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Collaboration or confrontation? An investigation into the role of prior experiences in the completion of collaborative group tasks by student teachers

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This paper describes research which investigated how a group of 23 postgraduate student teachers from a wide variety of international backgrounds with a broad range of previous experience perceived the significance of their own and others' prior experience in accomplishing directed collaborative tasks, related to their coursework, in pre-determined groupings. The students were asked to comment on how they valued their own and others' prior experiences and how they considered prior experience informed the completion of the tasks. They were also asked to comment on the dynamic of groups in which they worked and how they felt others' prior experiences affected the management and achievement of the task. The students rated some experiences more highly than others and almost all appreciated the predetermined nature of the groupings as benefiting them socially as well as educationally. However, they raised practical, attitudinal and personality issues, suggesting that more structured guidance from tutors at the outset would be beneficial.

Keywords: beginning teachers; prior experience; collaborative group work; skills development

Introduction

The research described in this paper was undertaken to obtain 23 student teachers' perceptions of the value of their own and others' prior experiences in completing directed collaborative tasks linked to their coursework. The students were also asked for their views on the way the tasks had been accomplished and how they thought they could be improved. This paper will firstly provide a contextualisation of and rationale for the research, followed by a description of the study and the analytical process, before discussing the findings. Finally, conclusions will be presented, along with issues for further development.

The Postgraduate Diploma of Education (PGDE) at the University of Glasgow, in common with courses in many universities, has recently incorporated problem-based or collaborative learning to enhance the delivery of the course, typically provided through lectures and subject-specific seminars. 'Learning to work together in a group may be one of the most important interpersonal skills a person can develop since this will influence one's employability, productivity, and career success' (Johnson and Johnson 1989, 32).

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The decision to integrate collaborative learning tasks with the theoretical inputs from tutors on the modern languages (ML) programme was taken for a number of reasons: firstly, it was envisaged that the link between theory and practice would be strengthened through reflective discussion of policy and practice by the students in their groups (Cooper 1990). By focusing on the collaborative construction of a 'product', whether a report or practical classroom resources, the intention was also that students would develop the interpersonal skills necessary for their career as teachers, when they are expected to work closely with colleagues as part of a team. By asking the students to report their findings back to the class, it was also planned that they would develop their presentation skills, another key skill necessary for a teacher. Finally, it was felt important that the students should experience working together in groups so that they would develop understanding of the process and therefore find it easier to facilitate this type of collaborative working with their pupils once they were fully qualified.

Collaborative learning

The directed study tasks discussed in this paper may be viewed as a form of collaborative or problem-based learning which aims to involve learners actively in their learning, allowing them to develop not only content knowledge, but also strategic learning skills (Hmelo-Silver 2004). Mattessich, Murray-Close and Monsey (2001, 7) define collaborative learning as 'a mutually beneficial and well-defined relationship... to achieve common goals. The relationship includes a commitment to... shared responsibility, mutual authority and accountability for success, and sharing of resources and rewards'. Tasks may comprise simple identification and description or be more cognitively challenging assignments such as reflecting, theorising or analysis (Biggs 1999). It is claimed that collaborative learning is more effective than more didactic approaches, because, by working through a problem together, students learn more and retain the information longer (Collier 1980; Cooper 1990). Collaborative learning relates to Vygotskian constructivist principles (1978, 1986) which emphasise the importance of the co-construction of knowledge through discussion with a 'more knowledgeable other' underlining the social aspect of learning through dialogue (Mercer 2000). Bransford, Brown, and Cocking (2000) suggest that the social interaction which takes place during the execution of a task may be an important part of the learning process.

For teaching students, it is important to develop the interpersonal skills which may enable them to work as part of a collaborative team. Working as part of a team is considered crucial in effective management of schools (HMIe 2006) and the skills learned from operating within an environment where each member of the team contributes to a successful outcome are seen to be indicative of good leadership (HMIe 2000). Communication, presentation, and negotiation skills are among those developed by successful team members (Johnson and Johnson 1989). It has also been suggested that working collaboratively increases intercultural understanding (Slavin 1990), an important factor for the students in this study, who comprised a wide mix of nationalities and backgrounds, as will be seen below. In addition, the intercultural mix in most classrooms demands teachers demonstrate an intercultural understanding which promotes an awareness and appreciation of 'differences' (Haran and Tormey 2002).

A comprehensive review of the research literature relating to collaboration, undertaken by Mattessich et al. (2001) identified six factors which could be

considered crucial for successful outcomes of collaborative working: environment, resource, membership, mutual purpose, communication and process and structure. The need for group members to display mutual respect, understanding and trust, the ability to compromise and open and frequent communication was seen as a vital element for the success of collaborative endeavours. Setting clear goals and sharing the work equally across the membership of the group were also key factors identified by Mattessich et al. (2001) in affecting positive outcomes of the performance of tasks. These factors were borne in mind when considering the students' perceptions of how successfully the groups completed the tasks and possible reasons for their responses.

The tasks

Each week the students were required to perform a task, related to the course, which required them to reflect and work in partnership on the development of a product, by applying what had previously been discussed in class. Examples of types of task included discussion of policy documents and examples of pupils' performance at different levels, or production of resources targeted at a specific skill or proficiency level. Greater detail of the tasks will be provided in a later section of this paper. A room was set aside for the students to meet to discuss the task one afternoon a week, although students were told that they could meet in their own time if that was more convenient. Students had a deadline for task completion, when they had to post their group's outcome on the student VLE in preparation for a short presentation, summarising their work, at the next class, when further discussion might take place.

What could be said to be distinctive about the tasks was the way the groups were organised. Depending on their previous experiences before they started the PGDE course, students were allocated to pre-determined groupings which changed every week. The aim was to mix the students, according to prior experiences, so that they would be exposed to as many different viewpoints as possible in order to explore and possibly challenge previous perceptions they might have had within the context of the theoretical framework provided by the course.

Students' prior experiences

Out of the cohort of 23 students, 10 were UK nationals, eight French, one Spaniard, one Italian, one Irish, one Venezuelan and one Mauritian. Of the eight French, seven were concurrently completing the second year of a masters in teaching French as a foreign language (fle). Seventeen of the students had already worked as a foreign language assistant (FLA) in schools either in the UK or abroad. All of the students had experience of the workplace, either through pursuing a previous career, or in temporary 'student' jobs. Many of the students also had experience working with young people or children through voluntary work, for example, sports coaching or youth clubs.

Because of the range of nationalities, the students had had very different experiences as pupils themselves and even those of the same nationality had been pupils in different contexts: schools situated in rural or urban settings; state or independently funded; secular or denominational. All the students, therefore, had a variety of experiences before starting the course, some of which may have been more influential than others in forming opinions about education and how to teach.

[Students] come to formal education with a range of prior knowledge, skills, beliefs, and concepts that significantly influence what they notice about the environment and how they organise and interpret it. This, in turn, affects their abilities to remember, reason, solve problems, and acquire new knowledge. (Bransford, Brown, and Cocking 2000, 10)

The purpose of the research was to determine which experiences were considered by the students as having produced ‘useful mental models’ which could inform reflection (Donovan, Bransford, and Pellegrino 1999) about effective practice and which were judged not so helpful.

Research into student teachers’ prior experiences has often focused on their own learning experiences as pupils and how this has informed their beliefs about practice (Calderhead and Robson 1991; Pajares 1992; Sexton 2004). Other studies have compared student teachers’ perceptions of the importance of prior experience for their learning before and after the training year (Banks 2009) or the influence of previous work-related practices in developing student teachers’ implicit pedagogical theories (Powell 1992). It is acknowledged that pre-service teachers’ beliefs, based on previous experience, influence their understanding and actions (Pajares 1992), but it is also seen as important that their beliefs should be challenged (Calderhead and Robson 1991) and those which may lead to inappropriate understanding or practice of better models of pedagogy should be relinquished (Darling-Hammond and Bransford 2005). The collaborative group tasks described in this paper were designed to stimulate discussion and reflection on what might be considered ‘good’ practice, so that any preconceptions that the students held of teaching and learning might be thoroughly interrogated.

Although the cohort reflected a wide variety of previous experiences, three main categories of student experience appeared particularly relevant to teacher development in a Scottish context: ‘home’ students, with experience of the Scottish education system as a pupil; students who had worked as a FLA, who already had experience of working within a school context with pupils; ‘fle’ students, who had sound theoretical knowledge of how to deconstruct their own language for learners, gained during the first year of masters study. It was decided to place the students in four groups of six and one of five, which reflected the multiple experiences of the cohort but which would always include a ‘home student’, a student who had previously worked as an FLA and a ‘fle’ student. The experiences often overlapped, for example, five of the seven ‘fle’ students had also worked as FLAs, as had six of the home students and two of the other nationalities. This was seen as beneficial as it allowed for more flexibility when determining the groupings and allowed a variety of perspectives to be taken in their discussions.

A secondary aim in constructing the groups was to ensure that all students had experience of working with all other students in the cohort over the 18 weeks when they were in the School of Education, partly as a social device, so that they would get to know each other but also to avoid ‘cliques’ which might have arisen if students had been allowed to self-select (Bacon, Stewart, and Anderson 2001).

The study

As already noted, the aim of the research was to elicit students’ views on the value of their own and others’ prior experiences in the performance and completion of the tasks. They were also asked about how prior experiences might affect the

dynamic of the groups they worked in and what improvements might make the tasks more effective. The tasks required students to assign meaning to an aspect of policy, for example, government recommendations, curriculum guidelines or codes of behaviour, through discussion. Other tasks required them to allocate grades and/or feedback to examples of pupils' work, justifying their conclusions with reference to theory through commentaries posted on the student VLE and in short presentations to the class. One task in which the students stayed in the same groupings for four weeks entailed the production of resources aimed at developing listening, speaking, reading and writing skills on particular topics, focusing on a different skill each week.

Questionnaires

The students were surveyed at the end of the first semester and subsequently, at the end of the second semester, seven students, approximately a third of the cohort, representative of the three main groupings within the class, were interviewed. The first part of the questionnaire related to students' prior educational experiences and also to experience in personal and professional contexts. The second part related to the tasks, their utility, the way they were carried out and the relative value of different types of experience. In all, the questionnaire comprised 11 open questions. Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2007) counsel against using open-ended questions in questionnaires because responses cannot be probed to elicit further meaning, as they can in interviews. They also suggest that open-ended questions may be too demanding of respondents' time. However, O'Cathain and Thomas (2004) suggest that closed questions reflect the researcher's, not the respondent's, agenda and that an important issue may be missed if a questionnaire relies solely on closed questions.

... closed questions should be used where alternative replies are known, are limited in number and are clear-cut. Open-ended questions are used where the issue is complex, where relevant dimensions are not known, and where a process is being explored. (Stacey 1969)

The issue being investigated in this study was multifaceted because of the variety of backgrounds and prior experiences of the students and their perceptions of others' 'stories' and the influence they had on the completion of the tasks. Closed questions, therefore, appeared rather restrictive, considering the exploratory nature of the investigation.

There may be difficulty in categorising the data obtained by asking open questions in surveys (O'Cathain and Thomas 2004). Some researchers regard them as qualitative (Bankauskaite and Saarelma 2003) while others have described open questions in questionnaires as producing quasi-qualitative data (Murphy et al. 1998). Open-ended questions are more likely to produce rich data (Schaefer and Dillman 1998; Sturgeon and Winter 1999), therefore, if they are to be analysed qualitatively, rigorous adherence to qualitative procedures must be adopted to ensure other researchers consider the findings 'validated' or 'trustworthy' (Mishler 1990).

Both researchers coded the survey data independently. Subsequently, a comparison of both sets of categories was conducted. After discussion, the initial codes were organised into broad overarching themes with sub-categories, and a list of

interview topics based on the themes was drawn up. A list of the original codes may be seen in Table 1.

There were six overarching categories with a number of sub-categories associated with them. During the coding process the focus was on the students' perceptions of the utility of the tasks and the way their own and others' prior experiences informed their completion. However, other matters arose from the data which had not been foreseen, for example, many of the students made reference to issues affecting successful completion of the tasks, either positively or negatively. Some of these issues appeared related to students' prior experiences, but could also be said to be linked to perceptions of individuals' personality and influence on the groups. These issues, as well as the more 'predictable' codes, were explored during the interviews.

Interviews

Interviews with the students were considered important not only as a means of verifying or disconfirming the initial findings from the survey, but also to probe deeper into some of the issues raised in the students' responses in the questionnaires. The students selected for interview reflected the multiple nationalities and prior experiences of the group.

Table 1. Overarching codes resulting from questionnaires.

Perceptions of the tasks' usefulness
<i>Educational</i>
<i>Learning styles</i>
<i>Relation to practice</i>
The make-up of the groups
<i>Personal/social</i>
<i>Interpersonal</i>
<i>Professional</i>
Perceptions of the utility of students' own prior experience
<i>Living abroad</i>
<i>Working in teams</i>
<i>Knowledge of the Scottish education system</i>
<i>Teaching experience</i>
<i>Experience as a FLA</i>
<i>Experience from fle course</i>
Perceptions of the utility of other students' prior experience
<i>Knowledge of the Scottish education system</i>
<i>Teaching experience</i>
<i>Experience as a FLA</i>
Roles adopted by students
<i>Organisation</i>
<i>Moderation</i>
<i>Ideas</i>
Collaboration issues
<i>Attitudes</i>
<i>Communication</i>
<i>Time constraints</i>
<i>Lack of direction</i>

It was essential that the students felt they could speak freely, so that the interviews could be considered 'a meaningful conversation' (Holstein and Gubrium 2004, 301), with a 'free flow of information' (Spradley 1979, 78), not overtly directed by the researchers' agenda. The questions were as open and non-directive as possible to allow them to answer without feeling pressure to conform to any pre-conceived notions of what they might feel to be an 'acceptable' answer. Interviews are unavoidably collaborative (Holstein and Gubrium 2004). 'While the respondent... actively constructs and assembles answers, he or she does not simply "break out" talking. Neither elaborate narratives, nor one-word replies, emerge without provocation' (152). However, aware of the power differential that might inhibit or modify the students' responses (Kvale 2006), great care was taken to ensure that any potential power imbalance was minimised. Students were interviewed at a time of their choice in an informal setting with refreshments provided. The overall timing of the interviews, that is, at the end of the second semester, when all their assessments had been completed and the students could be considered 'qualified', was also judged to be conducive to obtaining genuine opinions, as by this time they could be described as independent of the university and therefore, perhaps less sensitive to tutors' perceived views.

The interviews were semi-structured with open questions which took as their starting point the overarching categories in the codes, with prompts relating to the sub-categories if necessary. Students were asked for their views about the tasks' usefulness and the way the groups were constructed. They were also asked about their perceptions of the usefulness of their own and others' previous experience in completing the tasks and the roles group members adopted. The students were encouraged to develop responses and were all asked at the end of the interview if they wished to add anything about the tasks that they felt was relevant.

The coding of the interview data was again performed by each researcher individually, using the original codes from the questionnaire data, before coming together to discuss possible interpretations and produce initial hypotheses. These hypotheses were then interrogated by both researchers together, with reference to both the questionnaire and interview data, before the findings were decided.

Findings

The findings are synthesised from the questionnaire and the interview data and are grouped under three broad categories. These categories were distilled from the original coding of the questionnaires, as seen in Table 1. The first category related to the tasks themselves and the way they were organised by the tutors, that is, the first two original codes: 'Perceptions of the tasks' usefulness' and 'The make-up of the groups'. The second category brought together the two areas of prior experience identified in the original coding: the students' views of the value or otherwise of different types of their own and others' prior experience. The final category centred on collaboration issues surrounding the completion of the tasks and the roles adopted by other students in the group and the students themselves. Each of these categories will be discussed below, before considering the implications of the study for future development of subsequent collaborative tasks. Quotes supporting the findings are taken from the interview transcripts and can be considered to be representative of the views expressed by students in the questionnaires and the interviews.

The utility of the tasks and composition of the groups

All the students viewed the subject matter of the tasks very positively and the majority enjoyed the changing nature of the groups, citing social, professional and educational reasons. They also considered the presentation of their groups' findings beneficial to the development of their confidence and communication skills.

The students had a clear idea of the purpose of the tasks, one of which was to prepare them for future professional responsibilities, when they would be required to work as part of a team. 'It's important to collaborate as preparation for working as a teacher. You learn how to work as a team'. The links to the other parts of the course seemed clear to the majority of the students. 'The tasks helped us put theory into practice'. A number of students mentioned the usefulness of the tasks in terms of allowing them to reflect on coursework and 'discover' meaning for themselves through discussion with others, implicitly echoing social-constructivist views of learning (Vygotsky 1978, 1986; Mercer 1995), where learners are helped to construct their own understanding through their participation in the learning process (Barnes 1976). 'You learn more from each other'.

The students also highlighted social benefits of getting to know the other members of the class, through the pre-determined allocation of members to the groups. 'It's sensible; you get to know everyone'. Two students made negative comments about the groups, one stating that it had been 'intimidating at first' and the other stating a preference for working alone. However, this student also stated that she had 'learned a lot from others'.

The value or otherwise of prior experience

Certain types of prior experience were regarded highly by the students. Students who had worked as FLAs or had previous experience working in schools were seen to have relevant, practical, up-to-date knowledge of the ML classroom and the characteristics of the learners at different levels. 'The people who had been FLAs always had a lot of useful experience'. Foreign students found the experiences of the 'home' students very helpful with regard to developing understanding of the Scottish education system. A large number of the students mentioned that prior experience working in teams in previous work environments had made it easier for them to collaborate. 'I already had lots of experience of working in teams'. The 'fle' students appreciated their own prior experience of masters level study of their own language, seeing the theory studied in the first year of the masters as good preparation for the PGDE. However, other students saw little value in their contributions to group discussions as they felt that their previous experiences meant that the 'fle' students took too academic an approach. 'The "fle"s didn't get what the curriculum was about'.

It seems that prior experience which was accorded the greatest significance by the students related to the practical application of teaching and other collaborative skills, rather than to theory. Ellis (2005, 52) states, 'Teachers are concerned with what works in their own particular teaching contexts. [C]lassroom research... is still remote from actual practice'. At this fledgling stage in their careers, it may be considered natural that the students' concerns will centre on the classroom. However, earlier comments about the links between theory and practice may also be considered encouraging, in spite of being viewed as of less immediate concern.

Over half of the 'home' students stated that they found the experience of living abroad helpful personally because it had given them confidence to contribute to the group discussions. Study or work placements abroad are viewed as bringing an improvement of many positive personal characteristics and a greater intercultural appreciation (Hansel and Grove 1986; Kneale 2008; Pence and Macgillivray 2008). It is possible that the perceived personal benefits cited by these home students allowed them to take a measured and tactful approach towards the group discussions, which, as will be seen below, did not always appear to run smoothly.

Challenges surrounding the successful completion of the tasks

Issues relating to the completion of the tasks that the students raised all appeared to be affected by attitudes demonstrated by some of the students, possibly as a result of prior experiences, which were thought to affect the successful completion of the tasks. In the questionnaires and the interviews the majority of students identified practical issues, such as 'timetabling' or the size of the groups as a problem. Despite the availability of a room in which the students could meet one afternoon per week, it seemed that nobody had used it, preferring to meet in their own time. Work, personal commitments and unexplained absences meant that some groups might only communicate by email, which led to some students' frustration 'I felt there was a lack of collaboration when team members missed meetings and we couldn't really discuss how to get on with the task'. The importance of open and regular communication is underlined by Mattessich et al. (2001), who, as noted earlier, conducted an extensive literature review on factors which facilitated successful collaborative effort. Perhaps because of the difficulty of getting five or six people together at one time, face-to-face communication in a group might be minimal, if at all.

Difficulties in finding a time or place to meet could be linked to the issue of regard for the tasks which was also identified by students as potentially affecting their completion. 'Certain students got to know who would be doing all the work and landed them with it. Some hardly engaged at all'. With regard to the presentations in class, several students noted that some students had never presented at all 'People didn't show up for the meetings or didn't turn up on the day to present'. This seemed to be viewed as disregard for the others in the group. Given that the presentations were an important part of their professional and personal development, it could be said the non-appearance of certain students also showed a lack of professionalism.

Perhaps due to perceived difficulties in meeting and distribution of work among a group of six people, the majority of students believed that the optimum size for a group was four. Research indicates that groups of four to five work most efficiently in collaborative tasks (Davis 1993), although most groups in the study seemed to function well with six members.

Some students complained about a lack of direction within the groups. Others, in groups where students were perceived to be less involved, adopted a management role in order to keep the group working together and ensure successful execution of the task. 'Depending on who was in the group, I had to be leader. When I saw that people weren't engaged, I took responsibility to chivvy people up'. Although taking on the role of leader might have seemed arduous at the time, it may be that students who took the initiative to lead groups will be better equipped

to contribute as part of a team in a professional role. The importance of teamwork in the effective running of schools has been highlighted as a success indicator by HMIe (2006) in their review of inspections in Scotland between 2002–2005. The development of teamwork is also one of the characteristics of effective leadership which is identified in their publication ‘Improving Leadership in Scottish schools’ (HMIe 2000). However, leadership has to be sensitive (Weinberg and Gould 2011). Over a third of the students stated that some of the other students could be ‘over-powering’; as one put it, ‘Sometimes in a group, one or two people took over and wouldn’t listen to anybody else’.

Perhaps because of the strong personalities of some of the group members, other students took on a mediatory role. Several students mentioned that they had developed diplomatic skills through working with a variety of characters in the groups; others said that they saw their role as helping others to compromise. ‘I had to learn diplomatic skills. I wasn’t with like-minded people, but I had to work with them’. The students appeared to be in agreement that the best performing groups within which they had worked had listened to each other and were respectful of each other’s opinions. Other factors students believed contributed to the successful outcome of a task were preparation before the initial meeting of a group, goal-setting and equal sharing of the work to be done. These factors are some of those listed by Mattessich et al. (2001) as crucial in his review of research and literature on factors influencing successful collaboration.

When asked about the tasks for which the students had stayed in the same group for four weeks, there seemed little consensus about whether it was preferable or not. The foreign national students appeared to find it slightly more effective, citing continuity and social factors. ‘You really get to know each other and argue and agree more effectively’. The ‘home’ students tended to consider it appropriate for the task, which required them over the four weeks to produce classroom resources, which developed listening, speaking, reading and writing skills on one topic per group, but still raised issues about others’ contributions.

Conclusions

It appeared from the questionnaire and interview data that prior experiences, particularly those related to practical skills, were valued by the students as contributory factors to the successful completion of collaborative tasks. However, some of the students’ prior experiences led them to take a less active role in the tasks, while others led students to appear highly opinionated. The students were in agreement that there was a need for mutual respect and acceptance of others’ ideas in order to make the groups work effectively. All the students saw the benefits of pre-determined groupings which were changed every week and the tasks themselves seemed to elicit approval as a bridge between the theory studied in the university and the practice within schools.

The findings will form the basis of subsequent organisation of the tasks with more initial input to the students into aspects of collaborative working from the tutors. Specifically, more structured guidance will be provided to the students on the importance of the process of collaborative working: students will be reminded of ‘good audience rules’ that is, avoiding interruptions, seeking areas of agreement if possible, asking questions to prevent misunderstandings and demonstrating patience for other points of view (Tubbs and Carter 1978).

It is also intended to introduce self-assessment to the tasks, so that students will be encouraged to take responsibility for their own contributions and as part of the development of reflective practice. Students will also be asked to use peer assessment to engender a greater accountability to the group as a whole. The use of exemplars before the commencement of the tasks in the first semester should ensure that students are aware of relevant criteria and will be able to make objective judgements (Orsmond, Merry, and Reiling 2002). Students continuously rated as contributing inadequately by others in their groups will be offered support and monitored closely. Although formal assessment is not possible due to the nature of the course structure, it is hoped that the students will recognise the importance of collaboration as part of their professional development in preparation for working with teams in school and their responsibility to the rest of the groups with whom they work.

Regarding the presentations in class, all students will be expected to have presented by the end of the second semester, either individually or as part of a group, taking lead and support roles, thus assisting them to develop presentation skills, vital for good communication in the classroom. They will also be asked to reflect on how they may be able to transfer the model of collaborative learning they have undergone to their own classrooms, so that, as well as benefiting from enhanced learning opportunities, their pupils will develop the skills of negotiation and communication while demonstrating respect for others.

The findings of this study may be helpful to teacher educators in institutions who have not had the opportunity to offer collaborative working as part of teaching and learning up till now or to those who may be considering this type of learning. The students who participated in this study all appeared to understand the benefits of working in collaborative groups for their professional development. Although students identified areas of conflict, it seemed that many had also developed strategies for ensuring that the tasks were completed successfully and the majority appeared to have developed a number of personal and professional skills which would be useful to them in the classroom as practitioners. Future research will focus on the self and peer assessment which is planned to enhance these collaborative endeavours.

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