The Case against Group Grades

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Project work is a common feature of course work in many disciplines at university level. Students may be required to work on a project and submit either a written paper or deliver an oral presentation or do both. These ‘end products’ may be part of the assessment requirement of a course or indeed constitute 100 percent of the assessment requirement of the course. Regardless of the weighting allocated, projects at university are often carried out in groups. Ehrman and Dörnyei (1998, p.72) characterize groups as “distinct unit(s)” of people whose interaction is determined by a common goal or purpose, the achievement of which requires them to stay together for a period of time.

The rationale for group work in projects is that group work encourages students to interact actively with their peers and in so doing, share information, engage in critical evaluation of that information and give valuable feedback on one another’s work. These are all valuable transferable skills applicable not only in any discipline at university but also at the workplace. With this added value in mind, if group work is carried out in the true spirit of “cooperative groups” with each member keeping an open and positive mindset, willing to share information as well as give and receive peer feedback in the right spirit, then “extraordinary achievement” could result from such work “than from isolated individuals competing with each other or working alone” (Johnson and Johnson, 2004, p.1). In reality, however, the dynamics of project groups at university are often complex not only because of the various demands on group members’ time but also because of the assessment system.

Assessment systems in most universities still reward the individual and not the group; first class honours and valedictory status are conferred on individuals not groups. This reality influences the mindset of the students and makes them question the value of group work and group grades. The matter is further complicated by the fact that not all students work well in groups. Others feel strongly about being acknowledged for their individual contributions, be it in the form of surveys conducted, writing of drafts or research, to the group project. Thus
for as long as the assessment systems are pegged to individual performance, overall group grades as opposed to individual grades for group projects will be an issue.

Furthermore, in as much as university education is about whetting and sharpening the individual’s sense of inquiry and equipping him with the critical thinking skills that he can apply to any situation thereafter, his employability post graduation is a very real concern to him regardless of the discipline he is pursuing. Knight and Yorke (2003) advocate the incorporation of four skills in undergraduate programmes to increase students’ employability and one of these is “collaboration (involving communication and teamworking skills)” (Knight and Yorke, 2003, p. 3). Clearly, a potential employees’ ability to interact and work with other employees is an important consideration for any employer.

One way for a university graduate to satisfy this requirement would be for him to show by way of an individual grade assigned for his contribution to a group project that he has proven abilities of working with a group. An overall ‘group grade’ that reflects the success of the whole group project may not satisfy the employer’s requirement as employers are aware that a group project is executed by, as the term indicates, a group of people. The employer would, as such, be eager to know the extent of the individual’s actual commitment and contribution to this project by way of an individual grade or description. Consequently, an overall group grade may not disadvantage him in this aspect of his employability but it may not give him the edge over other candidates either.

Thus, given that project work involving groups features significantly in university education for reasons stated earlier and that students still prefer to be rewarded for the quality of their individual contributions to a group project, awarding a blanket group grade for project work may be inadequate. Instead, adopting a formal, structured method of rewarding individuals in the group based on the quality of their contributions to the project may be useful. Indeed, this may be one way to encourage individuals to give their best to the group project to ensure a high quality end product.

References


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**About the Author**

Dr. Radhika Jaidev teaches advanced business communication to international MBA students as well as critical thinking and writing to engineering undergraduates at the National University of Singapore. Her research interests include group work at the university level, writing for both academic and business contexts, and speaking in formal and informal contexts.