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Autonomous Study Group Assessment in Philosophy (Lisa Jones)
Philosophy of Art Honours Module, Semester 1 2010-11

Why autonomous study groups?

I wanted to encourage:
- More student activity
- More student autonomy
- More variation in assessment
- More opportunity for peer-learning
- More exploration of subject

Students pursued own research projects across 12 weeks, in groups of 4-5, culminating in a 30-minute presentation to the rest of the class in final week. Worth 25% of overall grade (same weighting as one coursework essay).

✓ research-led teaching; peer learning; employability skills; aligned curriculum.

Challenges:

- How to arrange class (39 students) into groups?
    - Random allocation?
    - Allocation by topic?
    - Self-selection?
    - Aiming for diversity within groups to maximise learning

- How closely to monitor their projects?

- How to organise presentations?
    - Part timetabled-in, part extra-curricular
    - Include opportunity for students to give peer-feedback

- How to mark presentations?
    - Evaluating the group presentation, giving feedback, keeping records
    - Arriving at a mark for each individual student (avoiding the 'freeloader' problem)

- How to evaluate success of this method of assessment?
    - Regular (University level) module evaluation questionnaires
    - Individual student reflective journals
    - Overall module marks
    - External assessment

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Reflections:

Seems to have been a success. The projects were interesting and related well to the topics covered on the module in lectures/seminars; the presentations were all of a good quality; groups seem to have worked well together (with one exception).

Staff concerns: no real costs in terms of time or effort; arranging and marking presentations roughly same amount of work as a second essay would require.

- Issues surrounding moderation – requirement for 2nd staff member to sit in on presentations? Or sufficient that presentation materials and feedback are on electronic database (MMS)?
- Question whether 'weaker' students are perhaps carried/lifted by stronger students – and, if so, whether this matters? (Might be a good thing.)

Student response:

Students, on the whole, liked it very much, despite having been very wary/sceptical at the outset.

Particularly, they claimed to enjoy: the autonomy, and the opportunity to see what it's like to 'do research'; the 'peer learning' aspect, both in terms of learning from/with their fellow group members (quite a few commented how good it was to 'meet up and talk with fellow students about philosophy'), and learning from the other groups at presentation-time.

Majority of students would welcome this kind of assessment/project again.

"Before starting the project I was unsure as to how well it would work since I have never been required to carry out group work at University before … However, I have found the experience to be very rewarding and enjoyed it far more than I think I would have enjoyed writing a second essay. I also think that the format encouraged and required me to learn and research into a wider field than an essay would have necessitated."

"Reflecting back on the whole process, I found the study project to be of great value. ... Most of all, I realized talking about philosophical issues with friends really helps you understand the question at hand and articulate your thought process about it more clearly. This is something that I don't do enough when writing essays and now know I need to do more of if I want to become a more confident writer or philosopher."

"… the types of skills needed for group projects are those that are not only useful, but necessary for future success in the *real world of jobs*. I did indeed see how this is true, and was happy to realize what sorts of group oriented strengths I could list on a job application."

"I ended up learning about a topic I found interesting in as much depth possible. In the end, the project meetings felt less like an assignment and more like personal learning. It was nice to be in an environment where I could argue for an idea that had just popped into my head, without worrying about having to vigorously defend it or reference an author by whom I had been influenced. I feel that while seminars are a necessary and good setting for open discussion, the majority of students are never as frank or forthcoming about their beliefs on a certain topic due to the intimate setting with other students and a knowledgeable lecturer. So the group settings were a nice change in which we could openly discuss our thoughts and ideas without this overhanging concern. A few times my group even began discussing topics introduced in lectures and I heard interesting viewpoints and objections that I had not heard in my seminars."

"I loved presenting my 12 weeks worth of research to the class and hearing their thoughts and questions. The presentations were a nice, relaxed way to end the semester and module."