions we would retire to a quiet place (staff club) for a debriefing meeting before we wrote anything in our diaries. It did not seem necessary to read each other's reflections as we had already shared verbally. Our thinking towards learning and teaching is similar and is reflected in our first journal entries when we were planning the project.

Carole:
> *Felt I didn't need to explain much because both of us think in a similar way, e.g. ideas about power/responsibility/social relations etc*

Jeannie:
> *Carole outlined the action research project as she had formulated it, and it became clearer to me straight away. I feel that both Carole and I have similar attitudes to the way in which students learn and the ways in which we teach; in my case because I have always supported student centred learning and seek to empower the student*

One positive outcome from this project was getting **instant feedback from students**. Both tutors have two sessions in the morning and two in the afternoon. We held the feedback meetings at lunchtime and on that day the seminar dealt with primary sources. At lunchtime, Jeannie had felt her sessions weren't going very well, whereas Carole had felt quite positive about hers. During the feedback session, one of the students had thought that the session had been a waste of time (he also wrote a section on this in his diary). During the afternoon sessions, both tutors decided to articulate the aims of the seminar much more clearly, and we both felt more positive about the outcomes. Carole reflected

> *I felt the sessions in the morning went quite well until the group meeting at 1.00 when some students felt that it had been a waste of time…. I did the same for my afternoon groups but spelled out much more clearly what my aims were for the session and*

11

what I hoped they would get out of it…I did ask the second two groups how they felt about the session.

Sometimes issues arose in the feedback meetings that surprised us, and **challenged our self-perceptions** as teachers. We both spend a lot of time giving feedback on written work, and were surprised when the issue of lack of feedback came up in the meeting. Carole's instant reaction in her diary was defensive

> *I couldn't believe they wanted more. I can't see what else we can do, unless the students take the initiative and come along to discuss their work further. I don't want to tell them what to do, but if they come with ideas, I'm happy to help them develop that way.*

Practical considerations of the project proved frustrating to both of us. Because of out stated philosophy of allowing everyone equal voice, we found that the meetings rambled on, often covering the same ground, and often going off what we considered was the point of the meetings. It was difficult to transcribe the meetings and the task became very time consuming as Carole comments

> *I've just come to the end of typing up the meetings and have found it difficult and rather soul destroying. No matter how much we ask people to speak into the tape, they start well, but it just degenerates into a group mumble, or half the contribution is missing due to the tape recorder being scraped round the table*

Jeannie's reflections were similar on the tension between allowing everyone free voice, yet our instinct as tutors was pulling us towards intervening. It was something we never resolved to our satisfaction in our methodology

> *…today we had an action group meeting and while it was OK, we are really finding it difficult to get the students to stay on topic. We really tried to direct them today through the questions we asked*

Summary of findings

The core module *Learning History* enables students to broaden their skills base by questioning traditional assumptions, not simply about history but also about themselves and the ways in which they learn or are taught. In order for us as teachers to be effective we aimed to research into group working skills, using reflective diaries as the tool of our research in order to ascertain if what students learn is actually what we think we teach.

Initial analysis of our research suggests that students experience some difficulties working in groups such as insecurity about themselves, group relationships and their organisation, but they certainly gained in confidence by working with others over a period of time.

However, our research has highlighted a number of interesting flaws in our methodology. Firstly, both students and teachers found it difficult to reflect on paper. Entries into the diaries tended to be sparse and negative, and actually reflected wider issues (often personal ones) than the project encompassed. Secondly, using action research – as an inclusive methodology where all participants are equal – was fraught with interesting and frustrating experiences and was not as successful as we would have wished. We have learned many lessons from both the subject of our research and our methodology, and we intend to research further into the issues raised so far.

Ways forward

- Students seem to find that reflecting either with a diary or through the feedback meetings was generally helpful. We already ask students to reflect on their presentation in writing and also use reflecting within the seminar groups in an informal way. We could perhaps incorporate some form of reflective diary-keeping as part of their final portfolio at the end of their project.

- However, we felt that students found reflecting quite difficult. We think that they need more help and support in learning how to think reflectively, and how to act on those reflections. For us as tutors, it is the key to learning about oneself and what type of learner one is, whereas students may not see this as important. As this project has been with first years, we feel it is essential to help them move away from directed learning into self-directed deeper learning. This could entail a combination of reflective activities where some reflection could be shared with others, including the tutor (Bain *et al* 2002) whilst some remain private.

- Students seem to want different levels of support and feedback from us. We will endeavour to emphasise that we have office time where they can come to us for advice, either individually or as a group, and that they can bring work in progress for feedback, or returned mark for further discussion.

- Some students want to get on with their project and find the whole group meetings a waste of time. These are the sessions where we discuss research methods, primary sources, constructing a bibliography etc. Whereas we feel that the majority of students benefit from these sessions, we need to make sure that all the students understand and see the relevance of these sessions to their own projects.

- Most students feel the exercise is a positive one, which has enabled them to work closely with other people. Our diarists articulated problems of working with others, but also stressed the need for skills such as diplomacy and trust. Whilst not all groups remained friends after the project, some bonds were formed which will carry them through into the following two or three years and they recognise the value of working out the differences themselves. As our diarists acknowledge that they were writing the diaries knowing their tutors were going to read them, we cannot be absolutely sure of their feelings towards others in their group and to us, their tutors.

- We feel this has been a worthwhile exercise both for ourselves and for our small cohort of volunteer co-researchers. We would like to take this opportunity of thanking the Subject Centre for providing the grant, which has enabled us to carry out this research. We welcome any feedback from colleagues at the addresses below.

carole.mallia@nottingham.ac.uk   jeannie.alderdice@btinternet.com

Bibliography

Booth, A (2001) 'Developing History Students' Skills in the Transition to University' *Teaching in Higher Education*, 4, pp 487-503.

Bain, J.D., Mills, C., Ballantyne, R., Packer, J. (2002) 'Developing Reflection on Practice through Journal Writing: impacts of variations in the focus and level of feedback' *Teachers and Teaching*, 2, pp 171- 196.

Brown, T & Jones, L (2001) *Action Research and Postmodernism*: Buckingham, Open University Press

Carr, E H (1961) *What is History?*: Harmondsworth, Penguin

Jenkins, K (1991) *Re-thinking History*: London, Routledge

Munslow, A (1997) *Deconstructing History:* London, Routledge

Samuel, R (1994) *Theatres of Memory*: London, Verso

Tosh, J (1999) *The Pursuit of History*: London, Longman

Appendix A: Example of topics

Every generation gets the Robin Hood it deserves
Looking at the myth of Robin Hood and how it has been used to reflect society's needs for a different type of hero through the ages. Students visited a number of local sites.

The depiction of British history in Hollywood films: Case study: Braveheart
How Hollywood directors 'change' history with impunity; looking at whether this is where audiences get their historical knowledge from. And if so, does it matter? Students produced their own home video version of the real Braveheart.

How museums deal with conflicting interests in displaying artefacts: the Enola Gay controversy
Students visited the Imperial War Museum to interview a curator on how politics affects the way they display their exhibitions, comparing the IWM's exhibition of the Holocaust to the problems of memory caused with the Enola Gay Exhibition.

Does death enhance your reputation? Case study JFK
Looking at how history displays a hero during his/her lifetime and how that can change after death, and why.

Is there such a thing as an English Identity?
Students looked at the changing identities of British people over the last 60 years and what affects how people see themselves. It included a survey on Englishness.

Who held the power in medieval times?
Using Foucault, students looked at the nature of power and how it manifested itself and changed over time between Popes, Kings, Holy Roman Emperors and the great unwashed.

The role of the media in the (first) Iraqi war
How the media influenced this war. Students interviewed a veteran and compared this with newspaper reports of the time. Interesting comparisons arose as the recent Iraqi war unfolded.

Appendix B: List of skills

Tutors' list
- Confidence
- Research
- Library
- Writing
- Team work
- Time management
- Content management
- Negotiation

- Problem solving
- Working with Others
- Taking control of own learning
- Interpersonal skills
- Broadening research skills to include people as resources

Student participants list
- Listening
- Research
- Team work
- Time organisation
- Diplomacy
- Organisation
- Basic level of education
- Research skills
- Target reading (fast)
- Applying raw facts to an actual argument
- Communication skills in presentation
- Typing
- Using the library
- Spelling
- Proof-reading
- Ability to reference correctly
- Structure
- Creativity
- Ability to make lists

Appendix C: Initial handout for diaries

Diaries

These form the basis of the research and will be brought to subsequent meetings for discussion. Tutors keep a diary as well.

Suggested ways they can be used:
- To reflect on this and subsequent meetings (not report – we've got the tape)
- Don't feel you have to write an essay (example of Barcelona book)
- You don't have to do them every day, unless you want to, of course. Probably the best way is when you have something to write
- Can use notes, diagrams, stream of consciousness, lists, it doesn't matter
- Try writing how you feel about something
- Reflect on what you have learned e.g. after a Learning History seminar or a meeting with your group, or even on your own, and write it down. Is there something that you feel you need to learn, but haven't been taught? What can you do about this, if anything?
- After a particular activity, think what skills and knowledge have been used. Where did this knowledge/skill come from? The tutor? Myself? Another student/person? How do I know?
- When you are doing something as above, is there any reason you are doing it a particular way? Are there any restrictions placed by the institution? Are there certain expectations from others/yourself? Think hard about this one, you have to try and go beyond accepted behaviour and situations
- How do you feel in general about working in a group? Do you feel that you have a particular skill that you can contribute? Do you think that of others? Why? What is it about that skill/person that makes it stand out? Are some skills 'natural'? Is there any such thing? (Sorry, slipping into post-modern mode here)
- Think about what skills are important for group work. This may change over time as the work progresses
- How successful do you think putting into practice these skills has been? Have you had to re-think any of your practice?

Appendix D: Reminder email

To: all our volunteers
Date : Thursday February 27th
Subject: Monday's meeting

Hello all
Regarding the meeting on Monday at 1pm in B15 (change of venue)

Carole and I hope your reflection is going well. We think we'd like to address a few more specific issues in the next meeting, so perhaps you can all reflect on these over the weekend?
Most of you will have had your Week 5 Seminar by the time of the meeting.
What particular skills would you expect to have developed, to whatever degree, by this stage of the project?
Do you feel that these skills have been adequately developed/learnt/taught?
To what extent do you personally feel confident about them?
Where has this learning (or not leaning) come from? E.g. taught/learnt/already had/others in group/just got on with it? (None being mutually exclusive)
Are there any gaps that you feel need filling?
It may be helpful to refer to the list we made in the initial meeting

If you have any queries feel free to get in touch with me jeannie.alderdice@btinternet.com or carole on carole.mallia@nottingham.ac.uk
Sorry that this is getting to you at short notice, but any reflection you can do will be worthwhile. Have a good weekend all

Jeannie

Appendix E: Prompt sheet for final feedback meeting

Thank you so much for giving us your time and taking part in this research. We hope it has been of some value to you as well as ourselves. This is the last leg and we would like you to reflect on taking part in the research and what effect it has had on you. We will not be present at this discussion, so hope that you will be completely honest. We will not listen to the recording until after your projects have been marked, so you can feel completely free.

The following are just some suggestions that you might like to discuss. However, if you would prefer to answer privately, please use this sheet and sent it to one of us through the usual channels. Likewise if you have anything additional to say, write it on this sheet.

We will be working on this project over the next few months, so if you have any late thoughts, just email them to us.

Diaries

What did you use your diary for?

Did the fact that we will be looking at the diaries affect what you wrote in them?

Was it a chore sometimes to fill them in?

Has keeping a diary made you think differently about yourself or others?

Did you compare diaries with others?

Support during Learning History 2

Was the support you received from the tutor during the semester adequate for the task?

What alternative/additional support would you have liked?

Yourself

What have you discovered about yourself as a team worker/as a person over this last semester?

What have you discovered about others?

Has this been mostly positive or negative?

Have you had to rethink anything about yourself whilst working in a team?