

The Value of Learning Groups to the 1st year undergraduate experience for Students of Early Childhood

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ABSTRACT

Learning networks, groups or communities are seen as having the potential to provide supportive, integrative and deep learning processes which can enhance student performance and support transition to university (Peat, Dalziel and Grant 2001; Zhao and Kuh 2004). The provision of a learning environment with opportunities for meaningful academic and social interactions is characteristic of higher education and collaborative learning strategies are frequently used to encourage student self-management, independence and the general development of group skills. Whilst the value-added potential of learning groups is well documented (Peat et al. 2001; Zhao and Kuh 2004; Lizzio and Wilson, 2006), the nature of the course subject is rarely considered as potentially significant to the effectiveness of the group process; the emphasis in research studies being more frequently concerned with generic academic or pastoral functions. The Early Childhood degree at the University of Worcester established learning groups in 2002 as a specific learning and teaching strategy aligning the pedagogic and andragogic philosophy of the subject to promote academic and professional characteristics required as transferable skills for work in the sector. The social constructivist philosophy underpinning the subject and practice of early childhood provided the common, connecting thread for learning groups to have relevance and meaning for personal, academic and professional development.

This study investigated the experience and perceived value of learning groups for the first cohort in 2002/3 through a questionnaire, and by interviews focussed more openly on their general first year experience with a sample group of year 1 students in 2008. The findings revealed an overall highly positive perception indicating that learning groups had scope and value as a forum for:-

- Building strong relationships and social identity
- Co-construction of a learning culture
- Reciprocal learning and skill development
- Empowerment of adult learners and development of confidence
- Enhancing professional development

The most useful transferable skills and knowledge gained during the first year came from sharing ideas and relationship building in small group work which gave the students confidence. The findings demonstrate that peer learning groups provide mutual support and learning opportunities which develop skill in working with others which, in turn, students regard as the predominant quality required for their future professional lives.

Keywords: learning groups, early childhood, learning culture, professional learning communities

INTRODUCTION

Learning groups were established as a specific learning and teaching strategy in the structure and design of the Early Childhood degree in 2002 and evaluated after the first year of operation. They have featured subsequently, in a modified form, in all later re-validations. Modifications to the original design have been based on student and tutor feedback and the outcomes of this research project.

The original inspiration for the formation of the Early Childhood learning groups was a Reggio Emilia conference attended by course tutors and the curriculum lead tutor. The pedagogical practice with children in Reggio Emilia, a northern Italian town, is based on a view of knowledge as 'the product of a process of construction' which is undertaken in relationship with others, and involves making choices and taking responsibility for one's own learning (Moss 1999: p.5). Reggio Emilia has gained worldwide reknown for its exemplification of a social constructivist perspective in action and the thoroughness of its application into early childhood practice (Valentine 1999). Carla Rinaldi, speaking at the Reggio conference in Kendal in 2002, emphasised that Reggio Emilia cannot be directly transferred as a system into different early childhood settings and countries, and was not a teaching method to be copied but rather an approach which should evolve with the identity of each community within its own socio-cultural context. Although Rinaldi was speaking of application into early childhood practice, connections with adult learning in the context of professional learning in Early Childhood in higher education seemed worthy of exploration, not least because these adult learners are the future pedagogues and policy makers in the early childhood sector. Applying a pedagogically relevant approach in their learning might offer a model of learner experience for students to translate into their own practice with children. An aim of the Early Childhood degree is to develop motivated and reflective learners who carry a persuasive pedagogy into their work with young children and families. This requires confident, knowledgeable and empowered students and a learning culture in which these qualities can develop in order to meet the professional demands of working within children's services.

The idea that pedagogical principles of early childhood have relevance to professional adult learners in the sector has been pursued by Margy Whalley and the Pen Green team in the context of the National Professional Qualification for Children Centre Leaders. They argue that pedagogy, andragogy and leadership are inter-connected through common philosophical principles about learning and leading learning in early childhood, and that all three concepts are concerned with engaging people in the process of development. (Whalley, Whitaker, Fletcher, Thorpe, John and Leisten 2004). To demonstrate this, Table 1 aligns philosophical commonalities between early childhood pedagogy and adult learning (andragogy) in the Early Childhood degree.

Table 1. Pedagogy and Andragogy in Early Childhood: philosophical commonalities

Pedagogy: the young child as a learner	Andragogy: the adult learner of Early Childhood Studies
Trust and belief in children as competent and capable learners	Value diverse skills and experience; capable of self-direction, taking responsibility for own learning with and through others.
Construct own theories through a) Interaction with others b) Interaction with environment.	Experiential learning: Sharing knowledge Examining theory in practice
Socially construct/reconstruct meaning in relation to context	Empowered to take control of learning through reflection and action in meaningful application in practice. Spirals of engagement.
Socially construct identity in relation to context	View of self as learner and practitioner develops and grows through collaborative contexts and responses and relationships with others.

The Reggio Emilia approach is underpinned by a belief in children as powerful learners, constructing their own theories and understanding of the world through interaction with others and the environment (Malaguzzi 1993 cited in Dahlberg et al 1999). This, in itself, is nothing new. What marks out the Reggio approach is the thoroughness of its translation into practice, supported by a genuine trust and belief in the child's own competencies and innate drive to learn (Scott 2001). It is complemented by an ethos of co-operative working as a community of learners and reciprocal learning (adults and children) (Valentine 1999). Similarly, the pedagogy of adult learning in the Early Childhood degree is based on valuing diverse skills and experience, sharing knowledge, examining theory and its relationship to practice in order to empower students to take control of their own learning, become self-directed, intrinsically motivated, and confident communicators of early childhood principles.

This self-determined approach to adult learning, which underpins the learning group concept, bears resemblance to what Hase and Kenyon (2008) term 'heutagogy' which they suggest goes beyond pedagogy and andragogy by developing people who can manage their own learning proactively. "Developing capable people requires innovative approaches to learning consistent with the concept of heutagogy", which encourages a shift in power and responsibility from teacher to the learner (Hase and Kenyon 2008; p.3). Heutagogy values interaction and sharing of experience with others and involves a range of action learning processes. Learning groups in the Early Childhood degree provide a forum for discussion of differing experiences and perspectives and an opportunity for collective exploration of ideas and examination of the relationship between theory and practice. Rodd (1997) suggests that, "The continued improvement in the quality of early childhood service provision appears to be more related to the Vygotskian (1962) perspective, where early childhood professionals are supported by their colleagues, to learn in order to develop." (cited in Fleet & Patterson 2001: p.3). Learning groups might offer a medium for learning to go beyond individual perception and contribute to new knowledge, shared perspectives, reflection and agency for

improved practice, in a similar way to professional learning communities which early childhood students could meet in professional practice. Stoll and Lewis (2007) discuss how this non-traditional form of professional development supplements and transcends individual knowledge by shared enquiry to promote new and better approaches to enhance learning.

Reggio has been described as pedagogical practice constructed through discourse, negotiation, reflection and critical thinking, relationships and intellectual conflict (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 1999). Dahlberg et al. (1999) suggest Reggio mirrors a post-modern perspective where meaning and identity are socially constructed and re-constructed within each particular context. Learning groups provide a context which could have significant potential for constructing a view of self as a learner and creating a culture of learning by offering opportunities for dialogue and collaboration in a forum where relationships can develop and learner identity can be forged. Collaborative and participative learning is a central feature of early childhood whether applied to children or the adult community of developing professionals. “Constructivism is the powerful process of making sense, identifying needs, testing ideas and sustaining and improving our work.” and learning together in this way can lead to new insights (Whalley et al. 2004: p.41). Characteristics of a learning culture drawn from these perspectives can be seen in Table 2 and their presence in the Early Childhood learning groups could provide indicators of relative success.

Table 2. Characteristics of a learning culture

Discourse
Negotiation
Formation of Relationships
Participation
Collaboration and co-operation
Reflection
Critical thinking
Intellectual challenge and conflict

RESEARCH APPROACH

Clough and Nutbrown (2007) suggest that categorizing research approaches into distinct paradigms is not always helpful as it can lead to artificial or uncritical characterization. Rather than adopting a particular approach, Clough and Nutbrown (ibid) suggest that researchers tackle the task by seeking to use combinations of valuable features of research approaches. For them the key is to demonstrate that the methodology suits both the context and purpose of the enquiry. The approach taken for this enquiry can be considered primarily within an interpretivist methodology, which seeks to explain the social world (MacNaughton, Rolfe and Siraj-Blatchford 2001). The rationale is that the social context of learning groups and the pedagogical philosophy behind the research subject, where the premise is that we make meaning of our experience through negotiation and dialogue with others, is appropriate to human action and individual perspectives. Interpretive approaches study subjects within their context and are concerned with “the subjective meanings that people bring to their situation” (Vaus 2001 cited in Clough and Nutbrown 2007:p.18). This approach suited the research aim which

was to gain insight into the participants' first year experience, particularly in regard to learning groups, through their own evaluation and interpretation of experience.

Data gathering

The research sample consists of two groups with data collected as a whole cohort questionnaire in 2002/3 and sample interviews from a year 1 cohort in 2008.

The initial findings for the project are based on the responses to a questionnaire on the impact of learning groups in the Early Childhood degree, following the first full year of their operation. The whole cohort was included to obtain the greatest spread of response and there were 26 respondents (24 full-time and 2 part-time) out of a cohort of 34. The questionnaire was designed in broad themes to elicit the participants' reflections on their learning group experiences. Questions related to their view of the purpose; relationships; roles; uses; benefits and impact; difficulties and aspects for improvement. The questionnaire contained some quantitative features in the use of rating scales to identify the extent of a feature. There was some use of pre-set categories to aid thematic analysis but with scope for qualifying statements to gain fuller insight into the participants meaning and interpretation.

In 2008, 13 full-time students were interviewed at the point of completion of their first year. These students were embarking voluntarily on a new professional pathway within the degree and had achieved at least mid-range grades in their first year. This was a non-random sample of students who could be considered motivated and successful and therefore their responses are not necessarily indicative of the whole cohort. The interviews were primarily focussed on their general first year experience and not specifically on learning groups. Whilst they cannot be considered representative of the whole cohort, their responses yielded spontaneous data relevant to the topic and some indication of the impact of learning groups on year 1 experience after a 5 year period of operation.

Interviews were designed more broadly and openly to gather information on significant year 1 experiences and perceptions of the students' current and future professional development. The data provided emergent thinking unprompted and unbiased by a stated focus. Responses were examined by identifying themes emerging and considering the significance and relationship of the topics most mentioned.

Data analysis followed an "inductive process through data coding of topics and categories which are regrouped to form patterns of concepts, themes and surprises." (Aubrey, David, Thompson, 2000: p.58); the purpose being to see what 'conceptual story' emerges from their interrelationship (ibid).

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Questionnaires revealed characteristics of the learning groups through the participants' view of the purpose of the groups, their relationships and roles within the group, and the principal uses made of the learning groups by their members. Participants were asked to consider difficulties they had encountered in the groups, how they were overcome, and what aspects could be further developed or improved. Respondents were asked to consider benefits and personal impact from membership of a learning group.

Purpose

In response to an open question regarding the purpose of learning groups, respondents used terms primarily connected with relationships. They talked of the purpose as building trust, interacting, sharing ideas (14), support (13), and forming friendships (5). Relationships are at the heart of the Reggio philosophy (Dahlberg et al 1999) and reciprocal relationships are seen as providing a supportive framework for discourse and collective action. Mulford (2007) suggests that social relationships play a vital part in creating capacity for learning and the way to establish professional learning communities is to start by building social capital, facilitating time for bonding, building trust and mutual support.

Relationships

Learning group members rated their knowledge of each other 'very well' (10 respondents), 'much better' (9) 'quite well' (5), in comparison with the start of the year and with other students in the cohort who they felt they knew 'fairly well' (20 respondents) or 'not well' (2) with only 2 respondents saying they had made good friends outside the learning groups. It would seem that learning groups can provide their members with an opportunity to develop strong social relationships with each other. This was further supported by the main social benefit gained from participation in learning groups which was unanimously expressed as 'making new friends' (Table 5, line b). Studies in transition to University have shown that early experiences in both academic study and social life can affect attrition rates and subsequent performance in the formation of habits and attitudes, arguing that peer groups provide some mitigation against difficulties during transition as well as a structure for mutual academic support (Peat, Dalziel and Grant 2001). In a survey, conducted at the University of Sydney, Peat et al. (ibid), found that forming strong friendships and social networks were issues determined as significant by students in helping to address anxieties, feelings of isolation and adjust socially and academically to their new environment.

The long-term nature of learning groups can thus provide a stable basis for committed relationships, friendship and trust to develop. These are important features if learning groups are to provide a personal support system, which is considered a prime function in collaborative learning (Dick 2004, Callahan 2004).

Roles

Participants were asked to indicate the roles they adopted in the group from a range of categories (see Table 3 for categories and responses). The main roles were 'contributor' and 'listener', which suggests that key elements of participation and communication were present. This can be considered a positive indicator as Pound & Gura (1997: p. 27) argue that, "Communities working in harmony are created through communication". There was also an indication that learning groups were operating democratically, as roles such as 'note-taker' were rotated, whereas only two responses indicated a leadership role. This could warrant further investigation to establish whether groups would gain benefit from support on developing leadership skills within a democratic group process.

Table 3. Roles adopted in learning groups

Role categories	Responses
Leader	2
Contributor	20
Listener	19
Notetaker	7
Other	0

Uses

Participants were asked to rate the most frequent topics in their meetings on a scale of 1-5, with 5 being the most frequent. The most highly rated uses, based on the modal figure, were common tasks of mutual benefit i.e. module or assignment related, as presented in Table 4. Qualifying statements showed that members used their learning groups for a range of shared tasks of clear value to them, such as exchanging material, project work, discussing how to proceed with tasks, feeding back on experiences or outcomes from work or university. This supports the view that, "Learning occurs more readily when the information is relevant to the learner, immediately applied, and problem centred." (Bullard & Bullock 2002: p 2) and this provides motivation for sustaining the collaboration and collective action of the group. Learning groups provide the potential to become a self-managed work team through the process of self-regulation and making choices concerning the use of their group time. It is a reciprocal process of active co-construction and therefore more personally relevant. Learning becomes "a part of who the student is, not just something the student has" (Zhao and Kuh 2004: p.117)

Table 4. Uses of Learning Groups
(Rated most (5) to least (0) frequent)

USE	RATING (mode)
Module Tasks/assignment plan/discussions	5
PPL discussions/ sources & research	4/3
Personal/general University experience	4/5*
Course experience	3 (5*)
Information collection/exchange	3/2
Social	4/2*

(part-time student responses are indicated as *)

The nature of the topics indicated in Table 4, imply a high presence of discussion and an element of negotiation which are necessary if new and shared understandings are to be reached and collaborative tasks fulfilled. Discourse and negotiation are essential components in professional learning communities, serving to support the continual construction and re-construction of pedagogical practice and understanding (Malaguzzi in Penn 1997; Dahlberg 1999; Scott 2001).

The use of learning groups for social purposes received a wide spread of rating (Table 4) but seemed to feature more for full-time than part-time students. This could reflect the life circumstances of part-time students on this degree, who are mature students with families.

Learning groups were used by all students to share personal and general university experience, which could aid the formation of friendship and common identity and provide

a source of support and reassurance. Karen John (2000) advises that creating the conditions for success in a group needs to pay attention to psychological needs of individual worth and acceptance, "...individual members' sense of worth and significance are derived from cooperative efforts designed to contribute to and advance the welfare of others..." (p. 422). Zhao and Kuh (2004) argue that strengthening social and intellectual connections between students through common activities and groups helps to build a sense of community, "As a result, students become members of a community focused on academic content, which allows them to further develop their identity and discover their voice as well as integrate what they are learning into their worldview and other academic and social experiences." (Zhao and Kuh 2004: p.117).

The benefits and impact of learning groups were identified by respondents against a list of categories (Table 5 column 1) with responses tallied (column 2) and qualifying statements invited. The most highly occurring qualifying statements are indicated in column 3:-

Table 5. Benefits and Impact of Learning Groups

1. BENEFIT	2. RESPONSES	3. Qualifying statements (Main occurrences)
a) Academic	28	Shared info (6) New knowledge (5) Confidence/skills
b) Social	23	New friends (23)
c) Personal	21	Confidence (18)
d) Professional	21	Confidence, experience, insight (11), skills(4), new knowledge(3), PPL(3)
e) Collectively	17	Worked well (7), learned from group (4)
IMPACT		
f) Self as learner	21	Problem discussion (5), Motivation (5)
g) Professional development	26	Yes (11), teamwork(5), wider knowledge (5), a little(4)

Students recognized the impact of their learning groups on themselves as learners and as developing professionals. Although the impact on professional development (g) was not always explicit (11 simply answered 'yes'), the incidence of responses relating to wider knowledge and teamwork coupled with professional benefits (d) of confidence, insight, skills and new knowledge imply that the groups are serving to empower students to share their experiences and understanding of theory and practice. Although not specifically considering an early childhood context, Dick (2004) recognized the importance of relating theory and practice in group learning and the potential for vicarious learning from one another's experience.

The findings show that academic, personal and professional confidence is derived from working in a learning group and the social benefit of making new friends is important to the first year experience.

Difficulties and potential improvements

Few students expressed difficulties with their learning groups: 2 responses related to meeting times and 4 were assignment related but a large number (14) expressed no

difficulties. Difficulties were overcome by time management and asking for help but 4 responses indicated problems remained unresolved or had room for improvement. The majority of students (14) did not feel that changes were necessary but those who did, wished for more opportunities to meet (7). Studies by Zhao and Kuh (2004) and Lizzio and Wilson (2006) found that frequent contact was significant for group familiarity and perception of effectiveness. Creating time and space for groups to meet could be an important consideration for course management. This was followed up by the early childhood team by providing more induction for learning groups and practical arrangements for the groups to work together during and after mandatory modules.

Interviews conducted with 13 students at the completion of their first year in 2008, used open-ended questions to elicit perceptions of their learning gains over their first year; concept of professional skills required in their future field of work; and systems supporting these. Themes were identified from the responses and the number of students giving the response is indicated to show prevalence of the perspective amongst the group.

The major gains in their first year were expressed as:-

Table. 6

Gains identified	By (no. of students)
Relationship building and teamwork skills	13
Confidence	11
Communication and dialogue	7

There was a clear relationship between the gains in their first year and their expectations and perceptions of professional/transferable skills required in their future field of work. The following were most frequently mentioned skills required:-

Table. 7.

Professional skills needed	Identified by (no. of students)
Working with others and teamwork	16 (combined score)
Relationship skills	11
Communication and listening	10
Confidence	7

Support systems which created and enabled these gains were identified as:-

Table. 8

Support systems identified	By (no. of students)
Peers/mutual support network	7
Learning Groups	5
Mentor/tutors	5
Family	3

The most frequently mentioned source of support was a peer mutual support network (7 students). Learning groups were specifically named by 5 students and if these two categories are combined they indicate a significant emphasis on the value of a peer learning support system.

Consolidated findings

The combined results of the questionnaires and interviews indicate that a peer support system, such as learning groups can have a powerful effect on confidence, personal and professional skill development and provide a social network. The meaning and value placed on this support by students completing their first year could be a contributing factor to retention rates in higher education (Zhao and Kuh 2004) and offer potential for application in other professionally focused or non-vocational degrees.

The qualifying statements relating to benefits and impact in Table 5, featured problem discussion, new knowledge, shared information and group learning. Communication and dialogue also featured strongly in the interview responses both in relation to major gains over the first year of the degree and in skills required for their future work (Table 6 &7). Ideally, learning groups in the Early Childhood course can provide both a forum for dialogue and sharing of experience of practice and a context for the interpretation of theory, which could lead to new pedagogical practice.

Skills in negotiation, communication, groupwork, networking and boundary management were identified by Clark (1996) as part of the operational repertoire needed by educators in a community context, such as schools and early childhood settings. The development of these skills for early childhood degree students were recognized as beneficial for their academic and professional development in both the questionnaire and interview responses. More explicit development of these skills could be useful in supporting group members with preparation for further periods of practice and opportunities to develop and try out their own pedagogical stance, thus developing future pedagogues who are confident advocates of the philosophy and principles underpinning their practice. The incidence of gains perceived in teamwork, working as a group and learning from each other, supports the value of these groups as arenas for collaboration and co-construction of a learning culture.

Although few difficulties were expressed, conflict is likely to occur in situations of negotiated learning. Intellectual conflict can be seen as a positive and enjoyable process that leads to growth (John 2000; Bullard & Bullock 2002) but strategies and support mechanisms for conflict resolution need to be in place to support the students through these experiences. Opportunities or exercises to consider leadership in a democratic group process might also aid group development. Sharing ideas and beliefs about what is important in early childhood requires openness, trust and mutual respect so that discussion can take place which affirms, contests and lays open ideas for examination from different perspectives. This requires confidence but also tolerance and respect for diversity. These attributes are particularly pertinent to early childhood, both as an academic discipline and in services for children, where there are many stakeholder interests and different professional disciplines involved, who need to work together to be effective.

CONCLUSIONS

Early Childhood graduates are increasingly taking up positions of leadership in the sector and their ability to promote quality in early childhood services will, in many respects, depend on their ability to interact to promote the shared construction of professional knowledge. Fleet and Patterson (2001: p.10) argue that professional growth must involve "inquiry, engagement, and agency, supported by recurring

contextualized interaction.” The effective use of learning groups in the academic training of future early childhood professionals can provide a basis and a model for establishing this way of learning for future professional practice.

The overall student perception of learning groups was very positive. The responses indicate their scope and value as a forum for

- Co-construction of a learning culture
- Reciprocal learning and skill development
- Dialogue and reflection on theory/practice
- Empowerment of adult learners
- Enhancing professional development

“Through co-construction, we open up a new space for ourselves as pedagogues, but also more generally as human beings.” (Dahlberg et al. 1999: p.135). Learning groups can provide such a space. The ongoing research project can serve the purpose of supporting their effectiveness by making the learning process more visible and identifying aspects which would benefit from supportive or preparatory strategies. Further investigation is needed to identify whether the learning group experiences alter in the second and third years of the degree and whether their influence does extend into professional practice during and after the degree.

The significance and value of learning groups indicated by the data responses suggests that a peer learning system could be a factor in student retention by providing a meaningful group identity and reciprocal learning opportunities. There could be scope for adoption of a peer learning support system in a wider range of degrees suited to their nature and socio-cultural context.

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