Developing oral skills and critical thinking through problem-orientated group work and assessment

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Our Flexible Learning Pilot …

'Enhancing Postgraduate critical thinking and oral competency through Problem-Oriented Project Learning with Viva Voce Assessments'

GEOG20072 *Research Design and Fieldwork (Prague fieldtrip)* Dr Craig Thomas

EDUC70252 *Social Justice in Education* Dr Louisa Dawes and Dr Carl Emery (MIE, SEED, Humanities)

Our Flexible Learning Pilot Aims:

- **Authentic assessment:** by incorporating problem-oriented project learning (PPL)/group work activities into the course units.

- **Develop Inclusive pedagogy:** by creating and implementing inclusive teaching methods to support and scaffold students towards enhanced oral competencies.

- **Mitigate AI Overreliance:** by addressing the current challenges of misuse and overreliance of Artificial Intelligence (AI) through oral assessments

- **Evaluate the impact:** by assessing the pilot's impact on student achievement, wellbeing, and satisfaction.

- **Inform pedagogy:** by disseminating general pedagogic principles of PPL and viva voce for use across different disciplines within the University

Roskilde University's pedagogy

We took several of the key principles that guide the pedagogy and assessment in Roskilde University (RUC), Denmark:

1. Student-Managed Learning

2. Project Work

3. Problem Orientation

4. Participant Control

5. Exemplarity

6. Group work

7. International insight and vision

Course unit redesign taking (some) PPL principles:

Problem - orientated

Exemplarity

Group work

International Insights

Participant control

Defining the 'problem': social inequalities and Social Justice/ global education – poverty/power and place

Discursive framing of the 'problem': How does social mobility approach position poverty?

Critical Theories of social justice and group project negotiation/organisation

Group work project based on students' interests and experiences

Presentation and in-depth discussion about the project content with detailed feedback for the final assignment
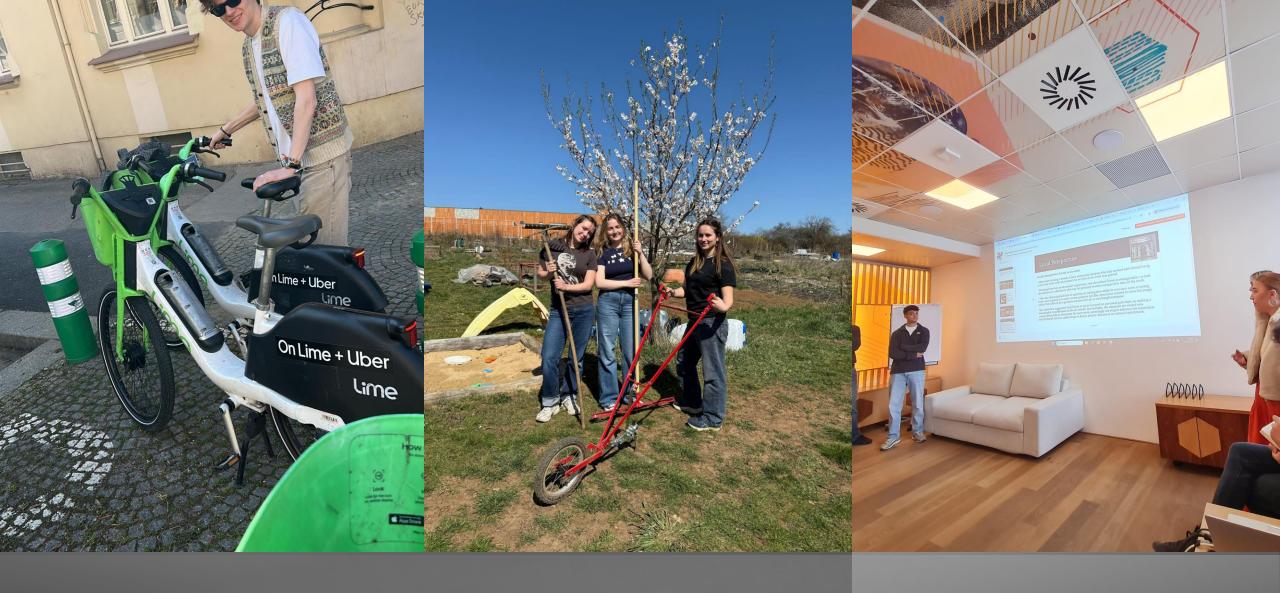
Seminars and taught sessions:

Several initial activities in the taught sessions to promote more discussion whilst still (hopefully) ensuring students were not anxious

e.g. Scaffolded debate 'This House believes that social mobility is the only way to overcome the achievement gap in education'

Group 'T' talks based on theories related to social justice in education (see handouts)

Research design workshops

Prague research and student conference

A Student's Guide to Success: Mastering Group Work for Postgraduate Projects...

1. Group Formation

- **Selecting your group**: If you can choose your group members, aim for a mix of skills, disciplines, and perspectives to enhance collaboration.

- **Setting ground rules**: Agree on meeting attendance, work commitments, and communication expectations to establish a productive working environment.

2. Initial Planning

- **Define Roles and Responsibilities**: Assign initial tasks based on individual strengths but remain flexible to ensure an even workload.

- **Set Communication Protocols**: Decide on preferred platforms (e.g., email, Microsoft Teams, WhatsApp) and establish response time expectations.

- **Create a Project Timeline**: Work backwards from the submission deadline, setting key milestones and ensuring sufficient time for review.

- **Draft a Team Agreement (Appendix A)**: Outline expectations for attendance, participation, communication, and conflict resolution.

Evaluation Data: Project-oriented group work

- **Overall learning experience**:
  - "I feel like I learnt a lot more than I would have learned if I did my research alone because you know, you get people they're interested in different things, researching different aspects of, you know, whatever it is we're looking at, and at the same time, it's a very short amount of time. So you learn a lot." (PE3)
  - "As a whole, like the way it was set up and structures was fantastic. Like, for me, that is my learning style. Small class is very relational and you have a chance actually build a relationship with the lecturers and classmates as well." (PE1)
- **Peer-learning and innovative project organisation:**
  - "...here we are equal peers. We are all learners in a field, especially in a field that I'm not familiar with. So I feel like I learned a lot more here, when everybody works as an equal instead of like the previous dominant role that I was taking in my job." (PE2)
  - "Hearing other people's perspectives and thoughts really pushed me to think about the issues from multiple angles and with greater depth." (PE4)
  - "... my teammates were really, really experienced in researching and I was the one who was being supported. In that group I was very happy to like, run the logistics and manage things and contribute in a non-academic way and learn from them in research." (PE2)

- **Proactive planning and involvement of course coordinators**:
  - "What worked well in this group work was we got to plan in advance." (PE3)
  - "... they [the instructors] were there on like our shared drive. They know how we're communicating and they're asking us in the middle how things are going and why we're choosing certain, you know, making certain decisions and that kind of like, I feel like it makes people work more..." (PE3)
  - "... they were very hands on, they're always sitting and chatting to us, checking in. They wanted to see how like, you know, someone was saying about, you know, Google Drive and our documents, they wanted to really see what we were doing." (PE1)
- **Lack of interest remains a concern**
  - "I think the major issue is just like this lack of interest and like, you know, you feel like your your group members don't want to work." (PE3)
- **Time and distribution of responsibilities and credit:**
  - "We probably could have done the whole thing within about a third of the hours we actually spent on it because we were spent a lot of time trying to guide and support the others." (PE1)

Evaluation Data: past and future

Prior experience with group work

- Team mates matter
- "... group project is a task which depends more on **who** you are working with." (PE4)
- "When... you're the only person who's like, maybe not a friend or maybe from a different background, then... you know, your decisions, your thoughts, your suggestions are always **pushed aside**." (PE3)
- "The only time I don't like it [group work] is when the people I'm working with are not the sort of people that I can easily **collaborate** with." (PE1)
- "... very helpful to [build] **rapport** with people as well." (PE2)

Reflections

- "... we do these in such a short amount of **time**. If we were a group right from the beginning of the year and we had a chance to actually bond and get to know each other, we'd find ways to build those values." (PE1)
- "... to be honest, I'm here for the certificate. I don't want my **grades** to be affected based on other people's behaviour. I don't think it's fair, so maybe it's something that needs to be, you know, further evaluated by university." (PE3)
- "I'm worried that if my contribution wasn't good enough, it could negatively affect our group's overall score. And while the collaboration itself was good for learning, the **assessment** aspect sometimes created anxiety for me." (PE4)