

How student discussions during group work influence learners' performance when doing a Department of Education prescribed Life Sciences activity.

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DECLARATION

This research is entirely my own work and has not been previously submitted as a research project, dissertation or thesis at any other university.

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this research project was to examine how group discussions influence student performance in a DoE prescribed Life Sciences activity. The research methodology draws on collaborative group work and learner oriented assessment frameworks. The case study was conducted in a suburban high school in south Gauteng. Students were explicitly taught collaborative group work skills. As group work discussions are dependent on subject content knowledge, students were required to complete the assessment activity individually first. Students were placed in groups of four or five that were academically heterogeneous, in an attempt to encourage robust discussions. Following group work discussions students completed a final write up of the assessment activity. Findings from the research showed a statistically significant improvement in the mean pre group work assessment score to the post group work assessment score. All students were found to interact in a co-regulated way in that all were active participants. Each group had at least one member who was a hitch hiker. This student was unprepared and was the most disengaged and passive throughout the group work. The hitch hiker tended to have the lowest post group work activity score for their group. The student whose post group work activity score was the highest was the one who was the most prepared and except for a student whose home language was not the LOLT all others were the most active in their groups. Student discussions were dependent on subject content knowledge. Where subject content knowledge was sound, discussions resulted in cognitive conflict allowing for the social construction of knowledge. Poor content knowledge resulted in discussions which left students confused and seeking help from the teacher. Whilst most students perceived the group work to improve their understanding of the work, the heterogeneity of the groups was raised as a concern by a hitch hiker and students who obtained the highest post group work assessment scores. The hitchhiker in one of the groups perceived that she was not taken seriously, whilst the high academic achievers felt that they were providing information to students who were not well prepared. Most students valued the group work activity and recommended its use for future Grade 11 Life Sciences students.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Declaration	ii
Abstract	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Table of Contents	v
List of Tables	viii
List of Figures	ix
List of Appendices	x
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	1
1.0 Introduction	1
1.1 Background and rationale	3
1.2 Problem statement	3
1.3 Aim of study and research questions	4
1.4 The theoretical framework	4
1.5 Organisation of the research report	5
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW	6
2.0 Introduction	6
2.1 The social construction of knowledge and conceptual conflict	6
2.2 Collaborative group work	8
2.2.1 What is meant by collaborative group work?	8
2.2.2 Group dynamics	9
2.2.3 Advantages of collaborative group work.	9
2.2.3.1 Improving scientific literacy through language	10
2.2.3.2 Learning improves.....	10
2.2.4 Disadvantages of collaborative group work.	11
2.2.4.1 Demands on teachers	11
2.2.4.2 Peer group pressure	12
2.2.4.3 Division of labour	12
2.2.4.4 How much learning is happening?	12
2.2.5 Type of activities that promote learning.	13
2.2.6 Role of teachers	14

2.2.7 Student interactions	14
2.3 Assessment.....	15
2.3.1 What is assessment	15
2.3.2 How is assessment carried out?	16
2.3.3 Assessment for learning.....	17
2.3.3.1 Feedback	18
2.3.3.2 Peer assessment	19
2.3.4 Learning oriented assessment	20
2.4 Theoretical frameworks underpinning this research	20
2.4.1 Theoretical framework for a collaborative approach to group work	21
2.4.1.1 Theoretical perspective on learning	21
2.4.1.2 Nature of task	21
2.4.1.3 Nature of interactions, organisation of groups and allocation of roles	22
2.4.1.4 Role teachers	22
2.4.2 Theoretical framework for learning oriented assessment	23
2.5 Conclusion	25
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY	26
3.0 Introduction	26
3.1 Context	26
3.2 Methodology	27
3.2.1 Explicit teaching of group work	28
3.2.2 Class work.....	29
3.2.2.1 Explanation to students on how to complete the assessment activity.....	29
3.2.2.2 Student’s individual assessment activity completed at home.....	29
3.2.2.3 Student’s work collaboratively on task in groups	30
3.2.2.4 Individual student’s rework of the first draft of the assessment activity	32
3.2.3 I (teacher) mark the final draft of assessment activity	32
3.2.4 Students complete a questionnaire evaluating the impact of group work	32
3.3 Research instruments	32
3.3.1 Rubric	32
3.3.2 Observation schedules	32
3.3.3 Video recordings	33
3.3.4 Questionnaire	36

3.4 Ethical considerations	36
CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS, RESULTS AND DISCUSSION	37
4.0 Introduction	37
4.1 Analysis of changes in student attainment	38
4.1.1 Comparison of pre and post group work scores	38
4.1.2 Summary of pre and post group work attainment	43
4.2 Analysis of Grade 11 collaborative group discussions	44
4.2.1 Selection of target students for further analysis	44
4.2.2 Qualities of communicative interaction between members of a group.	47
4.2.2.1 Analysis of lesson observations to determine qualities of communicative interaction between members of a group.....	47
4.2.2.2 Summary of qualities of communicative interaction between members of a group.....	50
4.2.3 Frames of activities of group work	50
4.2.3.1 Analysis of lesson observations to determine the frames of activities of group work.	50
4.2.3.2 Summary of analysis of lesson observations to determine frames of activities of group work.....	56
4.2.4 Analysis of the “substance” of discussions.....	56
4.2.5 Summary of analysis of Grade 11 collaborative group work discussions	60
4.3 Analysis of student’s perceptions of the usefulness of group work from the questionnaire	61
4.3.1 Home language	61
4.3.2 Student’s perceptions of the purpose of assessment	62
4.3.3 Student’s perceptions of the influence of group work on the post group work assessment activity.....	64
4.3.4 The perceived influence of listening on the post group work assessment activity..	65
4.3.5 Student’s perceptions of trust and respect amongst group members	68
4.3.6 Student opinions of group work: should it be part of an assessment activity?	68
4.3.7 Summary of student perceptions of the usefulness of group work.....	70
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION	71
REFERENCES	74

LIST OF TABLES

Table 2.1:	Collaborative approach to group	23
Table 3.1:	Student group allocation based on term 2 marks.....	31
Table 3.2:	Students who qualified to be target students	34
Table 3.3:	“Frames of Activities” (from Kutnick and Berdondini, 2009)	35
Table 4.1:	The distribution of seventeen students that completed all parts of the research.	37
Table 4.2:	Pre group work and post group work assessment activity scores	39
Table 4.3:	Comparison of assessment scores from the essay rubric	40
Table 4.4:	Distribution of students, ranked according to student pre group work assessment activity score.....	42
Table 4.5:	Distribution of learners ranked according to student post group work assessment activity score.....	43
Table 4.6:	Selected target students from groups 6 and 7.....	45
Table 4.7:	Types of communication between students in a group	48
Table 4.8:	Summary of qualities of communicative interaction between members of groups.....	49
Table 4.9:	Results from the “On Task” part of the “Frames of Activities” observation schedule	52
Table 4.10:	Results from the “Off task, task preparation, social and off task” part of the “Frames of Activities” observation schedule	53
Table 4.11:	A students perspective : why the assessment activity should be completed using group work.	69

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2.1	Framework for learning oriented assessment	24
Figure 4.1	Seating plan for group 6	45
Figure 4.2	Seating plan for group 7	46
Figure 4.3	Seating plan for group 2	47
Figure 4.4	Percent “On task active” episodes for all target students during group discussions	54
Figure 4.5	Percent frequency of “On task passive, listening” episodes for target students	55
Figure 4.6	Student perceptions of purpose of assessment	63

LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix 1: DoE Activity and memo	I
Appendix 2: Ethics permission letters	XI
Appendix 3: Position of groups in class	XVIII
Appendix 4: Observation schedule: “Qualities of communication”	XIX
Appendix 5: Observation schedule: “Frames of Activities”	XX
Appendix 6: Research questionnaire	XXII
Appendix 7: Transcript from group 6	XXIII
Appendix 8: Transcript from group 7	XXXIX
Appendix 9: Glossary	LIII
Appendix 10: List of acronyms	LIV