Review for Session Topic:
Collaborative Writing in Divergent Disciplines

Commentary on:

Cutts "Essay Writing with Peer Reviewing and Marking"

Das & McGugan "Shakespeare: Page Stage Screen"

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Both of these case studies describe assessment activities that represent divergence from disciplinary orthodoxies. In computing science, collaborative work is commonplace, but there is traditionally little emphasis on formal writing skills. In english literature studies, assignments are rarely collaborative and the assessment of group working skills uncommon.

The authors of both case studies point to the need to address employability skills agendas as the driver to introduce different types of tasks into their courses. For Das and McGugan, collaborative writing activities and the evaluation and assessment of team effort are a response to the HEA's 2004 student employability profile for english studies graduates which identified skills weaknesses in team working, problem-solving, time management, working under pressure and computer literacy. The case study describes a group writing exercise that requires students to create either a new critical edition or performance text based on a passage from a Shakespeare play. As well as collaborating on the production of the text and a commentary on the joint decisions that lead to the creation of a definitive version, students are asked to reflect on their experience of group working by completing a pre-defined group assessment sheet and collaboratively assigning a % share of marks to their peers based on contribution to the task.

The criteria by which students peer assess and reflect on their experiences are pre-defined by tutors. Students are asked about the process and experience of working together, rather than the process of developing the content of their work. The criteria employed embody assumptions about effective team working that appear authentic in that they replicate aspects of team behaviour in the workplace (for example, the emphasis on efficiency implied in the statement "the group avoided duplication of tasks"). However, another case study in this conference (Baxter: A Case Study of Online Collaborative Work in a Large First Year Psychology Class) describes an effective group working design in which all students are required to undertake *all* the task in order to be able to provide useful feedback to each other. It's clear that criteria are unlikely to be neutral in this respect and it would be interesting to speculate on whether class debate about what is important and authentic about this kind of task and its relationship to employability skills might lead to the development of a different set of indicators (and perhaps different criteria for each annual cohort or indeed each group within the cohort). What is clearly authentic about this task is its relationship both to the demands of the subject discipline and the way in which students are encouraged to work together through a complex task to achieve an acceptable negotiated compromise around a text.

QUESTIONS FOR NANDINI DAS AND STUART MCGUGAN:

1. What incentive is there for students to be honest when they use the criteria sheet to assess the group experience? Might they be tempted to report that their group was wholly functional?

2. Do you think that the pre-defined criteria embody assumptions that might not reflect students' subsequent experiences? Would asking students to define their own criteria add value to the task?

3. How do you deal with dissent when group members are asked to calibrate individual contributions to the task? How do group members assess the quality of contributions?

4. Do you think the earlier introduction of group working (perhaps in year one) would have a positive impact on the student experience? Are other tutors in the department planning similar initiatives?

The employability agenda is also a driver for the design of Quintin Cutt's computing science module. Here too, students are required to collaborate in the production of a text (in this case, a formal essay) but the collaboration is not managed in groups. Individuals write a draft essay which is then reviewed by three other students in the class. The reviews themselves are subjected to scrutiny and assessment by other students and the original essay draft is revised in line with peer comments where these are deemed valid by the author. Students are asked to make a response to reviewers and these responses are also marked by student peers. The final revised essay is given a summative mark by tutors.

The employability rationale here is primarily one of responsibility. Students have to participate in all elements of the process of review, reflection and revision in order to ensure the process is effective for all class members. They in turn receive substantially more feedback on their work and on their contribution to the process than would be possible if feedback was solely tutor-generated.   It could be argued that the responsibility imperative is undermined because the tutor is the final arbiter of the summative mark for each essay.

In common with the Das and McGugan case study, the criteria used by students is pre-defined by the tutor, although it is implied that a significant amount of time is spent in class discussing what is important and clarifying expectations. Comments from student evaluations suggest however that the feedback received by students from their peers is not always of a high enough quality to be useful and perhaps students might benefit from a more active engagement with criteria development (for example, the case described by Rosario Hernandez in her paper for this conference).

A more troublesome aspect of this case study is the perceived lack of authenticity from some students who cannot see the link between writing a formal essay and the kinds of tasks that they might be asked to undertake in the workplace. Cutts' solution of asking former students to return to explain their real-life work experiences and the relevance of the class is an attractive one, but perhaps a re-design of the task which asks students to collaborate on a technical report or other form of writing might also be helpful. An earlier introduction of similar exercises into the course (perhaps even in first year) might also help to embed these kinds of working practices.

QUESTIONS FOR QUINTIN CUTTS:

1. Why do you think it's important that the tutor awards the final summative mark for the essay? Does this undermine student responsibility?

2. Do you think that students would provide better feedback to each other if they were asked to define their own criteria?

3. The process you describe seems very complex. What are the key elements you would keep if you were asked to simplify it? Do you think that the iterative nature of the task is helpful?

4. What would you change to make the task appear more immediately authentic to final year students concerned about employability?

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