

# The Year 2 Group Project for single honours History students

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## Summary

Group project work's contribution to the History curriculum and to engaging with the wider world

## Short Description

The flagship History Group Project at Southampton generates very positive feedback, and produces high quality work. How successfully have Year 2 students engaged with the broader community, as well as acquiring skills appropriate to independent historical investigation? What are the strengths and weaknesses of an ambitious course with several, very different assessment elements?

## Rationale

History's Year 2 Group Project is a semester 2 30 credits module initiated five years ago as part of a wider initiative in curriculum development and design, responding to internal and external pressures for radical change, and drawing upon initiatives elsewhere in the University of Southampton and the discipline's wider academic community. Its architects intended the Group Project to be:

- genuinely innovative, not least with reference to assessment;
- responsive to broader shifts in the pedagogy of undergraduate History, not least with reference to e-learning and independent learning;
- engaged with contemporary discourse re the changing role and function of the discipline within society, notably the emergence of 'public history';
- tailored to the acquisition and/or enhancement of subject specific skills *and* generic/transferable skills relevant to the world of work;
- rooted in collaborative as well as individual work, each to be appropriately assessed, and with necessary differentiation in order to measure each team member's performance and achievement;
- recognised as a research apprenticeship, providing hands-on training for the Year 3 dissertation.

## Description of the Practice

In semester 2 all single honours History students undertake what comprises 25% of their Year 2 work. In 2005-6 this constituted 90 students in 15 groups of 6, although a cohort of 140 in 2006-7 will require 18 groups of 8. In Year 1

students choose a topic, the range of which depends upon the interest and enthusiasm of the designated supervisors, but which increasingly has a local history bias - this is being encouraged, partly as a consequence of enthusiastic partners such as Hampshire Record Office and Southampton Heritage Services.

Because of its nature the [double] module expects all students to make constant reference to the HIST2008 Group Project website ([www.history.soton.ac.uk/hist2008](http://www.history.soton.ac.uk/hist2008)). The website is their guide across the semester, providing undergraduates with learning outcomes, assessment tasks, assessment criteria, and a timetable of supervision, presentation, and submission. The unit co-ordinator and the project supervisors have important supportive roles, but the emphasis is upon independent learning hence the centrality of the website.

### **Week 1**

has all students attend an induction day, where, via designated tasks, the emphasis is on briefing, bonding, and an early appreciation of the particular roles team members may play within their group.

### **Weeks 1 and 2**

involve initial meetings with supervisors, followed in weeks 3 and 4 by refinement of the 1000 word **project proposal [10%]**. Each group is given a budget of £100.

### **Weeks 5 and 6**

entail training sessions (e.g. in interviewing technique, effective group presentation), feedback on the project proposal, and continued research on the chosen topic - how that research is undertaken is ultimately the responsibility of the group as the supervisor is only available on request to advise. The initial entries in the **group log [10%]** are handed in to the unit co-ordinator for formative comment, with each supervisor given a copy of written feedback.

### **Week 7**

concludes with each group rehearsing its presentation of 20 minutes, followed by 10 minutes of questions, and being provided with positive criticism by the unit co-ordinator and supervisor.

### **Week 8**

concludes with the **group presentation [20%]** in front of an audience of staff and students, with the unit co-ordinator and supervisor assessing content and delivery according to the criteria outlined on the website and condensed in to an appropriate marking sheet (which students are familiar with).

### **Weeks 9 and 10**

see feedback on the group presentation, and culminate in submission of the 3-4000 word **group historical essay [30%]**, which is the climax of the team's individual and collective research, and where the emphasis is on coherence, cohesion, and continuity as much as upon intellectual content.

### **Week 11**

sees the **public outcome [15%]** go live, in whatever form it takes (electronic, hard copy, event, exhibition, school-based activity, etc.), but such that the

supervisor and unit co-ordinator are easily able to mark it, e.g. be present in school when the activity takes place.

### **Week 12**

ends with feedback on the public outcome, and submission of the completed group log and of the 1500-2000 word **individual reflective essay [15%]**, both elements focused upon research process rather than eventual outcome, but with narrative taking second place to a genuinely reflective, discursive, evaluative, analytical, and thus ultimately illuminating and revealing, approach.

The two essays and the log are returned to students by the supervisor during the assessment/examination period that concludes the semester. *All* work is second marked by the unit co-ordinator, and a sample sent to the external examiner (including URLs for online public outcomes). Powerpoint material used in the group presentations, and sample recordings are also available to the external examiner - and can be used on induction day for the next cohort as an example of best practice.

## Implementation

### **Strengths:**

- student engagement and enthusiasm, with the overwhelming majority remarkably conscientious and well-motivated;
- student acquisition and enhancement of work-related skills, notably IT-related and presentational;
- individual student marks match performance in conventional units, and in the case of weaker undergraduates invariably above average;
- students, as a consequence of direct 'field' experience, are better equipped to undertake Year 3 dissertations, in that they have developed appropriate methods of inquiry and investigation and they now have the confidence to take the initiative;
- students find themselves engaging with the wider world, relating their subject to a much broader agenda, and recognising that formal study of the past does not take place in a vacuum;
- students' experience of team work is beneficial when they undertake Year 3 documents-based specialist modules.

### **Weaknesses:**

- problems with the group dynamics can mean a dysfunctional team and/or demotivated individuals (the - regrettable - lack of mature students has reduced the potential for tension caused by 18-22 students' 24/7 lifestyle);
- a system of signing up for topics can mean a cluster of under-performing students (invariably men);
- not every topic can be guaranteed to sustain enthusiasm and produce impressive outcomes;
- there is an issue of whether weak students are carried by the rest of the group (i.e. with 85% of the assessment collective is there adequate

differentiation?). N.B. peer assessment was an element in the first two years but was removed in the face of overwhelming student antipathy;

- with so many assessment tasks and so many first markers can parity of treatment be ensured? (Which is why a senior, experienced member of staff is designated unit co-ordinator, and who second marks everything.)

## Impact

### Reception:

- year on year *very* positive feedback, formally and informally, from students - although they are not afraid to highlight any perceived administrative faults or grievances re assessment [twice these have been seen as legitimate, and action taken accordingly];
- staff see the public outcomes and the presentations in particular as very positive (boosting *esprit de corps!*), and generally enjoy what is not an unduly stressful teaching experience - a good sign is that colleagues volunteer to be supervisors;
- partners off-campus value the public outcome, with library exhibitions, community websites, primary school lessons, visitor guides, newspaper features, etc. all establishing positive links between the University, Southampton, and its hinterland - future years will see topics that meet the needs and priorities of relevant bodies within the city and county councils;
- potential students and their parents, in that there appears to be nothing similar elsewhere and feedback from open days suggests that the Group Project is a USP for History at the University of Southampton - as confirmed by the response to a feature in *The Times*.

### Questions re. the future:

- With 18 groups of 8 [and an increased budget of £130] will fresh tensions emerge, and will the group dynamics prove as productive (e.g. will there be enough for every team member to contribute fully)?
- Will staffing constraints begin to impact? (In the short term no, as History's policy is that every available lecturer has to supervise at least one group.)
- Given the importance of on-line support, and the growing numbers, will there be adequate back-up for a potentially over-stretched unit co-ordinator? Similarly will a stretched system still ensure the present heavy emphasis on academic rigour? (Again, in the short term no, as History recognises the Group Project as a resourcing priority.)
- As more History combined honours are allowed to undertake free-standing dissertations [i.e. not rooted in their Year 3 special subjects], will they claim that they are disadvantaged by not undertaking the Group Project?

### Response:

Feeling positive about the future of the Group Project is not an expression of naïve optimism. Today's students do not possess the cultural capital of earlier grammar-schooled generations, but they have remarkable information-gathering skills (witness our high expectations re dissertations compared with say 30 years

ago), and often a technical presentational ability that belies their status as non-IT specialists. This expertise will be ever more evident year on year, as is clear from the current exceptionally high quality of Powerpoint presentations/DVDs/websites/digital radio programmes and podcasts. In this respect, not only is the Group Project an ideal vehicle for forcing students to engage with an intellectual agenda re 'public history' but it places the discipline firmly within the knowledge revolution.

## Further information

### **Unit website:**

[www.history.soton.ac.uk/hist2008](http://www.history.soton.ac.uk/hist2008)

### **Unit co-ordinator:**

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