
CAN AN ENTIRE PAPER BE PROJECT-BASED GROUP WORK?

Hunter Hatfield: *Department of English and Linguistics, University of Otago*
<hunter.hatfield@otago.ac.nz>

Abstract

Most students who are linguistics majors will not become professional linguists. Therefore, teaching of linguistics should be focused explicitly upon building the general skills of a liberal education that students will most benefit from, rather than only discipline-specific material. With this in mind, the university's course on first language acquisition was reorganized so that all instruction was based around group-oriented projects. The hope was that such a course would (1) develop students' skills with group work and research planning, (2) motivate learning through frequent interaction and (3) increase student interest due to ownership of content. For purposes of comparison, the course covered similar content as a previous version that used lectures and an extended class project. Evaluation of the course is performed through comparison of assessment results across years, student feedback on an extended survey and the instructor's experiences. Within the limitations of the study, the redesigned course did show evidence of interactive learning and team-work skills while understanding of linguistic content persisted. Moreover, Honours students in the subsequent year continued to practise techniques developed in this paper.

1. Why a Course Based upon Projects?

LING 318, Child Language, is a third-year course on first language acquisition. Most students taking the class are linguistics majors, though a small number of students come from education or psychology. Despite the fact that most students are majors, the single course they must have taken before LING 318 is an introduction to linguistics, so only some basics of phonetics, phonology, morphology, and syntax can be assumed. The current paper discusses the redesign of a lecture-based 2012 version of the class into an entirely project-based 2014 version to identify pluses and minuses of such a design.

The 2012 course used a combination of lectures and a significant project. Students read Eve Clark's (2009) *First Language Acquisition* throughout the semester. This can be a difficult text for students, and so lectures were designed around providing background material and explicating difficult concepts. For the first few weeks of the course, students attended 2-hour lectures with periodic tutorials also lead by the lecturer, myself. After this introductory period, I would lecture for the first hour, and a group of students would do a presentation on the project for the second hour. The course project was to design a test that could triage 3-year-olds into two groups, one at high risk for developmental dyslexia and a second at low risk. Dyslexia was chosen as a topic for two primary reasons. First, it is a research interest of mine and so was a chance to integrate teaching and research. Secondly, many linguistics majors do not have a chance to apply their theoretical knowledge to a question that is of immediate consequence to others. By starting the project with accounts from individuals with dyslexia about its impact on their lives, the hope was to increase interest in the material.

Assessment of the instructor-led content was based upon two take-home essay tests. The goal was to measure the student's ability to integrate ideas into a coherent theory about some aspect of child language development. As such, a successful response required using concepts from multiple chapters of the text, as well as ideas from lecture and tutorial. The focus therefore was not on testing specific material but on ability to use such material to provide a well-reasoned explanation of linguistic behaviour. Students had approximately one week to write and submit their essays. The project on dyslexia initiated eight weeks before it was to be finished. The second hour of each lecture session was dedicated to presentations from student groups who had researched some part of the topic. Students presented on topics such as the experience of dyslexia, proposed causes of dyslexia, and common methods of linguistic

research with children. The project concluded with an individual research proposal that contained a literature review and methodology for how they would perform the triage test.

Even though instructor-led lectures and tutorials composed the majority of time, the project appeared to take focus for most. One student completed an Honours dissertation based upon her dyslexia project the following year. In discussion with students about how to improve the 2012 paper, one student asked, ‘perhaps the whole paper could be the project?’ and another student suggested making the project more real-world by presenting the results to a support group for dyslexia. Whenever the course came up in conversation, it was invariably the dyslexia project that was mentioned. None of the content about phonological, morphosyntactic, semantic and pragmatic acquisition was discussed.

There were broader motivators as well. For one, most of the linguistics majors are not future professional linguists. It is highly unlikely that they will need to know in five to ten years whether semantic features help explain word learning or whether three-year-olds can comprehend passives. Rather, they are acquiring something more general, some set of cognitive, social and practical abilities. I am not arguing that child language is not worth studying, but that child language should be taught so as to focus on those general abilities. (Barnett & Coate 2005; Conrad & Dunek 2012; Whitehead, 1929: 26; *inter alia*). The current course redesign focuses upon developing these skills using linguistics, rather than treating linguistic knowledge as the sole end with “liberal” skills as fortunate additions.

The final motivation for a course redesign came from learning theory and learning studies. The more that students are engaged (Barnett & Coate 2005; Tagg 2003) in active tasks, rather than passive (Applebee, 1996), answering a question that they asked (Entwistle 2009), the more successful the learning outcome. In order to create such a student-directed, active and engaged environment, a collaborative-learning strategy was used (Dörnyei 1997). In one review of 168 studies on learning patterns, cooperative learning was discovered to be substantially more effective than competitive or individualistic learning. Examining effect sizes from this meta-analysis, a student who would have a score at the 53rd percentile for individual learning could be predicted to score at the 70th percentile learning cooperatively (Johnson, Johnson & Smith 1998; see also Jones & Jones 2008). In the course redesign then, groups would be created whose task was to answer some question about first language acquisition. Lectures did still occur. Indeed, the

result was that just less than 50% of the class time was composed of lectures. However, the lectures were never an end-in-themselves. They were always written to serve the group work; they were primers for the primary class activity of collaborative, active group learning.

Therefore, the skills that I hoped students would take away from the paper were those of collaborative work and independent learning – learning how to learn and teach others. The topic of first language acquisition is, in a sense, incidental. It was a course with a small enough cohort to make the design practical, challenging material, and natural ways to apply the knowledge, such as with dyslexia or childhood education. The redesigned course was created so as to be comparable with the earlier, more traditional, 2012 version. However, there are limitations to this comparability. In an ideal study, for instance, independent graders should assess essays from both years. Unfortunately, the 2012 version was not taught as part of a research project. Essays were collected, marked, and returned. As such, the current essay cannot firmly establish that a group project method, for instance, is superior. Instead, it will assess what the experiences of such a method are for the students and provide some indications regarding students' linguistic and liberal learning.

2. Design of the New Course

To assess the results of redesigning LING 318, Child Language, the outputs needed to be similar to the previous incarnation. While there is certainly a place for working on one relatively narrow topic, such as dyslexia, for an extended period, I thought that students would benefit from a broader exposure to the topic than just dyslexia. In exploring existing designs of linguistics courses and research, it was common to see projects along with lectures, where a project was an application of ideas from the lectures. However, the idea for this paper was to make 'everything' project-based, using projects to learn the main theories. It was also possible to find classes with a single, semester-long project, but I was aiming for formative, staged projects where people learn how to do projects iteratively. Finally, whatever happened must include a set of activities that a larger group (likely over 20) could perform together within constraints of lecture spaces.

Ultimately, I created a course with four smaller projects and a final exam. The first project was highly scaffolded. I supplied the research questions for every group, gave instructions of how groups should function, provided the

primary text for their learning, and set out guidelines for what they should supply to each team member in the group. By the fourth project, however, the course outline for three weeks stated simply ‘what you choose.’ Therefore, in a sequence I removed the scaffolding of how groups should work and the questions they should ask (Spronken-Smith & Harland 2009).

The core text was still Eve Clark’s (2009) textbook; the final project was still to design a method of triaging 3-year-olds at risk for dyslexia; and the final exam contained a selection of the same questions that had been used for the 2012 take-home tests. Therefore, many of the key assessment outputs were the same. However, the teaching style was quite different. Would a project-based style of learning improve those outputs while making gains in student engagement and self-directed learning?

2.1 *Projects Overview*

The first three projects were targeted at learning generally about child language, covering (1) speech perception and production, (2) word learning and (3) syntax, respectively. This represents a sacrifice in breadth. However, if they were going to forget specific content, then little was lost, long-term. In these three projects, students were supposed to learn the skills for the paper and much of the content. In each of the projects 1-3, I presented a large **topic question** that guided the entire project. These questions were preparatory for the questions they would eventually see on the final exam. They also gained research experience through the three projects to get ready for project 4. In the first project, they focused upon the text and reading research articles of their choosing to answer a question. In the second project, they read the text and research articles of their choosing, and provided a new research question. In the third project, they read the text and research articles of their own choosing, and provided both a research question and a methodology. Students then demonstrated (1) the skills they had acquired in Project 4, where they researched dyslexia the way they saw fit, and (2) the knowledge they had acquired about first language acquisition in the final exam essays.

2.2 *Project 1: Speech Perception and Production*

The focus of Project 1 was to examine how to work as a **home group** and read primary research articles. I wrote a very broad research topic. As it was so broad, I also broke it down into seven so-called **sub-questions** that, if each were answered, would provide the knowledge to answer the overall topic question. From the first week of the semester, they were put into groups (randomly).

Each group was responsible for its own answer to the topic question, using the sub-questions as keys. Each person in the group was to become an expert on their own question. For instance, one person in the group would be responsible for learning whether babbling has any relation to early words. Another person would be responsible for learning what phonetic sounds infants can perceive. They would read the text and articles to find out the answer and then come back to teach the group.

The student was not alone, however, in becoming an expert. There were four groups of 6-7 members, implying that four students were researching the same topic. These four worked to become an expert on their sub-question (such as babbling to early words), a so-called **expert group**. The expert group operated in a pairs and square arrangement (Hughes & Townley 1994). In this arrangement, they brought possible articles to a class session. A pair from the expert group would choose one of the articles and read it. They would come back and discuss the article with each other, coming to some agreement on its findings and theory. That pair would then teach the other pair in their expert group about the article. Each person in the group was now an 'expert,' and so they would go back to their larger home group and teach those members the answer to their question. All of this finished by the home group giving a 10-minute presentation answering the topic question. Critically, the expert group functioned as a partial replacement for the material that had previously been provided in lecture. Each student had three other students to help her with difficult parts of the text, as well as using outside literature to supplement that text. If a student could increase their ability to learn material and support others, that will be a long-term beneficial skill. They practise becoming experts.

During all of this, I had two main tasks. The first was to prepare students to be experts on their sub-question. I used a couple of lectures to survey the topic content. I also gave a couple of lectures / practicums on searching for literature online and on reading articles. The second task was facilitating this rather complex arrangement.

I also provided requirements for how the groups should interact. They should bring a teaching handout -- a set of notes about the article that was written in such a way as to share with the partner. This handout could then form the basis of a fruitful discussion to understand the article. Similarly, when one pair taught the other pair, they should have a written handout of teaching material. The goal was to learn and discuss with colleagues, not chat about the topic. These handouts, as well as reflections, formed the basis of their group

notebook. The group notebook, particularly for the first three projects, was the primary assessment. If they were reading the articles, making notes to share, and actively reflecting upon the content, then they earned strong marks for the project. While the group notebooks were collated, each person was assessed individually for their contribution. (Academic Development Group 2006; Jones & Jones 2008).

2.3 Project 2: Word Learning

Project 2 was intended to be one step away from the very structured project 1 towards the entirely student-driven Project 4. The primary difference in organization of Project 2 was that, rather than my giving the list of sub-questions on the word-learning topic, the students would submit something that they were interested in regarding word learning, and then I would place them with others interested in something similar to form an expert group. The second difference between the two projects was that, rather than giving a group presentation at the end of the project, each student would write a short literature review that lead to a research question.

These seemingly small changes introduced significant confusion, however. When breaking it all down into steps, confusion is understandable. (1) I give an overall word learning topic question (which is a set up towards the final exam). (2) Each student submits a possible sub-question which I used to form expert groups. (3) With the expert groups formed, the students then had to come up with their 'real' sub-question together to resolve differences. Some groups got stuck here for multiple sessions and I eventually negotiated a question for the group. (4) Finally, each individual proposes a research question in their essay. It is easy to see how question after question could confuse.

During this project, I again led several sessions, including one practicum on experimental design and two overall lectures on word learning. Again, the students kept a project notebook of their reflections on the content and their handouts for discussion and teaching.

2.4 Project 3. Phrasal syntax

Project 3 was the next step towards total freedom on how they would conduct research in Project 4. While the focus in Projects 1 and 2 was on bringing in primary literature and teaching others, the focus on project 3 was on looking at existing knowledge, formulating a novel research question, and proposing a methodology to test that question. Therefore, the home groups and expert groups, with pairs and square arrangements, were gone. Instead people were

simply placed together and their job was to be a sounding board for other group members' research ideas.

I lectured several times during this brief project, with one lecture at the start on common child language research methodologies and three lectures on the acquisition of syntax, based out of the textbook. After this series of lectures, the groups met a couple of times to present their research ideas to their group and get help on designing the methodology. The individual kept a brief notebook of these interactions and their reflections on the topic. They also submitted an essay containing their research question and a method.

2.5 Project 4: Diagnostic Test for Dyslexia

In Project 4, students worked in groups to come up with a method of identifying children at risk for dyslexia. Similar to Project 3, they worked with only one group. There were only two requirements: (1) each student would turn in their proposal. (2) The group would document a plan for how they would research the issue and follow that plan. Assessment of this last group notebook would have no additional criteria from me. If they followed their own research plan, they would receive full marks. I lectured the first day of the project to introduce them to dyslexia and some contemporary researchers. I did not lecture again for the two and a half week period of the project.

The hope was that students would combine their practice working in groups from projects 1 and 2 with their practice forming research questions and methods from Project 3 to successfully complete Project 4. If they could do so, with very little present involvement from me, then it would be an overall successful semester.

Table 1: Overview of Course Designs Across Years

WEEK	2012 COURSE		2014 COURSE	
	CONTENT	ASSESSMENT	TASKS	PROJECT
1	Clark Ch. 1; 2-hour lecture		Clark Chs. 1&2; Lecturer gives topic question and sub-questions	Intro
2	Clark Ch. 2; 2-hour lecture		Clark Chapter 3; form home groups and expert groups; student experts do literature review	Speech
3	Clark Ch. 3; 2-hour lecture		Teaching of articles within expert group using pairs and squares	Speech

WEEK	2012 COURSE		2014 COURSE	
	CONTENT	ASSESSMENT	TASKS	PROJECT
4	Clark Ch. 4; 2-hour lecture	Annotated Bibliography due before Presentation	Integrate expert information in home groups; home group presentation	Speech
5	Clark Ch. 5; 1-hour lecture	Dyslexia Group 1 Presentation	Lecturer gives topic question; Clark, Chapters 4 & 6; students create sub-questions themselves; start literature review	Word learning
6	Clark Ch. 6; 1-hour lecture	Dyslexia Group 2 Presentation	Teaching others in expert group with shared sub-question learning	Word
7	Clark Ch. 7; 1-hour lecture	Dyslexia Group 3 Presentation; Take-Home Test 1 Due	Integrate expert information in home groups and develop a research question	Word learning
8	Clark Ch. 8; 1-hour lecture	Dyslexia Group 4 Presentation	Lecturer gives topic question; read Clark, chapters 7, 9 and 10. Students choose area of syntax and are placed in groups	Syntax
9	Clark Ch. 9; 1-hour lecture	Dyslexia Group 5 Presentation	Discuss research question and methods in group	Syntax
10	Clark Ch. 10; 1-hour lecture	Dyslexia Group 6 Presentation	Write essay with research question and methods	Syntax
11	Clark Ch. 11; 1-hour lecture	Dyslexia Group 7 Presentation; Take-Home Test 2	Students placed in groups; they decide all activities	Dyslexia
12	Clark Ch. 12; 1-hour lecture	Dyslexia Project Due	Group-designed activities	Dyslexia
13	Clark Ch. 14; 1-hour lecture		Dyslexia research question and methods essay due.	Wrap-Up

2.6 Course Evaluation Survey

An end-of-semester course evaluation was conducted. As part of a research project, ethics approval was obtained, and students had to provide consent for their responses to be used. The questionnaire consisted of a collection of Likert items (scale 1 to 5) and open-ended questions. The survey asked for students to rate:

1. Their view of the rate of absenteeism in the current paper relative to their other papers.
2. Interest in the topic at the start of the semester.
3. Interest in the topic at the end of the semester.
4. The number of lectures, as well as an open-ended question on why more, if more are desired.
5. Whether the group work was successful.
6. If it was not successful, an open-ended question asked why.
7. Whether the group work was enjoyable.

The evaluation ended with a series of open-ended questions including:

1. Did you contribute to the course as you wished?
2. Should the course be continued with this structure?
3. Should other courses follow this model?
4. Do you feel you learned more in this paper than other 300-level papers?
5. A space asking for any other comments.

The paper had been redesigned to increase engagement through a collaborative learning curriculum, and so many questions were targeted towards measuring those features. Other questions requested that the student make comparisons of the collaborative method against other courses that did not use such a paradigm. The results of this evaluation will be discussed as related points arise.

3. Evaluation of the Course

Evaluation of the course will be based upon four items. (1) Comparing marks and quality of work across the two years that the course has been run, (2) my own experience as the instructor of both classes, (3) observations of group interactions and (4) student feedback on the course.

3.1 *Quality of Work across Years*

The same essay questions that were used in 2012 for take-home tests were used again in 2014 for the final exam. Students were not aware of this fact during the semester. In 2012, students were given the questions and had to turn in a paper one week later. In 2014, students were given the questions one week before the final exam. During the exam, they could take all their notes and texts into the session, but had to write the essays during this time. Overall, the 2014 situation should have been more stressful as there was only a single 2-hour session in which they could write the essays. The same rubric was used for essay marking in both years.

In 2012, the overall mark on take-home test 1 was 79 and the mark on take-home test 2 was 84. While the 2014 exam did draw questions from both tests, very few students in 2012 actually answered the particular question from test 2, so it is difficult to compare that test with the 2014 final exam. The average mark on the exam in 2014 was an 81. Qualitatively, most of what students stated in answering the questions was accurate. Large-scale misunderstanding was uncommon. Where students lost points was in leaving out part of the required answer. Similarly, the average mark for the dyslexia project was 80 in 2012, but 83 in 2014. This was the case despite the fact that the 2014 students had a little over two weeks to complete the project, while the 2012 students had 8 weeks, where some work was required through group presentations, repeated dedication of time in lecture to the project, and an annotated bibliography.

In sum, all evidence points to the conclusion that students in the 2014 paper learned the linguistic content of the course at least as well as the students in the previous, more traditional format. The primary goal of the redesign was to focus on the larger take-away skills of self-designed learning and group work, so that if linguistic learning did not decrease and broader skills increased, then the design can be said to have met its purposes.

3.2 *Student Perception of Learning*

There is no direct way to compare learning in this course versus a broad selection of 300-level lecture-based courses. However, the survey did ask students what they believed their comparative learning to be. Of the 18 responses to this question, four believed they learned more or the same in the other lecture-based advanced courses they had taken. Comments included

- ☐ Because I'm more used to traditional format, I get more out of them
- ☐ About the same and not sure the process really helped
- ☐ Both. I keep all notes, textbooks, etc.
- ☐ Not sure compared to a religion paper, but I liked it [the current paper] better.

The other 14 of 18 responses believed that the current method was somehow more rewarding to them. Some of these responses focused upon skills. Such comments include:

- ☐ Skills, yes; information about the same
- ☐ I think I've learned more about people
- ☐ Since we did lots of researching, we know what to do if we want to know more about.

A number explicitly stated that content and skills from the current course would stick longer. Such comments include:

- ☐ I do think this paper will affect me more in the long run
- ☐ I always forget lecture material once the semester is done, but I feel that this class enabled me to engage with the material more so I will remember it more
- ☐ Yes, I learned way more in this paper and I def. will remember more of this. To be honest, I don't even remember anything from the other paper.

A few students directly tied possible better outcomes to their learning style:

- ☐ Will learn more; interacting with other people to share and explain ideas requires you to have an understanding of it

- ☐ I learn through interaction and doing rather than listening to a lecture or reading. In this way I found I learnt a lot more
- ☐ I feel I learned more from this one and would remember this one more as I actually had to really apply the knowledge to real-life situations (children) and design experiments.

Finally, one student stated, ‘I think I’ve learnt skills more useful for further study in this class. I think this style does make the knowledge more my own & therefore I’d be more likely to remember it.’ Just such an outcome was the goal of the course redesign. Most detailed content will be lost over time, and so it is a set of cognitive abilities that the student is gaining from a linguistics major.

Students were asked directly if other courses should follow this model and if the current course should continue along these lines. The most common answer was a qualified yes. Continue, but make fixes. Possible changes included more lectures, less shuffling of groups and a better match between assessment percentages and work.

The current version of the paper gave very little weight to the output of the early projects. If the student was actively participating in the group, represented by the group notebook, then the early projects would have very little long-term impact on their final mark. The hope was to decrease stress on the student until they’ve had some weeks to gain requisite skills. The flip-side of a low-cost assessment is what some students felt was a low-benefit assessment: significant work that does not strongly affect a result.

On top of the ‘yes, but’ answers were simple yes answers with reasons that matched the hopes of the paper. These students believed the current course offered interactive learning, chances to engage, development of skills for other areas, including confidence for the future and jobs, and was more realistic towards a work situation. One student did declare, ‘Yes! This has literally been the best paper ever!’ Regrettably, only one student was this effusive with praise for the course design.

3.3 *Student Experience in the Course*

Did the course design successfully encourage interaction, engagement and student ownership of their own learning? There are several ways to assess this, and the answer is mixed. As already discussed, several students specifically mentioned interaction as a key part of the course.

Additionally, the survey asked students their interest level at the start of the course and their interest level at the end, with a 1 being low interest and 5, high. The rating changed from 4.1 to 4.4. The lowest rating for any student for the end was 'neutral' (2 students). There was a strong ceiling effect with 55% of the respondents indicating they started at the highest level, so that no improvement was possible. In a pair-wise comparison, 8 students moved up over the course of the semester and 4 moved down. In sum, the course appears to have had a neutral to positive effect on student interest.

Another way to assess engagement is simple presence in class. It is not traditional at the university to keep attendance at lectures, a practice which I followed. However, I would estimate that on average 25% of the students would be absent on any given day. This could increase to almost 50% on the worst days. In a class based upon each student bringing their own contribution, this can be debilitating. On multiple occasions, only a single individual in an expert group of four would appear.

The major question is whether the class design contributed to this situation. Are the students specifically skipping this class because of its design? There are no absolute numbers with which to assess, but my impression is that the absenteeism was typical of classes at the university. I asked colleagues in many other programmes, and they all reported similar or worse numbers. I also asked the students in the class survey if they thought absenteeism was higher for this paper than others. Using a 5 point Likert scale with 5 being better than other classes and 1 being worse, the average guess from students was 3.75, and only a single individual said it was worse. Part of the purpose for the course redesign, however, was to increase student participation. The hope was that if students were actively engaged -- asking their own research questions, socially committing to a classmate to contribute -- then they would be more present than normal. This *may* have occurred. A student knows they are responsible for something and so attends a class they might have skipped if it was a relatively passive lecture. On the other hand, it equally well might have occurred that the student had not yet done what they were intending to do, and so they chose to skip, rather than show up empty-handed. In short, this group project-based class had typical attendance for papers at the university.

The major factor, however, in determining the student experience in the class was the particular groups students found themselves in at any given time. Students rated group work success at 3.7 with the most popular rating of 4, and the enjoyment of group work at 3.4. When asked why group work was not successful at times, far and away, the answer was non-contributing group

members. Other team members did not bring anything to the class, did not respond to emails, or simply did not appear in class at all. Other reasons were given including shyness (3 responses), a noisy room (1 response) and lack of group direction (2 responses).

An additional question asked if the student themselves contributed the way that they wished. The most revealing answers indicated that they would contribute less if the topic or group was less interesting. Therefore, a cycle could occur in which a group was not working well, so a student would start contributing less, so the group would not work as well....

It is difficult to overestimate the importance of group dynamics to a course such as this. As a group moderator for half of the class, several group patterns were noticed.

1. Some groups flourished and were a true joy to watch. The highly functioning groups could be seen clustered together, everyone trading ideas, listening, and appearing to enjoy the process. Such engagement is extremely hard to generate in the best of lectures. If such groups were always the norm, then it would be easy to declare the current course design a true winner.
2. Another type of group was the one where the members were mostly present, but not very engaged with one another. One team member might sit on their computer typing, another looking over notes, and periodically, they would exchange an idea. This seemed to be a combination of personality type and preparation.
3. A very different issue could occur with what I will call the Excelling student. If one student in a group was operating at a higher level than the other students in their group, then the feedback for the excelling student was limited. There were instances in which a student would bring quite a set of sophisticated ideas, but the other group members were unable to effectively give feedback. This could only feel like a disappointment for such a student.
4. The final group pattern I noticed were the 'we've already done it' group. That group were working together, but they would have exchanged an idea or notes through email before the class session and therefore feel there was nothing more to discuss. Sometimes, such a group settled too quickly on something plausible, rather than truly striving for the best solution.

How can an instructor or a course design maximise the potential for the first time of group? There are several possibilities. First, even though the point is to increase independence, quick action from the instructor could assist. If a group is stuck on one matter due to simple disagreement, step in and negotiate a solution before multiple sessions are lost. Similarly, if it becomes clear that one group member is being abandoned by non-contributing members, move them to another group quickly. The way groups are put together can alleviate some issues. In the current paper, most early groups were randomly put together, except that expert groups were based upon interest. The final project groups, however, were tuned by myself to handle issues encountered during the semester. Criteria for the last groups included putting previously successful groups together again, connecting at least two Excelling students together, and distributing the frequently absent students around the groups. Many such adjustments can only be done after the course has progressed.

One further matter must be mentioned before leaving this topic. There are potential face threats (Brown & Levinson 1987) in all classroom interaction. However, in a class such as the one being described here, those potential face threats increase. The student is asked to frequently put themselves forth, presenting in writing and in verbal interaction their understanding of some difficult topic they barely know. These opinions can then be criticised. An argument can be made that such issues will be commonplace in work situations later so that getting practise negotiating face threats in a comparatively safe classroom environment is a good thing, but it makes them no less real. Time spent on developing team skills is rarely time wasted.

4. Final Evaluation

The goal of the course redesign was to increase a student's ability to learn independently by having repeated responsibilities towards other students. This groupwork-based project course does not work miracles. For a good number of students, the interactive, research-focused design appears to have been very rewarding. The understanding of content did not dip, and it may have improved. The argument for improvement is based upon similar results to the previous year under more difficult conditions. While the 2012 class had over eight weeks to do the dyslexia project, the 2014 class only had a little over two weeks, yet their proposals were of similar quality. Similarly, the 2012 class were able to spend as many hours as they wished over a week working

on an essay. The 2014 class produced just as high quality essays on the same topics in the more stressful examination environment. Moreover, several of the students did indeed seem to develop some of the independence skills and group work skills that were the primary goal of the course. This is most clearly seen in successful completion of the dyslexia project where I provided very little guidance. This was corroborated by the student survey. After all, after university education has ended, the odds of needing to know some fact about first language acquisition is rather low, but there is a significant chance that a former student will need to synthesise a great deal of material quickly, make choices about what actions to take next, teach others about what they have learned and argue for the next steps. This is what the course is intended to develop.

Even if this is all accepted, however, it does not mean that every course should function this way. Within a curriculum, if one or two courses had an organisation such as this, that would likely be sufficient for developing the specific skills being emphasised here. Other courses can emphasise other skills in a university's graduate profile. While many students found this pedagogical method rewarding, not all did, and there is no reason to force all courses to work this way.

The different components of the current course design need not all be used in future courses. The current paper had duelling aims. One aim, most clearly seen in project 1, was to use teaching others students to learn. This worked quite well. A second aim was to develop skills designing research, most clearly seen in project 4 on dyslexia. This also worked quite well. The transition between these two projects, however, was much messier. It is possible that one might run a course like project 1 throughout the semester; there is no requirement that it be paired with research design.

My take-home point, however, from this course was not related specifically to groups or projects. Rather, when the course was really working, it was because the student had a question, tried to answer it, had someone listen to them and then got substantial feedback. This is the critical moment. This *can* occur with groups, but it is not the groups that are fundamental; it is the feedback from another interested party. The current course is only one way to allow this to happen.

5. Epilogue

I am writing this article in 2015, one year after LING 318. Three of the students who were in LING 318 are now Honours students in a new class with me. The major task is for the three students and myself to conduct a research project together and write a joint paper. For this, we would jointly create the rubric for assessing this group project. The requirements of the rubric were that it should measure both individual and group contributions, and it must be documented for evaluation by another university. When I met with them, the students said, ‘Why don’t we do something like we did in Child Language with a group notebook showing what each person has done in the research plan?’ I agreed.

References

- Academic Development Group. 2006. *Information Series 400/2: Assessing Group Work*. Downloaded from http://www.canterbury.ac.nz/academicservices/info_series.shtml on 28 March, 2015.
- Applebee, A. N. 1996. *Curriculum as Conversation: Transforming Traditions of Teaching and Learning*. Chicago: University of Chicago.
- Brown, Penelope and Steven Levinson. 1987. *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Clark, Eve. 2009. *First Language Acquisition (Second Edition)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dörnyei, Zoltán. 1997. ‘Psychological processes in cooperative language learning: Group dynamics and motivation.’ *The Modern Language Journal*, 81: 482–493.
- Barnett, Ronald and Kelly Coate. 2005. *Engaging the Curriculum in Higher Education*. Maidenhead, Berkshire, UK: Open University Press.
- Conrad, Clifton and Laura Dunek. 2012. *Cultivating Inquiry Driven Learners: A College Education for the 21st Century*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press.
- Entwistle, Noel. 2009. *Teaching for Understanding at University: Deep Approaches and Distinctive Ways of Thinking*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hughes, H. and A. Townley. 1994. *Cooperative Learning in Graduate Education: A Study of its Effectiveness in Administrator Training in two California Universities*. ERIC document ED 375517.
- Johnson, David W., Roger T. Johnson and Karl A. Smith. 1998. ‘Cooperative learning returns to college: What evidence is there that it works?’ *Change*, July/August: 27–35.
- Jones, Karrie A. And Jennifer L. Jones. 2008. ‘Making cooperative learning work in the college classroom: An application of the ‘Five Pillars’ of cooperative learning to post-secondary instruction.’ *The Journal of Effective Teaching*, 8(2): 61–76.

- Spronken-Smith, Rachel and Tony Harland. 2009. 'Learning to teach with problem-based learning.' *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 10(138): 138–153.
- Tagg, John. 2003. *The Learning Paradigm College*. San Francisco: Anker Publishing.
- Whitehead, Alfred North. 1929. *The Aims of Education and Other Essays*. New York: The Free Press.