Motivation in group assessment: a phenomenological approach to post-graduate group assessment

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ABSTRACT

Whilst group work has many benfits for enhancing collaborative learning, it can cause anxiety in summative assessments when group members do not contribute equal e ort. Increasing understanding of student perceptions of group assessment, and in particular their motivation to persevere to overcome the challenges, has the potential to lead to better assessment design and reduce dysfunctional behaviour. This exploratory study borrows from phenomenology to investigate the lived experience of a cohort of post-graduate journalism students at a UK university, who were required to work in small groups to produce a web-based, multimedia journal for a final summative assessment. Using the expectancy-value theory of motivation, this study examines whether students were motivated by the task, and how this might influence their perception of the group assessment experience. The study found that not only was the group motivated by this assessment design, but also, in contrast to much of the literature on group assessment, their experience of group work was defined by harmony, loyalty and an 'all for one, one for all' attitude. It is therefore proposed that student groups are less likely to be dysfunctional or dissatisfied with group assessment if the group expects to do well and values the task.

KEYWORDS

Introduction

Teamwork and the ability to collaborate are highly valued employability skills, which higher education institutions strive to develop in their students through the increasing use of assessed group work (Maiden and Perry 2011). Gibbs (2010) meta-analysis of the empirical research into group project work finds strong evidence that it benefits students, with a number of surveys reporting that students often prefer group work to individual work (Gat eld 1999; Barfield 2003; White et al. 2005). Gibbs identifies six areas in which group work has a positive impact:

- student performance;
- marks;
- attitudes towards learning;

- persistence/retention;
- teachers can increase the complexity and challenge of the tasks students can experience;
- opportunity to involve students in collaborative work.

However, group work – especially as summative assessment – is problematic, with a number of issues that need to be considered if collaboration is to work towards, rather than against, the purpose of assessment (Webb 1997). Furthermore, there are concerns about dysfunctional behaviour in groups and student anxieties about the fairness of group assessment. In particular, studies have noted anxiety about 'free-riders' (Maiden and Perry 2011), and the 'sucker effect' whereby more able students reduce their e ort to avoid being made a 'sucker' of (Houldsworth and Mathews 2000). Complex systems have been devised to enable students to redistribute group marks in an e ort to overcome some of these problems (Gatfield 1999), but these can sometimes confuse students who may have a poor understanding of peer and self-assessment (Nordberg 2008).

A variety of mechanisms have been explored in the literature to deal with dysfunctional behaviour in group assessment, such as teachers issuing a warning to students or following group work with an individual examination. However, Maiden and Perry (2011) found no evidence to suggest that one method was any better than the other. Rather their research suggests that, 'it is the attempt to address free-riding that is significant rather than the particular method chosen' (Maiden and Perry 2011, 460). However, a study for the Higher Education Academy in 2013 found that, whilst students were frustrated by uneven contributions, 80% of survey respondents said they were happy to contribute more than their fair share to a group project if they felt it improved the work or their learning (Bentley and Warwick 2013).

Gibbs (2010) suggests it is the environment created by the teacher that seems to have the greatest impact on group work. In the end, he concludes, the most reliable way to minimise dysfunctional behaviour in groups is not through time-consuming mechanisms, but for the teacher to create a 'healthy learning milieu' in which students are supported to understand the value of group work, the assessment system, expected behaviour and the necessary group work skills. To address these issues, there is a need to understand more about group assessment as the students themselves experience it. However, few studies have investigated qualitative data on how students *feel* about group assessment. Instead, most of the literature relies on quantitative analysis of questionnaires, usually using a Likert scale for students to respond to different statements based on what instructors feel is important. Whilst this ensures a large number of responses enabling hypotheses to be tested, these studies may not

capture the full range and nuances of the issues that concern students. There is a need, therefore, for more qualitative studies in order to develop a richer understanding of group assessment from the student point of view.

Given the demands and potential challenges of group work, students need to be motivated by the assessment design, otherwise there is a danger they will not persevere to overcome the dificulties and achieve the learning outcomes. From a social constructivist theory of learning (Vygotsky 1978; Bruner 1985) motivation carries great importance, since the theory of knowledge construction and internalised meaning-making requires students to be active – rather than passive – learners, with motivation 'a necessary prerequisite and co-requisite for learning' (Palmer 2005, 1855). Although group assessment has been explored extensively in the research literature, less attention has been paid to the role of motivation in group assessment, and its implications for assessment design.

Simpson suggests that the widely used expectancy-value theory of motivation could be applied to assessment design, and offer a practical framework for designing tasks that enhance rather than diminish motivation (2013, 61). This exploratory study seeks to develop this proposition by investigating the lived experience of a cohort of post-graduate journalism students at a UK university, who were required to work in small groups to produce an online journal for a final summative assessment. The methodology of the study borrows from phenomenology, taking an interpretivist approach based on an assumption that reality is socially constructed by the people experiencing the phenomenon.

Through thematic analysis of the responses to an online questionnaire and a group activity, using the nominal group technique, the study found that not only were the students motivated by this assessment design, but also, in contrast to much of the literature on dysfunction in group assessment, their experience of group work was defined by harmony and loyalty. It is therefore proposed, drawing on expectancy-value theory, that student groups are less likely to be dysfunctional or dissatisfied with group assessment if the group expects to do well and values the task. This has implications for practice

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because it o ers the potential for designing out dysfunctional behaviour and anxiety in group assess- ment by focusing on expectancy and value as key variables in assessment design.

Background

Group work in journalism education is now common, particularly in newsroom exercises where students work in teams to produce news reports across di erent platforms (Charles and Luce 2016). Practitioner researchers have investigated student perceptions of this experiential learning approach, and there is general consensus that students find it both beneficial and engaging, although it is di cult to quantify the level of meaningful learning produced (Steel et al. 2007; Rhodes and Roessner 2008; Mathews and Heathman 2014; Charles and Luce 2016). However, when such group work exercises are used as summative assessment, Frost (2001) found students had mixed perceptions of the fairness and consistency of their group marks, even though they played a key role in assessing their own performance.

But in general there has been little research into group assessment in journalism education, although collaborative teamwork is an obvious skill for journalism students to acquire (Aumente 2007). Indeed, Seamon (2008) criticises journalism educators for not familiarising themselves with and making use of existing pedagogical research in other vocational subjects in order to improve teaching and learning. He suggests that assessment in journalism education, in particular, needs further scholarly attention.

For this current study, the final group assessment in the Online Journalism module at Manchester Metropolitan University's Master's degree in Multimedia Journalism was chosen for analysis, because it is potentially problematic for journalism students. It requires them to apply their technical digital skills – specifically HTML/CSS, the computer language used to create websites – rather than more traditional journalistic writing skills. Students are required to work in small groups to produce a multimedia journal using valid, semantic code. Such skills enable them to work confidently in a digital environment (Quinn and Filak 2005; Zion and Craig 2015), but there is dispute within journalism education and the industry itself about the relevance of journalists learning to code and the willingness of students to study it (Hannaford 2015). Therefore, there is potential for some students to lack motivation for this assessment task, and for this to impact on their experience of group assessment.

The students were randomly assigned to groups and received a group grade for the end product. Students also had the opportunity to moderate the group mark up or down, within limits, for each group member according to pre-established criteria to reflect each student's contribution.

The research questions for this study are as follows:

. (1) To what extent do the students perceive they have learnt sufficient skills to expect to do well in the assessment task?

. (2) To what extent do students perceive this task to be relevant and valuable?

. (3) What is the lived experience of students in this group assessment?

Motivation

It would seem there is strong potential for assessment, more than anything else, to enhance or destroy students' motivation for learning (Harlen 2012). High-stakes assessment causes anxiety and introduces an element of competition which could diminish motivation, especially in the context of group assess- ment. Students may be encouraged to take the easiest route to achieve success, rather than engaging in strategies that lead to deeper learning (Harlen 2012). A group assessment could also be assumed to have an influence on motivation because of the importance of relationships in forming the beliefs, values and emotions that constitute motivation (Martin and Dowson 2009).

Definitions and theory

Early theories of motivation viewed it from a behaviourist perspective, whereby external stimuli and reinforcement – such as rewards and punishment – were seen to influence motivation. More recently.the emphasis has shifted to a socio-cognitive paradigm, which believes motivation to be internal and emphasises students' individual beliefs about themselves, their goals and values – what Pintrich and Schunk (2002, 59) describe as the 'subjective and phenomenological psychology of the individual'. However, these motivational beliefs can be in uenced by environmental factors such as classroom experience and assessment.

The social constructivist view of motivation is concerned with the influence of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to drive students' desire to study and learn. Intrinsic motivation is defined as 'the doing of an activity for its inherent satisfactions rather than for some separable consequence' (Ryan and Deci 2000, 56). It is highly situated and accepts that not everyone is intrinsically motivated for everything. It is related to ideas of interest, satisfaction, mastery and enjoyment gained from doing a task. There is general agreement that intrinsic motivation leads to high-quality learning and creativity. Self-determination theorists argue that intrinsic motivation is enhanced when basic psychological needs are fulfilled, namely competence, autonomy and relatedness (Ryan and Deci 2000). Thus, individuals are said to be intrinsically motivated when they are self-determined.

Extrinsic motivation is defined as 'a construct that pertains whenever an activity is done in order to attain some separable outcome' (Ryan and Deci 2000, 60). A

constructivist perspective would see extrinsic motivation as leading to shallow learning, because students will be more strategic in their learning if the main motivation is to achieve a higher grade. This could be particularly true in group assessment, where students might decide to adopt a pragmatic strategy whereby the most able member takes on most of the task, rather than 'wasting' e ort helping all group members achieve learning outcomes by working together (Webb 1997). However, self-determination theorists argue that some forms of extrinsic motivation may represent an intermediate level of self-determination. For example, seeing value in a task because it is of benefit to a career, could be seen as an extrinsic motivation but there is a level of relatedness implied which could lead to self-determination. Thus, self-determination theory would tend to see the intrinsic/extrinsic constructs not simply as good/bad motivation, but as a developmental process. Students may need extrinsic motivation in the early period of study, but this may lead to intrinsic motivation as they develop.

Because learning is a social phenomenon (Vygotsky 1978; Bruner 1985), some of the learners' motivation is derived from the group. This could be extrinsic in that a student is motivated by a desire not to incur the disapproval of other members. It could also be intrinsic if collaboration itself is seen as enjoyable and the collective reward valued.

Motivation: expectancy-value theory

The widely used expectancy-value theory of motivation could offer a practical framework for designing assessment tasks that enhance rather than diminish motivation (Simpson 2013, 61). Expectancy-value theory is based on the work of Atkinson in the 1950s and 1960s, expanded into the field of education by Eccles and further developed by Wigfield and others. The theory proposes that motivation is the *product* of the perceived possibility of accomplishing the task and the value of accomplishing it (Wigfield and Eccles 2000). Thus – if applied to group assessment – if students do not expect to be able to accomplish a task or do not see the value of it, they will not be motivated to overcome the problems and frustrations which authentic group assessment almost inevitably entails.

Expectancy relates to the student's beliefs about how well they will do in an assigned task, but also to ability beliefs – what they believe they can already do. It is strongly linked to the idea of self-efficacy, whereby a person believes themselves to be capable of performing a task at the appropriate level for success (Bandura 1982). It is a significant predictor of achievement in college students according to longitudinal studies across a range of subjects carried out by Pintrich and Zusho (2007). Current research suggests that expectancy and self-efficacy are domain specific, rather than global, so a student may have expectations of success

in one course module but not in another. Expectancy therefore differs from a generalised sense of self-esteem (Pintrich and Zusho 2007).

Eccles et al. (1983) have defined four components of the *value* portion of the motivation model:

- *Attainment value* is the importance of doing well and how it ts in with goals.
- *Intrinsic value* is the enjoyment one gains from doing the task and is linked to intrinsic motivation and interest.
- *Utility value* is the usefulness of a task and how it fits into future plans, and so is similar to extrinsic motivation.
- *Cost value* refers to how the engagement in a task might limit one's ability to do other tasks. The perceived cost value could have implications for group assessment, in that a student might experience a high 'cost' because group work tends to be time-consuming and could lead to the increased stress of working with others. Alternatively, it could be low cost if it is perceived to be an opportunity to reduce workload by sharing responsibilities and benefitting from others' knowledge. Expectancy-value theory has been frequently applied to explain student choices and achievement, and to design motivational classroom environments. However, it does not seem to have been used as a framework for the study of students' perceptions of assessment design. The potential of expectancy-value theory in this context seems worth exploring, given the high validity of Eccles and Wigfields' work on the theory in longitudinal studies in schools (Pintrich and Zusho 2002). Whilst motivation itself is di cult to measure, the components of expectancy and value might be more easily observable by means of students' own self-reports. A limitation of the current literature on motivation in education is that most of the research is based on studies of school children, which may not be generalisable to post-graduate students. Perhaps there is an assumption that Masters students are, by definition, motivated to study and therefore there is little to be gained from investigating this. However, motivation is known to be domain specific so, although the students are motivated to study journalism, they may be less or more motivated to study the technical module of the course, with implications for their experience of group assessment. Since Eccles and Wigfield (2002) emphasise the importance of context when studying motivation, group work, post-graduate studies and new digital technologies would seem to present very specific contexts to investigate.

Methodology

The research questions are concerned primarily with understanding how a set of people perceive a phenomenon they are experiencing at a particular time and in a particular social setting. The phenomenon, therefore, is understood not as an external reality but is socially constructed and given meaning by the people experiencing it (Gergen 2009; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Jackson 2012). Social constructionism, as developed by Berger and Luckmann (1967), acknowledges the importance of context and that different people – or groups of people – might interpret the same phenomenon in different ways leading to multiple realities (Crotty 1998). Thus, the methodology for this study borrows from phenomenology (Husserl [1900] 2002), in that it seeks to understand the phenomenon of group assessment through the eyes of the people experiencing it. However, it tends towards Heidegger's ([1927] 1962) rendition of phenomenology, which argues that, since we are all 'in the world', it is impossible for the researcher to 'bracket' or suspend her own preconceptions as required by pure Husserlian phenomenology (Bradbury-Jones, Sambrook, and Irvine 2009). Van der Mescht (2004, 1) suggests the interpretive phenomenological approach lends itself to '"What's it like for them?" type of studies' that can lead to 'startling new insights' into complex issues in education.

Online questionnaire

A self-administered online questionnaire was developed for the 2014–2015 cohort of post-graduate journalism students. There were 14 students in the cohort and 10 students (71%) consented to take part in this section of the study. The questionnaire was used to capture the lived experience of individual participants, and thus provide a foundation on which to build an understanding of the group experience, which is the principal aim of this study. The questionnaire was administered to students immediately after submission of their assessment, so that they were still emotionally and cognitively involved. It used both closed- and open-ended questions to encourage reflection on various aspects of the group assessment experience relating to motivation.

Group activity

Seven of the 14 students (50%) participated in a group activity that took place several weeks after the online survey (to accommodate the Easter break). It was structured using the nominal group technique (Delbecq, Van de Ven, and Gustafson 1975). Nominal group technique has been used widely in studies where the perceptions of a particular group of people are being studied (Dewar et al. 2003; Tuffrey-Wijne et al. 2007; Castiglioni et al. 2008). From a practical perspective, nominal group technique enables a wide spectrum of experiences to be collected in a relatively short

amount of time (approximately 90 min), an important consideration given the students' commitments at the time of this study. Interestingly, Webb and Kevern 2001 insist that group activity of any kind is incompatible with phenomenology, because any interaction 'contaminates' the described experience of the individual. However, Bradbury-Jones, Sambrook, and Irvine (2009, 664) argue that phenomenological group activity is not necessarily a 'methodological crime'. Whilst acknowledging that some researchers have combined them uncritically, the authors argue that the Heideggerian tradition is less concerned with uncontaminated accounts, and that group activity might actually open up new perspectives through discussion. Furthermore, in this current study, group activity is congruent with the research questions, since it is the *group* experience that is being investigated rather than solely the individual.

In the nominal group technique session, students were asked to consider the final assessment for Online Journalism and write down their thoughts, perceptions and ideas about their experience of two issues:

- Learning HTML/CSS;
- group assessment (as opposed to individual assessment).

The nominal group technique for this study broadly follows the steps outlined by Delbecq, Van de Ven, and Gustafson (1975):

(1) silent generation of ideas

(2) round robin recording

(3) serial discussion

(4) vote and ranking

(5) tally of vote and ranking

(6) final discussion

The results of the voting and ranking stage were used as a basis for the nal discussion. Field notes were taken alongside the detailed contemporary written account of the discussion.

Analysis

The responses to the questionnaire are presented thematically in line with the research questions. The responses generated in the group activity are analysed according to the voting and ranking stages, and the top five priority responses devised by the group for each question are presented in tables. Then a narrative approach

is used to analyse the qualitative data gathered from the questionnaire and the discussion stage of the group activity. This approach is preferred because it avoids fragmenting the comments and discussion into disembodied codes and themes, which would diminish the authenticity of the students' accounts of their experience of the phenomenon (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2013).

This approach remains true to the central idea of phenomenology in that it seeks to retain the context of the whole lived experience (Hycner 1985).

Combined, these analytical approaches to the data will facilitate a contextualised interpretation of the students' experience and perceptions of the phenomenon under investigation as they relate to the research questions.

Findings

Online questionnaire

The closed question responses are summarised in Table 1.

Question	Very satisfied	Satisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
How satisfied were you with working as a group on this assessment?	6	4		
	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I worked harder on this assessment because it was a group assessment.	1	9		
I believe our group had gained enough knowledge of HTML/CSS to do well on this assessment.	2	8		
Compared to other skills I have learnt on this course, I am not		5	5	

good at HTML/CSS				
I got better at HTML/CSS working in a group than I would have if I'd worked by myself.	1	4	5	
It's important to me to be good at this technical, web-design aspect of the course.		9	1	
Creating our own web site using HTML/CSS was an interesting assessment task.	2	7	1	
	Good knowledge	Some basic knowledge	No knowledge	
How would you rate your knowledge of HTML at the start of the MMJ course back in September?		3	7	
	Done mainly by one individual	Shared equally		
The technical aspect of this assessment (i.e. constructing the website using HTML/CSS) was….	8	2		

All participating students responded that they were satisfied or very satisfied working as a group. When asked to write about the best aspect of group work, students described the growth of friendships and social connections:

The support (and love!) given by my team!

Working together in the library to bring in all the elements. It was nice getting to know each other better.

Pulling all the work together and spending time with friends.

Others valued the process of collaboration on a major task:

It was fun to bounce ideas o our peers.

The delegation of responsibilities to allow people to use their strengths to benefit the group.

Knowing you have someone to rely on.

When asked to consider the worst aspect of group work, students consistently described the difficulty of finding time to get together face to face. Responses included:

Trying to meet up outside uni on a regular basis due to jobs/locations etc.

Difficult to get together as we don't live near to each other and members were either ill or away.

However, three students reported that the worst aspect of group work had been the added stress of collaborating on a joint task:

The last minute stress of one team member giving me something to put on the website a few hours before the deadline!

Being afraid of letting them down.

Even though time-management was a problem for some students, all agreed with the statement 'I worked harder on this assessment because it was a group assessment'.

All students agreed or strongly agreed that their group had gained enough knowledge of HTML/ CSS to do well on this assessment. Two speci cally said that pooling their knowledge had helped them overcome di culties with a new technical skill:

Between the three of us we managed to successfully create a website with the right content and materials as well as successfully using style pages and coding.

We got the hang of HTML by sharing knowledge with one another and practice.

Other students reported difficulties with the coding but seemed to have overcome these:

I literally knew nothing about HTML. We have learnt how to merge our creative licence with the

technical aspects of the website.

Nine students agreed and one disagreed that it was important to be good at this technical, web-design aspect of the course. Those students who agreed with the statement all felt that it would enhance their employment prospects:

I think the modern day journalist needs to have at least a basic knowledge of HTML/CSS so becoming good at it is a career necessity. Part of the reason I took this course was to learn about HTML as I think it's an incredibly valuable skill to have in this day and age!

Even the student who disagreed with the statement still felt it was an important skill to have studied:

I feel HTML/CSS is worth knowing and a valuable skill, but I don't feel like it will be something I will focus on after leaving the course.

When asked if creating their own website using HTML/CSS had been an *interesting* assessment task, one student disagreed – although this was not the same respondent who had disagreed that it was important to be good at this skill.

Group activity

Seven students (50%) participated in the group activity. This included at least one student from each of the four assessment groups. In keeping with the nominal group technique stages, students silently generated their responses to the statements provided by the researcher and shared them with the group. Students then voted individually for the five items which were most important to them. They then ranked these items giving five points to the most important and one point to the least important. Table 2 summarises the votes and ranking for items generated in the group activity in response to the statement –'Write down your thoughts, perceptions and ideas about your experience of learning HTML/ CSS'. The top five ranked responses are shown.

Rank	Items	No. of votes	5	4	3	2	1	Total
1	Will make a big difference to potential employers knowing we have it.	5	3		2			21
2	In the modern day world, it's very useful skill	5	1	2	2			19
3	We should be allowed "cheats"/shortcuts. Sometimes made more complicated than it needed to be. Had to be done in a specific way.	4	1		1	2		12
4	Lynda.com and other online resources	4	1		1	1	1	11

	helped eg W3schools.							
5	Quite intimidating, like learning a foreign language	3		2			1	9

Students were then asked to consider their responses to the following statement –'Write down your thoughts, perceptions and ideas about your experience of group assessment (as opposed to individual assessment.)'. The top five responses generated are shown in Table 3.

Rank	Items	No. of votes	5	4	3	2	1	Total
1	Chose roles we thought we'd be best at – played to our strengths	5	1	3		1		19
2	As a group, felt accountable to others in the group, they whipped me into shape. Left to my own devices, I'd have left it too late. So it brought out the best in me.	3	1		2			11
3	Fairly difficult to get everyone together in same time same space.	2	1		1			8
3	Working as a group meant we could bond and go to events we might not have gone to on our own. Enriched our social and cultural lives.	2	1		1			8
4	Playing to each other's strengths was conducive to a good work environment.	3	1				2	7

Immediately following the voting and ranking stage, students were invited to discuss the items they had generated. The discussion was not recorded for privacy reasons, but the researcher took detailed notes with the prior consent of the group, which are presented in narrative form.

Discussion

This section critically examines the research findings within the context of the existing literature from which the research questions derived.

RQ1. To what extent do the students perceive they have learnt sufficient skills to expect to do well in the assessment task?

The students all believed their *group* had enough knowledge of HTML/CSS to do well on the assessment, according to the survey responses. This would seem to be a good achievement, since very few of them had even basic knowledge of these skills at the start of the unit. However, there was far less confidence at an individual level. Only half the students felt they were 'good' at HTML compared to other skills they had learnt on the course. Some students reported finding the code 'intimidating, like a foreign language'. In the nominal group technique discussion, one student said he had to rely on the workbook to accomplish the HTML tasks. Another reassured him that just learning the basics and not being afraid of the code was a sufficient achievement, suggesting she had developed a level of self-efficacy (Bandura 1982), and was keen for others to feel similarly satisfied with their progress. Expectancy was, therefore, high for the *group* but much lower for individuals (Wigfield and Eccles 2000). In the light of these findings, it is interesting that, in each group, there was an individual sufficiently con dent to take on the role of coding the web journal, and these individuals had the confidence of their peers. It seems it was this ability to assign a challenging task to a competent group member that gave the group as a whole its *expectancy* to succeed. Indeed, this was the response which ranked most highly for students in the nominal group technique activity: 'Chose roles we thought we'd be best at – played to our strengths'.

As a result of this strategy and assessment design, it seems not all students perceived their individual knowledge of HTML to have been *enhanced* by group work. Indeed, when asked about this in the survey, only half of the students agreed they learnt more working in a group than if they had worked alone. Two students in the nominal group technique activity voted for the statement: 'Not sure how relevant group work was to HTML course. Only one person did the HTML'.

RQ2. To what extent do students perceive this task to be relevant and valuable?

Almost all students in the survey agreed that learning HTML/CSS was important and the assessment was interesting. Similarly, in the nominal group technique discussion phase, students agreed this had been a useful part of the course and the assessment had been 'good', even though there had been some initial hostility to the technical demands. One student exclaimed with a big smile on her face:

Just thinking about this assessment makes me happy!

The group agreed that this had been an assessment worth spending time on, and this was discussed in the group activity. Its relevance to real-world tasks and the opportunity to produce an authentic artefact seemed to have given the assessment greater meaning:

I de nitely invested more in it. I wanted it to look good because it was a website, whereas if it's just an essay, not so much.

Other students seem to have constructed personalised meaning from the assessment task, because it represented accomplishment of something which had been challenging and they had been keen to share this accomplishment with family members:

My mum was very proud when I showed it to her! I showed my mum the code – but she didn't get it!

As detailed earlier, Eccles et al. (1983) defined four components of the value portion of the motivational model, and the ndings can be analysed in this context:

Attainment value – Students were primarily concerned with performance goals rather than mastery. Learning enough HTML/CSS to do well in this assessment was valued more highly than gaining expertise.

Intrinsic value – Only one respondent to the survey did not find the assessment interesting. Others felt proud of their work and had wanted to share it.

Utility value – The group perceived the task to be important and useful to their future journalism careers.

Cost value – Some students perceived a cost in that collaboration produced the stress of finding time to meet and not letting others down. Others perceived it to be low cost because the large, complex task could be shared with others.

Thus, it seems that *value* was high for the group of students. *Expectancy* was also observed – thanks to the ability to allocate the HTML coding to a competent individual within the group. So it can be argued from the findings that, based on the expectancy-value theory, this group of students found the assessment design motivating. Students need a high level of motivation in order to devote the time

and energy required of a complex authentic assessment (Palmer 2005), and there is certainly evidence here to suggest that the assessment experience enhanced students' motivation rather than diminished it (Harlen 2012).

RQ3. What is the lived experience of students in this group assessment?

Although the positive impact of group work has been well documented (Gibbs 2010), there is a large body of research reporting dysfunctional behaviour in groups, leading to student dissatisfaction with the experience (Gatfield 1999; Houldsworth and Mathews 2000; Nordberg 2008; Maiden and Perry 2011; Bentley and Warwick 2013). In contrast, these post-graduate students had a very positive attitude towards group work. The overwhelming experience of the group was of harmonious relationships and loyalty, with all four groups declining the opportunity to reallocate marks to reflect contributions. The teacher's observations had revealed considerable discrepancies in the contributions made by students, yet this did not result in accusations of freeloading.

Instead, students reported that they enjoyed 'bouncing ideas' o others and being able to 'rely on' others – consistent with Gibbs (2010) summary of the positive impact of group work. Students in general felt their work improved as a result of group collaboration. So although students had not collaborated to share their learning of HTML/CSS, leaving that task to one group member, it seems collaboration had encouraged students to replicate the attitudes and diligence of other highly committed students.

Social issues played a prominent role in their perception of the group work. In the nominal group technique activity, students immediately brought up the issue of loyalty. Although one student felt it was important for the assessor to know how much work each student had been responsible for, others in the group were quick to disagree:

> it's di cult in a group to then say you don't want somebody to get full marks. I wanted what was best for my group. Yes. The whole point of group work is one for all, all for one.

It is unclear from the research data why the group loyalty was so strong. Certainly, there is evidence from the literature to suggest that students have a more positive experience of group work if they have prior work experience (Gatfield 1999), and all students responding to the survey did indeed have work experience. However, it seems unlikely that this alone would account for the sense of unity. Another possible factor is the close age range of the cohort (Barfield 2003), but, again, it seems unlikely that this offers a complete explanation. Perhaps this sense of 'all for one and one for all' derives simply from the group dynamics of this particular cohort. What is far from certain is whether the teacher had any part to play in creating this 'healthy learning milieu' discussed by Gibbs (2010), and whether a

similar loyalty could be fostered in a different cohort.

Linked to this sense of loyalty was the theme of friendship and bonding. This strongly influenced their perception of the group work experience, with two students saddened that they had not experienced the same growth in friendship that other groups had, and seemed to view this as 'failure':

They're great guys, don't get me wrong. But we didn't bond in the same way other groups did.

It is interesting to note that this did not emerge in the survey completed immediately after the assessment, but in the group activity one month later, suggesting these students had reflected on the experience over time, and their perception of the experience in this regard had evolved.

The students' lived experience would suggest that the assessment experience in general enhanced students' motivation rather than diminished it (Harlen 2012). Martin and Dowson's (2009) study suggests that learners' motivation is, in part, derived from relationships with the group and relation- ships were an overriding factor for these students. At times, this appeared to have been an intrinsic motivation because the students gained satisfaction from their group's success. But, at other times, this motivation was perhaps extrinsic because they wished to avoid letting down their peers. The extrinsic motivation to gain a high mark also led to pragmatic group work strategies such as leaving all the HTML/CSS to the team member most likely to do it well. This meant most students effectively 'dropped' this element of the unit (even whilst acknowledging it was an important skill to acquire), and deliberately chose to avoid developing their skills as soon as they could do so and still complete the assessment successfully.

There was evidence elsewhere too to suggest that both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation played a part (Ryan and Deci 2000). The cohort's intrinsic motivation seemed to be strong, with students describing the satisfaction they gained from creating a web journal they could be proud of. There was also extrinsic motivation in that students perceived this task to have real-world relevance to their future career plans. This is consistent with self-determination theory, which suggests that the relationship between the two forms of motivation is subtle (Ryan and Deci 2000); both may have importance at various stages in a task and may change as a student develops.

Limitations

The phenomenological approach used in this study is inevitably subjective, domain-specific and focuses on a small number of students participating in a particular assessment task at a particular university. It is, therefore, not appropriate to generalise from these findings to other cohorts of students. Some students taking

part in the group assessment did not consent to take part in the research study, so their experiences and perceptions are not represented here, which could potentially bias the findings. As noted earlier, the study design had to take into consideration students' other academic commitments at the time of year. In particular, this meant that the longer, in-depth interviews more typically associated with phenomenological-type studies were not possible in the time frame. The short online survey and nominal group technique activity were chosen by the researcher as a means of efficiently collecting data from the group, whilst still providing depth, richness and a sense of the collective group experience. However, it is acknowledged that some interesting aspects of the participants' experience may have been missed as a result of these research methods.

Conclusion and implications for practice

Motivation theory can be used to investigate students' experience of group assessment. By observing expectancy and value, the students' motivation to complete the assessment could be analysed (Wigfield and Eccles 2000), and the data suggested that the students' motivation to complete the assessment was high. This result was surprising given the potentially challenging assessment. Expectancy-value theory is not usually applied to assessment design (Simpson 2013), but this study would seem to suggest that it is a powerful formula for evaluating student motivation and attitudes to assessment, which could prove beneficial when looking to improve future iterations of assessments.

The most unexpected finding in this study was the harmony and loyalty that defined this cohort's experience of group assessment, in contrast to the difficulties reported in so much of the literature in this field (Gatfield 1999; Houldsworth and Mathews 2000; Nordberg 2008; Maiden and Perry 2011). Not only did the students report an 'all for one, one for all' attitude, but friendship and emotional bonding seemed to be major issues which were regarded as signs of success by those who had experienced them, and those who had not. It has been di cult to explain this based on current research in the field, but it could be that the students' motivation – evidenced by observing their group expectancy to do well in the task and the value they placed on the task – could play a role in their positive experience. It is possible students are less likely to be concerned about the behaviour and contribution of others if completing the assessment is in itself motivating and satisfying. Similarly, students are perhaps less likely to exhibit negative group behaviour if they are motivated by the assessment design. Indeed, it could be that expectancy-value theory could be applied to predict the *behaviour* and *experience* of students in group work, not just their motivation. This leads to the following hypothesis derived from the findings of this study: student groups are less likely to be dysfunctional or dissatisfied with group assessment if the group expects to do

well and values the task.

Testing this hypothesis could help understand whether designing assessment tasks which students value and feel con dent in achieving could help reduce reports of dysfunctional group behaviour more effectively than the complex, time-consuming mechanisms used to redistribute marks. The latter presupposes students will find group work problematic. The former places the onus on the teacher – through assessment design – to create the 'healthy learning milieu' referred to by Gibbs (2010) as the most reliable way of ensuring group work is beneficial to all.

So, although phenomenological studies are not generalisable, they can lead to a deeper under- standing of a phenomenon, enabling the researcher to construct new hypotheses inductively from the qualitative data (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2013). This is consistent with Van der Mescht (2004), who argued that the interpretive phenomenological approach can offer new insights into familiar educational dilemmas. Therefore, although the scope of this study is limited to one particular cohort of students, the findings suggest the potential for further quantitative studies to explore a hypothesis and apply expectancy-value theory in a different context: i.e. the behaviour of groups during assessment and the design of those assessments. Given the increasing use of group assessment in higher education, this has important implications for practice.

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