

[O33] Student-led Final Year Discussion Groups

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Abstract

The expectation is that final year undergraduate life science students should manage their own learning and become more self-reliant. For many students this transition from second to final year is challenging and requires a review of their approach to independent learning and time management, especially as contact time with staff teaching academic units decreases slightly in our final year.

From discussions with students, we know that many find it beneficial to discuss course material and extra reading with their friends. Due to the large number of optional modules in our final year, however, many students are split up from these regular working groups. This prompted our Faculty to pilot some final year discussion groups for modules where the need was felt by students or staff.

The initiative is simple and consists of helping students to organise discussion groups for a given module. Students subscribing voluntarily to the group met once a week for one to two hours, after the module was completed.

The aims for each discussion group were: to provide students with opportunities to work collaboratively; enable them to get more engaged and maximise their learning by setting agendas to cover the course material progressively; pull central concepts together and draw links between lectures. Participants who enrolled in overlapping modules provided valuable insights to contextualise knowledge.

It was also hoped that the sessions would provide students with opportunities to gain feedback in two ways: from peers (as students expose and test their understanding with others), and from staff, who found that questions arising from a collective after a two hour discussion were considerably more effective than 20 individual questions.

Introduction

Students from the Faculty of Life Sciences at the University of Manchester are offered a very large number of units (90) in their final year. Whilst units with small student numbers ($n < 30$) can offer a learning environment reminiscent of seminars/tutorials, units with greater numbers present more of a challenge. Staff teaching on units with $n > 100$ find it difficult to foster an environment where an exploratory class discussion can take place and where students feel confident/at ease asking questions to the lecturer in front of their peers. Lecture material can be adapted to become more interactive and feedback can be generated using online material, but even so, the pressure of final year and the large amount of personal study required for each unit in a short period often leaves many students unsure of what is expected of them and how to tackle this reading material.

In 2007-08 the first author of this paper, then a Final Year student, found the material of the "Stem Cells" unit particularly difficult. She set up a 'Stem Cells Study Session group' to provide her and her peers with a separate forum for stimulating and in depth discussions on the course material that were not enabled within the traditional lecture format of this unit. Two sessions were organised and the students who attended ($n=15$) found the sessions reassuring as they were able to clarify some of the key concepts within the unit, share lecture notes, recommend papers to each other and discuss some of their concerns. However, too few sessions were held to go deep enough into complex concepts and create any notable academic benefits. The main restricting barrier that

limited the number of sessions organised was the time it took the author to recruit students, set up the groups and organise the sessions.

In 2008-09, the author was employed by the University in a role responsible for coordinating student-led activity within the Faculty of Life Sciences (Sabbatical Intern). With the help of two members of academic staff involved in peer support (co-authors), a proposal to further develop the 'Final Year Discussion Group' initiative was put to the education board and approved.

The broad aims of the Discussion Groups were to provide students with opportunities to:

- Work collaboratively by setting agendas to cover the course material progressively
- Make links between concepts within the unit
- Discuss with others on different degree programmes or from overlapping units to gain a variety of perspectives.
- Gain feedback on their understanding and develop clearer exam expectations.
- Develop transferable skills

The study sessions remained student-led, but the Faculty recognised that it could support the groups with organisational aspects. The role of the Faculty via the Sabbatical Intern was to identify the units that needed support and recruit volunteer 'Group Coordinators' who would be given the practical knowledge and confidence to start the groups up themselves. The Intern had a briefing session with every Group Coordinator to review the specific needs of the unit, explore how the study sessions could help, and review our step by step 'starter pack' containing (1) the rationale behind this initiative and (2) practical suggestions to recruit students, organise meetings and run effective group study sessions (please contact the corresponding author for a copy of the pack). The Intern was also available to book rooms for students and to provide ongoing support, if needed, once the group had started.

Once the groups were established, the starter pack was provided to all participating students so that the responsibility for organising and running sessions could be shared and to make sure that every student understood the aims of the sessions (see abstract). Minutes of each meeting were sent to the Intern to allow us to evaluate the scheme.

How was the evaluation conducted?

To find out what happened in the sessions, discover whether the intended outcomes of the sessions had been met and identify the challenges were faced by the groups and Group Coordinators, semi-structured interviews were conducted with three of the four initial Group Coordinators. These interviews explored topics such as the information that their group had covered, descriptions of their best and worst sessions and benefits that they felt they had gained.

The views from all participants on these aspects were then sought through a comprehensive online questionnaire partly designed with the information gathered through the interviews and the minutes sent during the semester, and including a mixture of open and closed questions, The questionnaire was emailed to all of the students that attended the initial meetings (n=51) and was completed by 15 students.

What happened?

Early in the year, 30 final year students attended a meeting that was open to their year and aimed to present the initiative to students, gauge interest and identify students who would be willing to become involved in organising a group (Group Coordinators). Four students expressed an interest in this role and each chose one of their units to focus on. For the four units we supported, an average of 14% of the total number of students registered to the units attended initial meetings held by the Group Coordinators. These students split into 9 different groups, each with between 5 and 12 members. Most of these groups met at 5pm for 1-2 hours on a weekly basis. The four groups that continued to communicate with us held around nine sessions, in which they covered nearly all of the material on their chosen unit. Other groups held five or so sessions. We did not

ask the Group Coordinators to keep attendance records past the initial meetings, lest we formalise the sessions too much.

Attendance stayed roughly the same from the second session onwards: it either dipped or increased slightly after the first session (some students enrolled in the second session by word of mouth), but once students were engaged with a group they returned each week.

What happened in the sessions?

The groups planned their own sessions: using lecture notes and intended learning outcomes, recommended reading and past papers as a guide, they decided what they would cover for each session, the way in which they would approach the information and how the responsibility/workload would be split between group members.

Several groups reported going through the course material lecture by lecture, alongside recommended reading so the unit content was covered thoroughly in a focused and structured manner. This also enabled students to draw links between concepts within the unit with more ease.

- *'It was useful to go through lecture by lecture to make sure we covered all the topics because then we could identify key links and concepts.'*
- *'We followed lecture slides and discussed as we went along where we had questions or didn't understand. This way, we were all up to speed and the session had a structure.'*
- *'Going over extra reading alongside the lecture notes was beneficial to attain a broader understanding of the topic.'*

Other groups employed a question-based approach, in which past paper questions were used to direct the focus of the discussion. It is clear that the students used this method with the intention of practising how to answer an essay question in order to become more confident about the exam expectation and to revise content. There was no mention of question-spotting or creating 'model answers' with the intention of memorising them (which our starter pack specifically deterred).

- *'Writing plans for past essay [was the most useful approach]...because you got a greater idea of content to include in a final year level essay.'*
- *'Talking over how we would tackle questions - i.e. making bullet point answers - it prompted you if you'd forgotten something and at the same time we talked over everything.'*
- *'We wrote an essay each and Professor G. (the Unit Coordinator) kindly read and marked them giving advice and help for improvement. This was very helpful in gauging where our knowledge levels were, compared to where they need to be to get a good grade.'*

Summary of evaluation findings

Overall, the benefits reported by participants and coordinators matched our intended outcomes. Students who were interviewed or completed the questionnaire reported that they had experienced:

- A greater understanding of material and a greater ability to draw links between concepts within the unit in question.
- An increased confidence with exam expectations.
- An increased motivation to revise.
- A friendly, focused and productive working environment.
- A more formal and organised environment than if working with friends.

Benefits for students

Learning through group discussion

Students were asked 'In your opinion, compared to working on your own, what are the benefits of working with other students on lecture material?'

The majority of the respondents answered with a comment about learning through group discussion, which is a common feature of Peer Learning initiatives. This opinion was also shared by the Group Coordinators in their interviews.

- *'Some of the concepts were quite hard to grasp, but talking about them really helped to get to grips with them. It was good hearing the topics spoken about in a different way - sometimes just rephrasing something made everything click into place.'*
- *'Some people describe concepts/pathways/interactions in a different way. If I can't get my head around a concept, it helps a lot to hear someone talk through it. Helps me remember when I've had a conversation about it, not just read it off a page.'*
- *'It really makes sure you have understood the material when you try explaining something to someone else. You absorb it better.'*

Many students also commented about the safe, informal, supportive and stimulating nature of the sessions.

- *'I just found them really helpful and a more fun way to approach extra reading for the unit.'*
- *'Because it was student- led there was less pressure and I felt comfortable contributing and asking (silly) questions.'*
- *'I didn't feel embarrassed about bringing up anything I didn't understand. I think if it was staff led, I would worry about asking a stupid question. Also, the stupid questions that people asked turned out to help me remember what they were talking about. Good revision.'*
- *'It was a more sociable and relaxed way of revising.'*
- *'[It] improved my focus...[as] I had to prepare before the sessions... and made me start revision earlier than I would have without the group.'*
- *'[I was] happier to study... 'actually this isn't just boring stuff in a lecture', you can get quite excited about it!'*

Furthermore, some of the students admitted they felt reassured by working with others as they could see the level that everyone else was working to, which allayed some of their concern regarding course expectations. They could also compare themselves to others and get feedback on their state of understanding.

- *'It was...nice knowing that everyone else found the module as hard as I did - it gave a bit of reassurance!'*
- *'It was ... very good to talk to the other students about the topic & discuss any concerns we had.'*

Were the sessions productive?

On the whole, the groups were successful in sticking to the point during their discussions because the group members had volunteered to attend and were motivated.

- *'We all wanted to get something from the sessions so usually stayed on topic. Our group fitted together well and therefore we all contributed to the session.'*
- *'We understood the seriousness of the exam and the lecture content, which kept us focused.'*
- One of the Group Coordinators was aware of digressions but thought that these were positive.
- *'Sometimes during the sessions... not in a particularly bad way... we would deviate a little bit from the exam question that we were answering and come on to things like, 'How long does your essay have to be in the exam?''*

Despite advice on group management given in the starter pack and meetings with Group Coordinators, in the questionnaire feedback there were a small number of comments from students who found that the student-led aspect lessened the focus of the sessions.

- *'I think we could have got a lot more out of the sessions. It needed someone to take charge and lead, to stop the distractions.'*

Why is this better than students just revising with their friends?

Three of the students interviewed admitted that they had wanted to do this with friends, but had not been successful.

Interviewees were asked: 'Do you ever study with friends on your course, working on the same material?'

- *'Um no. Though I planned to do that... I would plan ad hoc study sessions, but people wouldn't have gone onto that subject yet, so you would plan it and they would be behind schedule and then it would just sort of fall apart.'*
- *'No... I was thinking of starting a few, but it didn't turn out... I was thinking of doing it with friends but everyone got really busy and weren't really motivated to do it. So we just left [it].'*

Our inference here is that study sessions run with 'strangers' can be more successful as it creates a certain level of commitment, and the marginally formalised environment permits less room for social digression.

Benefits for lecturers

All of the groups were self-sufficient, as nearly all of the questions raised were answered by the students themselves. Some groups forwarded unanswered questions, practise essays and requests for papers that they could not access to their lecturers, but very minimal time was given by the lecturers of the units in question.

Logistical Challenges

For one of the units, a very large number of students attended the first meeting and were split into several groups by the Group Coordinator to meet at convenient times. It seems that these new groups did not continue successfully, and questionnaire respondents claimed that they did not receive any communication past the first meeting. After interviewing the Group Coordinator it appeared that he had simply returned home to study, had not attended his group and was unaware that the others had not continued.

Discussion

Overall, the aims for the Discussion Groups were met; the attendees involved in the evaluation were largely satisfied and felt that they had benefited academically and socially from attending a Discussion Group.

We have learnt that using Group Coordinators to mobilise their peers works best if they are supported properly in the very early stages, although there is currently no back-up plan if one of them does not fulfil their role. We recognise that a more efficient system for establishing multiple groups within a unit needs to be instigated and that all Group Coordinators must be offered a one to one briefing meeting with the Intern before they start their sessions. The Faculty support needs to be kept relatively minimal, however, as final year students clearly want to work independently and have a strong sense of ownership of the sessions.

Within the groups, an element of informality is essential to create the positive learning environment in which students are open and forthcoming with 'silly' questions. However, this needs to be balanced with the appropriate level of focus and maturity. Largely, we feel that the Discussion Groups achieved this.

It is important that students recognise that they are not alone when faced with seemingly impersonal lectures and that by building support networks like these Discussion Groups, they can learn from one another. We consider this a worthwhile initiative, noting that it costs nothing, requires limited staff time to organise and puts the students in a place where they can take greater control of their learning. As a few of the attendees pointed out, studying this way is *fun*, and we should be encouraging students to enjoy their studies and engage each other in discussions on topics that they are interested in. After all, isn't that what we go to university for?

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