

Examining the impact of group work on first year journalism and new media students

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Abstract

Group projects have become a key component of the curriculum in a variety of programmes in third-level education, including journalism and media. Group work prepares students for workplace practices. This project will investigate the impact of group work on first year BA in Journalism and New Media students who took a news writing module at the University of Limerick. Through action research, the project looks at approaches to teaching, problem-based learning, group selection, group size and the division of work within each group. The project's goals are to establish if the teaching method used is suitable and if the group work has a positive impact on students. The project sought to determine what changes, if any, should be made to teaching and to group work specifically, based on the findings of this research.

Educational situation

Journalistic Writing for News 2 (see Appendix B) is a mandatory first year module (semester 2) for students completing the BA in Journalism and New Media at the University of Limerick.

There are 33 students in the class, the majority of who came in through the Central Applications Office (CAO) (processes first year undergraduate applications in Ireland) and started the four-year programme in September 2014. There were also five international students who were studying at the University for one semester, while there are three mature students in their mid-twenties in the class. There are 22 females and

11 males in the class.

This module is an important core module in this programme in first year and prepares students for the foundations of all journalistic writing they will do during the course and in their chosen careers. It focuses on news writing, interviewing, generating news ideas and analysis of news.

The research concerned potential changes to practice focusing on the lecturer's approach to teaching, giving clear instructions for the group projects, of which there are five in this module. This included group discussions, research (in and outside the class) and one group presentation arising from the work.

This project was divided into two stages, cycle 1 and cycle 2. It looked, at the end of cycle one, at students' feedback on how the class should be divided into groups and roles allocated, for each group project. This was particularly important for the second cycle, as while the group work was not graded in cycle 1, one group project in cycle 2 was graded.

Previously this module was heavily focused on individual projects but it was felt by tutors that the focus should shift to incorporate group work, so that students could learn from each other and prepare for opportunities on placement and in the workplace, where group work is a key component. While individual assignments remain a part of this module, the group work has now taken on a more important role. Group work was part of the module during seven classes in the semester (out of 12 x 100-minute weekly classes in the module).

Sometimes students are not sure what is expected of them in group projects and rather than tackle it, they are reluctant to participate. This was addressed in this project through an inclusive approach and a clear and coherent structure, which was outlined to students at the beginning of term.

Literature Review

There is a variety of opinion on the value of group work in educational settings. There is an overall acceptance that we learn from each other. However, on the other hand, many people have had a negative experience in group situations, particularly in relation to the division of work, or failure of members of the group to agree on key aspects of the work. Biggs (2003) says that while group projects have become increasingly popular and prepare students for the workplace, they are not popular among students for practical reasons such as difficulties in coordinating times to meet, and also because the assessment does not usually take individual contributions into account. Cohen (1994) believes that everyone benefits from interaction when there is thinking and discussion in group work assignments.

“People of any age deal with the uncertainty of a challenging task better if they consult fellow workers or students than if they try to work by themselves” (p. 11).

Jacques (2000) looks at the variety of purposes for the formation of groups which includes learning from each other, pooling resources and sharing ideas and is of the view that the aims of group discussion are intellectual, social and emotional.

Preston-Shoot (1987) is of the view that group work has limitations and makes the point that they are not an “alternative setting for one-to-one work with the addition of an audience” (p. 18).

A lecturer's approach to teaching plays a role in deciding if group work is a fit for a particular subject. A behaviourist approach, where the learner is passive, is common in some third-level teaching. This is an approach that Jordan et al. (2008) believe is “outmoded” and “fails to take account of people's ability to take action for themselves” (p. 33). Through experience, the lecturer's approach to teaching has changed from behaviourist to social constructivism where facilitation is key (Jordan et al., 2008) and this is an approach that facilitates group work in small classes and also works well for this subject area.

This approach is also vital for problem-based learning (PBL) which is an important part of group work in this module. PBL involves presenting problems from practice to students and this provides a “stimulus for learning” (Boud and Feletti, 1997, p. 15). O'Neill and Hung (cited in Barrett and Moore, 2011) say that the PBL process supports student involvement in their learning activities, while Drinan (cited in Boud and Feletti, 1997) stresses the importance of the PBL process being reviewed and further developed. Brainstorming works well as part of PBL and involves all students pooling ideas. It ties in well with social constructivism; it is acknowledged that “no two people will have exactly the same discussions with exactly the same people” (Jordan et al., 2008, pp. 59 – 61). Everyone can feel confident about getting involved, as there are no correct responses (Davies, 1999).

Assessing group projects can be done in a number of ways with different methods being favoured by different module leaders and lecturers. One of the biggest concerns is the practice of allocating one group mark as this can lead to angst for students, as the division of work within the group is rarely even. Biggs (2003)

believes that awarding one overall grade for the group is not a good idea. Roberts (2006) suggests that the most reliable and fair way of distinguishing between individual contributions in groups is to focus on peer assessment within the groups. In reality, however, this is potentially problematic, particularly at first year level as students can give more positive feedback to their friends, compared to those with whom they are not as closely acquainted.

Management of group projects is important. For instance, the optimal method of dividing a class into groups, group size, the division of work and the allocation of roles, to ensure everyone benefits equally from the process. Preston-Shoot (1987) says that the resources and personalities of those involved should be considered when decisions regarding group size are made. "In considering size, the task is to create the optimum conditions for the group to achieve its purposes" (p. 33).

Some people favour large groups, while others are of the view that pair work gets the best out of everyone, depending on the circumstances. Davies (1999) believes that productivity is increased in small groups and shy students experience an increase in confidence. Biggs (2003) says there is "no set answer" on group size, "as it depends on the nature of the group task and the group dynamics" (p. 92). Johnson and Johnson (1999) argue that the smaller the group the better as the more difficult it is for students to hide in small groups, but that there is "no ideal size for a cooperative learning group" (p. 19). On the other hand, they note that as the size of the group increases, so too does the range of abilities, skills, expertise and diversity of opinions.

Selecting members for groups is an "intricate exercise" (Preston-Shoot, 1987, pp. 34 – 35). There is no "cut-and-dried response" (Bennett and Dunne, 1994, p. 114). Johnson and Johnson (1999) outline several options such as random assignment, teacher-selected groups or preferences i.e. based on favourite pastimes. Regardless of the methods chosen by the lecturer, it is important to be clear on the roles within the group environment, as lack of clarity can create problems such as lack of confidence or anxiety (Adair, 1986).

Inclusiveness is vital in group projects. Cohen (1994) argues that problems of non-participation can be avoided by "teachers' planning and preparation" through the use of roles (p. 87). Johnson and Johnson (1999) advise rotating roles so that each member of the group gets the opportunity to fill each role. Time management is also vital when preparing, delivering and working on group projects. Cohen (1994) stresses the importance of estimating how much time each phase of a project will take and advises making a time schedule and sticking to it.

At the start of term, a colleague at the University outlined the details of the research to students and invited students to take part if they wished. It was clear to students that participation would not impact on their marks and all surveys and feedback provided by participants were anonymous.

The idea of inviting a colleague to explain the project details was requested by the University's Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences Ethics Committee, which approved the Ethics application for this research. It is important that participants are informed about the aims and purposes of the research (Radnor 2002).

It is also important that students are aware of what is expected of them and also that their input into the project is not linked in any way to their results in the module.

Research questions

The main concern in this project surrounded the approach to teaching, the impact of group work on students and also ensuring that the group work was delivered in the fairest and optimal way.

The following were the project's main research questions:

How effective is the approach to teaching in terms of ensuring instructions are clear and that students can learn from the group work?

Are students engaged in group work and problem-based learning (PBL) in the module?

How should teaching approaches be changed in terms of dividing the class into teams for group work, assigning roles, deciding on optimal group size and ensuring the work is spread evenly, for the various group projects in the module?

This took the following questions into consideration:

- How is the class divided into groups, in a relevant and fair way?
- How are roles assigned?

- What is the list of roles and responsibilities and how is this explained from the start of the process?
- How is group work graded – is there a focus on individual and collective marks?

Methodology

This research featured a blend of qualitative and quantitative methods and data collection focused on triangulation (Cohen et al., 2006; Campbell and Fiske, 1959, cited in Cohen et al., 2006). It also sought to build on work carried out in this field by international academics including Biggs, Cohen and Jacques.

For each class, a lesson plan was prepared. A PowerPoint presentation, delivered in the first section of each class was also prepared. This included clear instructions for the particular group project to be discussed in that week's class. A diary was kept, which featured regular entries during the preparation and completion of the research. This, allied to the lecturer's observations, formed one data collection method. Two written surveys/feedback sheets – one at the end of each cycle – were completed and a focus group was facilitated at the end of cycle 2, in which students were given the opportunity to discuss the group work they had undertaken in the module.

In advance of the first week of cycle 1, the following was completed:

Lesson plans were prepared for each week during the first cycle where group work was part of the module

Clear criteria for group work were drawn up, to include roles and responsibilities, structure and marking criteria

Questions for the first survey were compiled

Clear assessment criteria for group work were outlined to all students i.e.:

What is expected of each student in group projects – what is each person's responsibility?

How are the marks divided – what marks are allocated for individual work within the group and what marks are allocated for the group collectively?

How are roles divided in the group, to ensure fairness?

A session on group work was presented to the class at the start of cycle 1 where the background and details of the project were explained. By the end of this session, each student was clear on his/her role and responsibility in the group work, the breakdown of marks – what marks were allocated for individual work and group work – and how roles were assigned for group projects in this module.

In week 6 (at the end of cycle 1), when some of the group projects were completed, a survey, on hard copy, was circulated. This gave students the opportunity to provide anonymous feedback on the group work conducted during cycle 1. Questions included a mix of open-ended and yes/no answers. They included:

- Do you think the group work on this module is adequately structured and that the marking scheme is suitable?
- Do you feel that you actively engaged in the group work in this module?
- Do you think there was an equal division of labour within groups in the group projects?
- How were roles assigned within your group?

The data gained from this questionnaire was analysed during week 7 of semester. It was then taken on board for the group work in the second cycle, during the second half of the semester (cycle 2), from week 8 onwards. The project then moved on to cycle 2, at the end of which a second survey was circulated; online via SurveyMonkey. It featured similar questions to cycle 1, whilst focusing on a new area, based on the feedback from cycle 1. A focus group was facilitated at the end of cycle 2. All students who took the module were invited to attend and engage in an open discussion on group work in this module, where the main research questions were explored.

Findings, data presentation and analysis

Raw data from the triangulated sources was collected: a handwritten survey at the end of cycle 1, an online survey at the end of cycle 2 and a focus group at the end of cycle 2. Raw data was also collected from a diary that was kept before and throughout the semester, which focused on the lecturer's observations and

Cycle 1 - Actions

Cycle 1 was undertaken in four classes in the first half of the semester, between January 27, 2015 and March 3, 2015. During that time, the lecturer changed her style of teaching in that the social constructivist method replaced the behaviourist approach and facilitation, team work and discussions played a central role (Jordan et al, 2008). It was felt that this was the best way that group work could be effectively completed and that facilitation was a key component of this. The lecturer also focused on clear communication and delivery of clear instructions on the group work. Clear lesson plans were prepared and PowerPoint presentations were delivered each week, while a discussion was opened in class, to ensure every student was clear about what was required of him/her individually and also in the groups.

Clarity of instructions is important for group work. In cycle 1, students were given the opportunity to work with whoever they wished and they were also given the chance to allocate roles to each other within each group i.e. one student was an editor, another student was a reporter etc, as long as each student had a role and roles were rotated (Johnson and Johnson, 1999). The group projects in this part of the module were not graded as it was felt it would not be fair to put the students under too much pressure at this early stage of their programme. Also, it was important that students could familiarise themselves with group work and enjoy the process, rather than be totally focused on marks. Feedback on this decision was desirable, in the survey completed at the end of cycle 1.

In cycle 1, the group work was done in class and out of class time was not required for the group projects. In total there were three group projects in cycle 1; one focused on writing news stories in pairs, another focused on writing and analysing news in groups of three, while the third project focused on role play for interviewing, in groups of three. Problem-based learning (PBL) was an important part of each of these group projects and groups took part in brainstorming sessions, with the lecturer as facilitator.

Each class was of 100 minutes' duration. Half of the group attended on Mondays and the other half attended on Tuesdays. This meant that there were no more than 18 students in any of the classes. This facilitated smaller groups, ranging in size between two and three. It also meant that group work could be facilitated more effectively than in larger groups.

Cycle 1 - findings, data presentation and analysis

A quarter of each class was spent on teaching and the remainder (75 minutes) was spent on facilitating group work. In previous group projects the lecturer had facilitated in other modules previously, the instructions could have been clearer and on occasion there were issues with time. Bearing this in mind, plans were put in place in advance of the start of term and a lesson plan was followed each week. Twenty-four of the 28 students who completed the feedback forms at the end of the cycle 1 either strongly agreed or agreed that the instructions for the group work were clear. Four students said they were not sure, but did not elaborate any further on this. 100% of students found the feedback helpful and 15 out of 16 respondents felt that there was sufficient time to complete the work in the time allocated (CR1). The feedback on this was also positive in the focus group. Respondents were happy that instructions were clear at all times and if anyone wanted to ask a question, they felt comfortable doing so. Student A said: "I like the way it was structured" (CR1).

In the diary, it was noted on March 10 (at the end of cycle 1) that it had been a good idea to deliver a presentation at the start of term outlining the details of the group work, the process and marking scheme. "The session on group work at the start was a good idea. It was important for students i.e. roles, what's expected of them etc." On that date, the diary also included the following comment: "I was happy with the feedback (feedback forms – cycle 1). Change to practice i.e. clarity in relation to group work has been achieved." (CR1).

Problem-based learning (PBL) was also a focus on each of the group assignments and it was felt that students adapted well to this. In the feedback forms at the end of cycle 1, 22 out of 27 respondents said they learned from each other. One student stated: "I enjoy group work. Each week I work with different people and I can learn from them" (CR2).

In cycle 1, it was decided to give students the opportunity to work with whoever they wished, but they could not work with the same classmate on more than one occasion. The group work in cycle 1 was not graded. In hindsight, this could have been addressed in a different way, as students who were friends worked together, while the international students were not integrated very well.

It was noted in the diary on February 10 (week 3 of cycle 1): "Maybe I should divide them into groups, randomly, as they tend to work with each other i.e. friends working together. Some groups then wander off

talking about other things.” In the diary on March 10 (after cycle 1), the following comment was included: “I need to mix gender and integrate international students better.” In the diary on April 21 (at the end of cycle 2), it was noted: “Randomly selecting students in groups worked well. I should do this more” (CR6).

In the feedback forms at the end of cycle 1, 26 of the 28 students said the division of the class into groups was done fairly (CR6). Two students were not sure if this was the case. However, when asked to elaborate further, one student responded: “I am nearly always paired with other girls. Mixing gender could be helpful.” Another student stated: “Maybe switching partners even more could help with overall participation in class.”

There should be a focus on more variety in the topics for the group projects, to ensure students are engaged. A number of students felt there should be more variety. One student stated that there should be “more variety in the type of work” (DR3).

Students who took part in the focus group felt that random selection is a good way of dividing up the class (CR6). Student B said: “I think there needs to be a gender balance. It’s important to get a mix of people, but still have it random.” Student B added: “In our class because we are so close, everyone is comfortable giving their opinions.” Student C said: “Randomly selecting groups was good. You worked with people you might not have talked to before.”

Feedback in relation to allocating roles within groups was also desirable. It was found that students were happy to allocate roles themselves. In the feedback forms, 20 students said that the roles should be decided by students, six said it should be decided by the lecturer, while two students said it could be either (CR5). In the focus group, Student B said: “The fact the students themselves decided who was to do what meant that it was a group effort and everyone was happy with their roles.”

Cycle 1 – Analysis and reflection

Having reviewed the data from cycle 1, it was felt that the lecturer’s approach to teaching worked well for the group work. The additional time taken to draw up clear lesson plans, the focus on clear instructions and on facilitating class work, as opposed to doing a huge amount of teaching, worked well. The feedback from students at the end of cycle 1 was very positive in this regard. However, some other issues emerged which need careful consideration. One relates to dividing the class into groups. While there were no concerns expressed in relation to integrating international students more into the group, it was something that needed to be addressed in cycle 2. While overall, students felt the division of the class into groups was fair, one student did say that gender balance should have been considered (CR6) and this was a valid point.

Another concern that was raised by some students was the division of labour (CR4). Some students felt that the division of work was uneven and that some were left to do the bulk of the work. Twenty-two students felt the division of work was equal; six were not sure and one student said it was not equal. Asked to highlight the most negative aspect of the group work, five students stated the unequal division of work. One student suggested: “If the lecturer made you include a list of who did what, so you would know that everyone contributed equally.”

The introduction of an individual reflective essay for the graded group project in cycle 2 is important. There was a group and individual mark for this group project. This was a change in approach for cycle 2.

Cycle 2 – actions

As with cycle 1, the roles, responsibilities and criteria for the team work projects in cycle 2 were clearly outlined in class each week. Each week, students were given the chance to ask questions in class, to ensure everyone was clear on what they were expected to do. In cycle 2, it was decided to continue to focus on clear structure and instructions on the part of the lecturer, adopting the Social Constructivist approach and focusing on PBL. It was also decided to zone in on two of the findings in particular from the first cycle and introduce two new actions: divide the class into groups through random selection (ensuring there is gender balance and that the five international students are integrated into the group) and introduce a reflective essay for the group project that was marked whilst allocating an individual mark for part of the group project. This was aimed at ensuring those who did the work were rewarded and a reflective essay, combined with the lecturer’s own observations in class, would help to establish who contributed to the work. One student felt that the work done by each student in the group projects could be more closely monitored (CR4): “In other modules, when group projects are completed a cover sheet is filled in detailing who has done what job in the process, it might be a good way of keeping track of progress in the group.”

Cycle 2 – findings, data presentation and analysis

Cycle 2 was carried out over three classes, between March 23, 2015 and April 21, 2015. In the first week, students worked in groups of between four and six and the groups were selected based on theme. Each student had to submit an idea for a profile they planned to write and those who focused on a theme of sport were grouped together and so on. Then in the second and third weeks, students were randomly divided into groups – with consideration given to gender balance and ensuring there was one international student in most groups – for a news day assignment over two weeks. This involved PBL in class on the first day, take-home work and a presentation on the second day. Students were required to submit a group assignment and also an individual reflective essay. On the first day, each group was given a topic and they were required to generate ideas relating to the topic and then deliver a group presentation on the second day.

Similar to cycle 1, it was felt that the approach to teaching worked well. The facilitation was important, particularly in the team project in the second and third weeks of the cycle. The feedback was largely positive: In the feedback form, one student stated: “I believe the marking scheme is suitable and that guidelines are clear” (CR1). In the focus group, Student A said (CR1): “I like the way it was structured. A certain amount of marks went to group presentations, but the individual mark and reflective essay was good, because if someone in the group didn’t do the work the whole group didn’t lose out on marks.” In the focus group (CR3), Student B said: “In nearly all of my group projects, there was at least one international student in it which I thought was good, because you learn a bit from them as well and you can help them out.”

It was felt that while the group work was done effectively overall, it appeared, from listening to the presentations, that some students didn’t put a lot of work into the marked assignment and this is something that should be considered, going forward. In the diary (CR3), the following was noted: “I felt the students were happy to communicate effectively via social media but not meet which is disappointing. If more marks were allocated to this, done over a few weeks, then perhaps students would put more work in. Also, this was the first and only graded group assessment; maybe students got into the habit of ungraded work and weren’t inclined to put enough work in.” It is clear, from experience in industry and academia, that a combination of social media and face-to-face meetings is vital for projects of this nature.

The findings from the focus group showed that the division of labour in the second cycle was equal, while the random selection also received positive feedback (CR6). For group work in this module, it was felt that groups of four or five (CR7) worked best, while students who took part in the focus group felt that groups of between three and five worked best (CR7).

Cycle 2 – Reflection

The approach to teaching worked well in cycle 2. The group size was larger in cycle 2 and it was felt that students adapted well. The PBL was effective, facilitation worked well and the introduction of random selection and an individual reflective essay was of benefit. Going forward, more graded group work could be introduced earlier in the semester. Groups should be randomly selected from the very start of cycle 1 and peer reviewing of group work should also be considered. The lecturer had been of the view that this would work better from second year of BA programmes onwards, but having gained good insight from the feedback in this project, the idea of introducing it from first year level onwards should be examined.

It should also be noted that international students usually join the class just after they arrived in Ireland and they can be isolated; there needs to be more integration into the class, even through an informal group discussion in the first week of term.

It is my argument that Social Constructivism should continue to be a focus, in practical-based modules like this, in future, as it worked very well here. Careful planning and delivery of lesson plans continued to be important; this was vital, as time management was key.

Implications and Recommendations

Eight main findings have been identified from this research project:

My argument is that a social constructivist approach to teaching, coupled with a focus on PBL, and clearly structured group projects, works very well and could be recommended for all practical modules in the University. The feedback from students in both surveys and in the focus group indicated this. The approach to teaching was the main focus at the outset and the findings showed that this approach worked well.

The behaviourist approach to teaching does not lend itself as well to a module of this nature, particularly as the module is more focused on practical work than on theory. It was clear that students were happy with

the approach and many students felt comfortable running ideas by the lecturer, tweaking ideas after they received feedback and also sharing ideas with colleagues in the groups.

Random selection should be employed from the start of term. The semester is very short – just 12 weeks – and the learning experience should be part of this from the very start. The idea of allowing students to choose team mates for group sessions is not recommended.

My argument, based on the research undertaken in this project, is that more variety should be introduced in the teaching for group projects, whilst taking the subject into account. While the feedback on the group work done in *Journalistic Writing for News 2* was positive and engagement was excellent, a small number of students felt that it became a bit mundane at times and that there should be more focus on variety i.e. a broader range of topics should have been included and a combination of in-class reporting and field reporting would have been desirable. It is important to adhere to the learning outcomes and this can still be achieved by employing a more varied approach. Consideration should be given to doing actual interviews with news sources and less role play. Also, the students found the more 'real' (i.e. reflective of work likely to be replicated in the workplace) assignments in cycle 2 to be more beneficial than the role play in cycle 1. Inviting guests from the political, social and sporting worlds into class would work well in this regard, as students could carry out interviews and write news stories based on that. Currently, this is done at second year level, but feedback from industry has, on occasion, noted that students lack confidence when doing interviews with sources, when they go on placement in third year. This would require additional resources.

While it was not raised by students, it is felt that more effort should be made to integrate international students from the start of the semester, both in terms of briefing them on news and current affairs in the Irish media and also ensuring they are placed in groups with Irish students and not paired together in isolation. It is important to liaise with the international office in the university to establish how many international students take the various modules and also to find out details of their countries of origin and the media and news systems there. Clear, coherent lesson plans worked well in this project and equally a clear plan on integrating students from overseas could work equally well. This is an issue that has occurred in other subjects, so communication across faculty is recommended. It was encouraging to note that the mature students in the class blended in very well for all projects.

Group projects should be allocated marks earlier in the module. One group project was marked in this module – in the last two weeks – and several students didn't put a lot of out-of-class time in, as they were in the habit of doing work that was not marked and did not take it seriously enough. It should also be considered that the last two weeks of terms is a very busy time for students who are completing assignments across a multitude of modules. Also, given that group work is a substantial part of this module, it is appropriate that a greater portion of the marks be allocated for it. The group projects should incorporate a group mark and also an individual mark. The group project that was marked was worth 20%. If more marks were awarded, it is my argument that students would have invested more time and commitment to the work.

Writing a reflective essay for group work is important and the content of this, allied to the lecturer's observations, can play a role in ensuring that marks are distributed fairly. It also gives students the opportunity to reflect on the learning experience and how the project worked for them. It will also indicate how the work was divided within each group, while it will give the lecturer the opportunity to establish how teaching methods can be improved.

Consultation with colleagues is important in deciding if peer marking should become part of the marking scheme for group work in this and other modules. It has worked well for more senior classes, but has not been used much at first year level in the past.

If the right environment is created, then the students will respond. By creating clear, coherent structures, students were happy to immerse themselves in group work, as they were clear about what was required of them. The lecturer is responsible for ensuring that guidelines for group work are clearly structured. It is the lecturer's role to ensure there is clarity across the board, to encourage participation and also to ensure those who work hard are rewarded through the marking process.

Conclusion

Elliott (1991) sums up the aim of action research as "to improve practice rather than to produce knowledge" (p. 49). Coleman and Lumby (cited in Middlewood et al, 1999) say that there are two aspects of action research: to promote reflection among practitioners and to bring about change.

The lecturer's approach to teaching and the structure of group work in this module shifted as the action research process evolved as the main research questions were addressed, focusing on approaches to teaching, the impact of group work on students and the fairest way of delivering group work.

McNiff (2014) notes:

“One event transforms into another in perpetual motion: the oak tree emerges from the acorn where it has lain phylogenetically dormant throughout history” (pp. 15 – 16).

The social constructivist approach to teaching is suitable for this subject and worked well for this particular group of students. Students were clear about their roles and responsibilities for each individual group project.

The level of engagement with group work in this module, overall, was good. Much has been achieved in relation to the structure of the group work, but more progress can be made. For example, the group selection process needs to be more rigorous, while the marking scheme should be reassessed.

The content in the module is interesting and adheres to the module's learning outcomes. However, some feedback from students indicates that there could be more variety in the content and processes and this is taken on board. One change that is desirable is a focus on a variety of themes in the various group assignments i.e. instead of focusing mainly on work in the classroom involving just lecturer and students, one option that could be explored is to invite guests from the community into the classroom who students could interview. Feedback from other students in other years and across a range of modules would be of benefit in this regard also, as it is difficult to draw conclusions based on one research project. It is also noted that students filled out the handwritten feedback forms in cycle 1 (28 students) in larger numbers than those who filled out the electronic feedback forms in cycle 2 (14 students).

This project has sharpened the lecturer's preparation techniques and has highlighted the value of careful preparation and delivery of lesson plans. Keeping a reflective diary was also a worthwhile exercise, for this project. Reflection is often neglected in teaching at third level, such are the academic, teaching and administrative demands. Some of the lessons learned in this project will be adapted for other modules going forward, as the aim to continue to improve teaching methods and approach to teaching will continue.

Having completed this project, it is agreed that “Action research is a powerful tool for change and improvement at the local level” (Cohen et al, 2006, p. 226) in that it is a valuable and flexible method. Drinan, cited in Boud and Feletti, 1997, says that constant reflection on our observations can lead to an improved learning environment and also enhances our understanding of how we learn.

Action research can be learned only by doing it (McNiff, 2014). Feedback is important and is part of the learning process for all. All feedback is part of a bigger picture and as part of the plan to ensure that teaching is as effective as possible, so that, ultimately, the learning experience for students is enhanced.

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Appendix A

List of Data Records

Data Record Number	Data Record Time	Data Record Description
DR1	Lesson plans (cycle 1)	Lesson plans for classes delivered on January 26/27, February 2/3, February 9/10 and March 2/3, when group work was part of the module.
DR2	PowerPoint presentations (cycle 1)	PowerPoint presentations for classes delivered on January 26/27, February 2/3, February 9/10 and March 2/3.
DR3	Student feedback forms (cycle 1)	Twenty-eight handwritten student feedback forms, completed at the end of cycle 1. There were 10 multiple choice questions, 10 Q & A questions and a suggestions box at the end where students were invited to outline any suggested improvements for group work in this module.
DR4	Diary	Collection of my observations and reflections before, during and after this Action Research Project.
DR5	Lesson plans (cycle 2)	Lesson plans for classes delivered on March 23/24, April 13/14 and April 20/21, when group work was part of the module.
DR6	PowerPoint presentations (cycle 2)	PowerPoint presentations for classes delivered on March 23/24, April 13/14 and April 20/21.
DR7	Student feedback forms (cycle 2)	Fourteen student feedback forms, completed electronically, at the end of cycle 2. There were 15 Q & A questions and a suggestions box at the end where students were invited to outline any suggested improvements for group work in this module.
DR8	Focus group (end of cycle 2)	Recording of a focus group carried out at the end of cycle 2, on Monday, April 27, in which five students took part.

DR9	Research Ethics application form	Ethics application form which was submitted to the University's Ethics committee, as a result of which approval for this study was granted.
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Appendix B

JM4012 Journalistic Writing for News 2 (abridged)

SYLLABUS:

News stories based on the inverted pyramid: You will write hard news stories, based on the inverted pyramid.

Building up sources: You will build up sources and apply this to journalism.

Interviewing techniques: You will focus on interviewing skills in journalism.

Writing news stories from speeches and press releases: You will write news stories from speeches and press releases.

Writing reviews: You will write reviews of various events, suitable for publication in magazines, newspapers or online media outlets.

LEARNING OUTCOMES:

Journalistic Writing 2 follows on from Journalistic Writing 1 in Semester 1. By the end of this module, students should be able to:

Write and structure a news story

Apply the principles of accuracy and good grammar to news and feature writing

Write a range of news stories and feature stories suitable for a variety of publications

Develop news gathering and news writing skills through a combination of team work and individual assignments

Understand the principles of writing a breaking news story, news feature, short profile and review

Evaluate the coverage of news and current affairs in the media in Ireland

Develop interviewing techniques for journalism

JM4012 SCHEDULE for AY2014/15

LABS

Week	Topic	Content
1	Feedback from Semester 1 News Group discussion	Review of Semester 1 news writing Style Book revisited Writing skills News analysis - coverage of issues in the public domain
2	Writing news stories	Writing from press releases, speeches, information

3	Writing news stories: Breaking news	Writing from press releases, speeches, information; Breaking news stories. Impact of the internet, breaking news and online journalism
	Grammar/punctuation exercise	Grammar/punctuation exercise
4	LAB ASSESSMENT 1 (15%)	Lab assessment: Writing a news story, Grammar/Style Book (15%)
5 & 6	Interviewing techniques – news and features	In-lab interviews; Generating news angles from interviews; Writing well-structured news stories based on interviews
7	Generating news ideas – community news pieces/breaking news stories. Getting published	Coverage of politics on a local and national level – specific examples. Local authorities, courts, tribunals. Community events. Building sources ** Details of community news assignment outlined – deadline week 11 (15%)
8	Profiles, opinion pieces, colour articles, editorials	Differences between news and colour. Main components. Analysis of profile/opinion/colour/editorial articles. Style/subject/audience. **Details of profile assignment outlined – deadline week 12 (20%)
	Exercise based on lab	Proposal for a profile (250 words)
9	Profiles	Profiles – in-lab preparation. Writing skills
10 & 11	Team project (20%)	Teamwork – generating ideas for a publication. Students appointed to various positions and decisions taken – newsroom style. Cultivating contacts. Ideas for stories. Filling pages. Prioritising stories
12		Profile presentations and Q & A. Writing skills. Recap

Assessment:

This module is examined via continuous assessment.

Lab assessments:

Week 4: Writing a news story/Grammar (15%)

Weeks 10 & 11: Team project (20%)

Week 11: Community news story (15%)

Week 12: Profile (20%)

Attendance and participation (5%)

