

Research Article

Exploring the use of group work to
improve concept understanding in a
communications module.

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Abstract

The study explored the use of group work to develop a deeper understanding of non-verbal communication concept. The population was first year students at a private Higher Education Institution (HEI) in South Africa enrolled for an interpersonal communication module as part of a bachelor's degree in Corporate Communication. Data was gathered using a questionnaire. Respondents indicated that group discussions improved their understanding of non-verbal communication although they cited group work dynamics challenges. The study proved that cooperative learning, group work in particular, has positive lifelong learning experience and improved concept understanding of complex and challenging tasks. This study was limited to a population of 20 students and no generalisations from the results were made.

1. Introduction to the Study

The 21st century has seen student enrolments in higher education increasing yearly, particularly in humanities, (Barkley 2010) forcing lecturers to opt for manageable teaching methods that may not be conducive for students to understand concepts or see the bigger picture. (Angelo and Cross 1993:3). Assessment feedback reports from lecturers continuously pointed out that students struggled to answer questions on non-verbal communication concept, as their answers showed that they lacked concept understanding (IIE Connect 2016).

Lecturers prefer using direct instruction when essential foundation knowledge is being covered to improve concept understanding (Nieman and Monyai 2012:104) instead of constructivism as a teaching approach. Research has shown that students are more likely to remember information they have made an emotional investment in (Barkley 2010:35) than information gained through direct instruction. Group work will be explored as a teaching and learning strategy that encourages students to think, reason and debate their own understanding of concept and result in effective learning (Killen (2015:97) to improve concept understanding and increase student pass rate. As such, a teaching strategy that requires students' active participation and engagement in acquiring knowledge will be tried for concept understanding.

1.1 Purpose of the research

The study aims to explore how group work can be used effectively and efficiently to assist students to contextualise content related to non-verbal communication for deeper understanding.

1.2 Background to the problem

Public Relations Institute of South Africa (PRISA 2016) noted that applied humanities require high order thinking skills to enable multidisciplinary analysis. For this to happen, effective teaching strategies that can help students with smooth transition while ensuring effective concept understanding are needed in the classroom. Barkley (2010:6) suggested that teaching methods such as inquiry, problem solving, presentations, collaborative learning and research be applied to encourage active engagement with content of any discipline. However, understanding and connecting dots is not an easy task for first year students struggling to adjust to the new learning environment and new teaching and learning strategies. Erickson (2012:2) discovered that learning complex subjects such as mathematics has solidly established the important role of conceptual understanding in the knowledge and activities of proficient persons. The same needs identified by Erikson and PRISA are needed for interpersonal communication students who struggle with grasping the bigger picture.

Students and lecturers surveys since 2014 have identified a lack of, or limited understanding of key concepts, mainly non-verbal communication, as one of the major challenges of interpersonal communication students. The pass rate has been below 45% for all campuses countrywide for the past three years, with the number of repeat students increasing each year (SAM Reporting Console Academic, 2015). The use of effective teaching and learning approaches and methods that encourage effective understanding of concepts paves way to high order thinking skills and can improve pass rates (Fry, Kitteridge and Marshall 2009:11).

2. Formulation of Problem

The study explored group work as a teaching strategy that could help students to understand non- verbal communication concept. First years were chosen to ensure that they master cooperative learning early in their first semester and improve concept understanding in other modules as humanities' learning outcomes are based on concept understanding. Failure to understand concept might lead to minimal academic successes (Chen, 2008). This means failure to comprehend the concepts in first year will affect students throughout their three years of studies as the concepts are related to major areas of their studies.

2.1 Justification of Problem

Lack of concept understanding has a negative impact, both on pass rates and at the work place as students will not be confident in partaking tasks related to those concepts (Chinn& Chinn 2009). Most studies on lack of concept understanding focused more on students in terms of what could be done to stimulate student active participation and make them self-regulated (Fry, Ketteridge and Marshall 2009; Barkley 2010; Killen 2015; Chinn& Chinn 2009). However, too many schools are raising issues of poor test scores where students are blamed without adequately addressing teaching methods and classroom instruction (Marzano 2010:170).

Interpersonal communication curriculum for (2014-2016) stated that the purpose of the module is to lay a solid foundation for understanding the nature and complexities of the communication process. Interpersonal communication assessments for first, second and third years from 2014 when the researcher started lecturing to date were based on concept understanding as application questions. The module assessments are mostly application questions which require students to understand the bigger picture before attempting to answer such questions (IIE 2016). Out of the three levels, the first years performed very badly as they struggled with concept understanding. With effective active learning teaching methods, concept understanding can be improved, as evidenced by Erickson, (1998) results in science subjects.

2.2 Research Question

This quantitative study will explore the following research question: -

In what way, can group work be used effectively as a teaching strategy to enhance concept understanding in interpersonal communication?

2.3 Research Objective

The study seeks to explore group work as an alternative effective teaching strategy that can enhance concept understanding in interpersonal communication.

3. Brief Literature Review and Definition of terms

3.1 Literature review and theoretical framework

Lecturers are encouraged to use a variety of strategies and approaches and use media for better results (Henderson 1989:71). According to Killen (2015:202-203), group work occurs when three or more students work together without direct intervention by the lecturer but with prior guidance to task and resources to develop a deeper understanding. The author added that by voicing their opinions freely, using real-life examples that they are not comfortable sharing with the lecturer, share learning tasks, observe the outcomes students will jointly arrive at an outcome (Killen 2015:203). Group work also lessens the pressure on both students and lecturer and gives responsibility of personal learning to students (Donaldson and Scannel 1986:54).

For group work to be effective, Orlich et al (1994:234) suggested that lecturers explain tasks in detail, give each student responsibilities accordingly and group members into numbers that can be managed, controlled and easy to supervise. Curry (1997) cited in Nieman and Monyai (2012) advised that care should be taken as there is high probability that students may lose interest to learn when placed in groups where they are not challenged. Dean (1996:69) suggested alternating group members from time to time and close monitoring from lecturer to overcome group challenges.

Leonard, Gerace, and Dufresne (1999) conducted research on concept understanding in physics whilst Lee (2012) conducted concept based problem solving to assist students to solve complex problems in linguistics, and Erickson (2012) conducted study of concept understanding in mathematics. Some people argue that interpersonal communication is not a difficult module like mathematics or physics but students struggle to understand communication concepts yet the world revolves around effective communication, (Louw and Du Plooy-Cilliers, 2014).

Group work provides students with an opportunity to transform and reflect in order to construct own meaning with special focus on deep and permanent understanding, not just information gathering,(Fink 2003:78)). To address the lack of concept understanding, group work was explored as a teaching strategy that might offer a permanent solution and encourage lifelong learning.

3.2 Key Definitions related to study

The terms are defined below in the context of the current study:

3.2.1 Concept understanding

It refers to developing a full understanding of the concepts associated with a subject to a degree that allows explanations, predictions, and linking of information to a given situation, (Freedman & Houtz, 2004).

3.2.2 Cooperative learning

A range of team-based learning approaches in which students work together to complete a task (Glossary of Teaching Strategies 2016).

3.2.3 Group work

It is a variation of cooperative learning where between 3 to 6 students help each other to learn better through sharing ideas and opinions on complex concepts (Killen 2015:204).

4. Research Methodology

This section will explain the research paradigm and methodology. MacMillan and Schumacher (2010:20), argued that the purpose of a research methodology is to specify a plan for generating empirical evidence that will be used to answer the research questions and objectives.

4.1 Research Worldview

Post positivism was used as it allowed more interaction between the researcher and research participants (Willis 2007). Researcher interacted with students during the lecture to produce objective and generalizable knowledge about how group work can improve concept understanding, seeking to affirm the presence of universal properties/laws in relationships amongst pre-defined variables. Post-positivism embraces objectivity and realism and goes a step further advising that the researcher cannot objectively observe reality as an outsider (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007). The paradigm was compatible with quantitative

research methods for objectivity and reliability, which can be modified with the use of triangulation of data collection methods and theories.

4.2 Quantitative Methodology

Mertens (2010) stated that quantitative researchers collect numerical data to describe, explore, interpret, explain and build a theory. This study aimed to explore group work in enhancing concept understanding. Students were given the task to research on their own in groups on non-verbal communication in relation to learning outcomes. This methodology does not allow generalisation of information but objectivity being sought after by post-positivism paradigm. Wyse (2011) added that quantitative research is used to quantify the problem by way of generating numerical data or data that can be transformed into useable statistics to formulate facts and uncover patterns with regards to opinion, attitudes and behaviour.

Major objectives of quantitative research design are to describe, predict and explain quantities, degrees or relationships from samples or population by collecting numerical data. It involves the collection of primary data from large numbers of individuals, frequently with the intention of projecting the results to a wider population (Martins 1996:125). However, due to limited time and resources, this quantitative research used a small number of students. Quantitative research can limit respondents or shape their thinking in line with structured questions but with limited time and resources it was the appropriate research design. The right data analysis tools also matter as right research design and data collection instruments is more crucial in terms of data validity and reliability (Aliaga and Gunderson 2000).

4.3 Survey design

The cross-sectional survey design, according to Maree (2007) is used to create a picture once as only one chance of data collection is granted. A once off teaching intervention was done to help students improve concept understanding through group work hence cross sectional design was suitable. Due to factors beyond the control of the researcher like time and institutional policies, one class of interpersonal communication for 100 minutes was used for the study.

During lecture key themes extracted by students guided by provided case studies and videos related to the topic were used. After identifying a grey area through researcher's experience or observing undesired outcomes from student performance in assessments covering concepts, this applied exploratory research was used to assist in solving a particular problem being faced and the findings will solve or address the challenges (Bless & Higson-Smith, 2000:39).

4.4 Data collection method- Survey Questionnaire

Survey design as a quantitative method of data collection implied that the researcher developed the survey questionnaire to collect the desired information from respondents. A questionnaire is a research instrument consisting of written questions with choice of answers for research participants devised for statistical study or quantitative research (Du Plooy 1997). The questionnaire was used for data collection because it can collect vast information in a short space of time, its cost-effective and objective, (Eiselen & Uys, 2005).

The questionnaire was limited to a maximum of 15 questions where nine of the questions were closed ended to generate the numeric data required. Structured questions with options to measure intensity of opinion or attitude (Zikmund, 2003: 235) by fixed number of answers from which a respondent needs to choose and elaborate were also used as suggested by (du Plooy-Cilliers and Cronje 2014). The remaining six open ended questions were meant to give respondents an opportunity to elicit underlying ideas that the researcher might not have considered to impact on concept understanding.

The self-administered paper questionnaires were used for data collection because of its ability to collect vast information in a short space of time, relatively inexpensive. However, students can make errors in filling in or may restrict themselves from providing honest answers since their handwriting was known by researcher. After lecture, the researcher distributed questionnaires to students who had signed consent forms and left to allow students to complete the questionnaire within 20 minutes. A class representative collected completed questionnaires on behalf of the researcher and submitted them to student reception.

4.5 Data analysis method

Data analysis is viewed by Henning (2004:10) as a process that requires analytical craftsmanship and the ability to capture understanding of data in writing. The researcher coded 20 questionnaires and used the information for data presentation and analysis with a heightened awareness of the data, a focused attention to it, and an openness to the subtle, tacit undercurrents of social life as suggested by (Schurink, Fouché and De Vos 2011:410).

Selective coding was used to select core categories or themes, systematically relating it to other categories, validating the results and filling in categories that need further refinement and development. The coded sheet showed the level of understanding or misunderstanding of non-verbal communication. Data analysis was done by excel thereby eradicating human error and making more accurate results (du Plooy-Cilliers and Cronje 2014).

5. Population, sample size and Sampling method to be applied

Population, sample size and sampling methods are discussed below.

5.1 Population

Chiromo (2006: 26) defines a population as, research respondents who will provide answers to the research questions. The population for this study was both male and female first year students studying towards a Bachelor of Arts degree in Corporate Communication at a private higher education institution doing Interpersonal communication as a module. The population included some repeat students who did not pass the module the previous year.

5.2 Sampling method and sample size

The study used purposive sampling to ensure that affected respondents are used in the study. The researcher purposively selected respondents accessible to her, requiring the teaching intervention and could provide the best information to achieve the objectives of the study (Kumar 2005:179).

Although a small sample is less accurate, it is more convenient (Bless & Higson-Smith, 2000:93). The research participants were aged between 19 to 24 years. In a class of 41, 26 students signed research consent forms from random tables in class. 20 students from different cultural backgrounds of a multi-cultural society participated in the study.

6. Feasibility and anticipated contribution of the study

Small population of 20 students, limited financial costs (printing only), enough time from March October 2017 to analyse data and write a report made the study very much feasible. The researcher also had access to research respondents prior to data collection and created a conducive learning environment.

The researcher and other lecturers will know how best to use group work as a teaching strategy efficiently and effectively. Previous studies in areas like physics and linguistics have produced positive results and indicated that group work has more benefits apart from concept understanding, (Jitendra et al., 2011) to various education stakeholders not just students and lecturers. Effective concept understanding in first years will definitely sharpen their critical analysis skills, high order thinking and improve their engagement in knowledge creation (Barkely 2010), boost their confidence (Chinn& Chinn 2009) and probably increase pass rates as well.

7. Ethical Considerations, Validity and Reliability

All ethical clearance procedures in line with international research ethics and possible limitations were considered. Gravetter and Forzano (2009:98) postulated that research ethics concerns the responsibility of researchers to be honest and respectful to all individuals who are affected by their research studies. Official ethical clearance from the institution and campus where respondents are based was granted. Neuman (2011:121) highlighted that it is

not enough to get permission from people but they need to know what they are being asked to participate in so that they can make an informed decision. Respondents were given written consent letters informing them of the purpose, objective of the study and that they will be required to answer a questionnaire a month before the study commenced. Respondents were debriefed and given an opportunity to ask questions related confidentiality, deception etc. The letter stated that respondents could at any time withdraw from the study. The study was conducted by the book as suggested by du Plooy-Cilliers et al, (2014:262-268) and if the same study is to be conducted under same conditions, it will generate same results as measuring instruments corresponded with study objectives.

8. Limitations of the study

The small sample of one class from one campus for an institution with more than 9 campuses with approximately 16 classes of the same module limited researcher from getting more accurate results ; however, results are accurate, reliable and valid (Bless & Higson-Smith 2000:93). Being a novice researcher, guided and limited by institutional assessment policy was another limitation, however, supervisor's guidance helped overcome other limitations of the study.

9. Data Presentation, Analysis, Findings and Discussion

In a class of 41 students 48.78% participated in the study. 26 students had signed consent forms and were asked to group themselves with members who had signed consent forms for the study. Only 20 students were present the day of study in 5 small groups of between 4 to 5 students. The collected information was coded using various themes related to group work, concept understanding and cooperative learning dynamics, reviewed and examined to answer the research questions and suggest other areas for further research. The questionnaire sought to determine students' group experience, participation, task allocation, individual contributions versus group contribution, benefits of group work and group discussion, concept understanding, group challenges and possible solutions and most importantly their understanding of non-verbal communication as a concept. Findings will be presented graphically and discussed below.

9.1 Group Work Learning Experience

Students' personalities can affect group work as students explore their social interactions (Killen 2015). Students' work experience was checked to ascertain if students faced any challenges that could have prevented them from understanding the concept, if so, what could have caused positive or negative group experience. Results are depicted below:

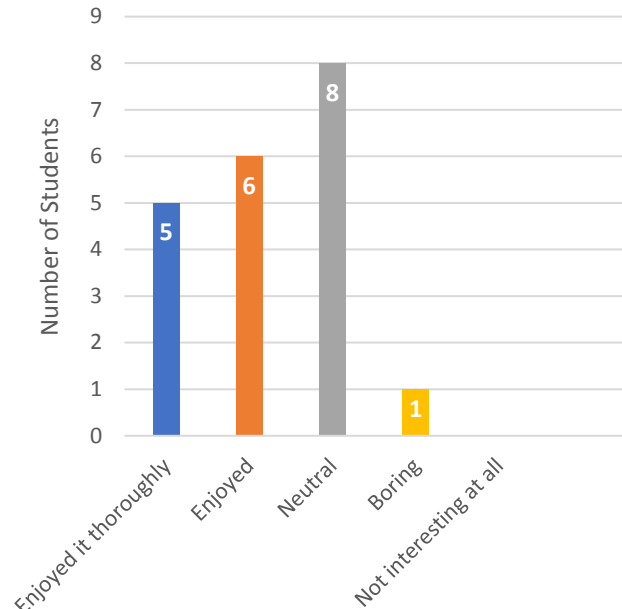
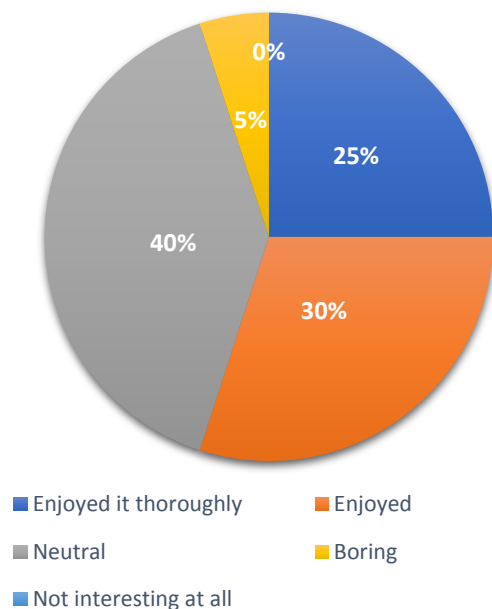


Figure 9.1- Group work learning experience

A quarter of the students extremely enjoyed group learning experience whilst almost a third of the population (30%) just enjoyed the experience. Dean (1996: 69) argued that circumstances and environment, type of work, group dynamics have to be considered as they affect the group working experience. Participants come from different backgrounds, home language, learning objectives and concept understanding levels. Differences in those factors might pose a challenge to group working experience. Students with different backgrounds learn in different ways (Hedge, 2000). A total of 55% had positive group work learning experience. 40% believed that their learning experience was just neutral, whilst only (20%) had a negative experience, classifying group work as boring. The researcher can argue that the neutral percentage can be divided by two to distribute positive and negative experience and 20% be added to the 55% to make it 75% of students with positive learning experience. An analysis of

above statistics shows that group work was enjoyed by majority students. Reasons will be explored below.

9.2 Group work Task Allocation Technique

The aim of this question was to understand group dynamics that could have affected research findings. The allocation of work amongst members should be done strategically to ensure success (Nieman and Monyai 2012:124). The group questions were given to students as homework a week in advance to give them enough time for research. Responses to a question about how members allocated tasks showed that half of the students shared the tasks randomly. Detail is presented in Figure 9.2

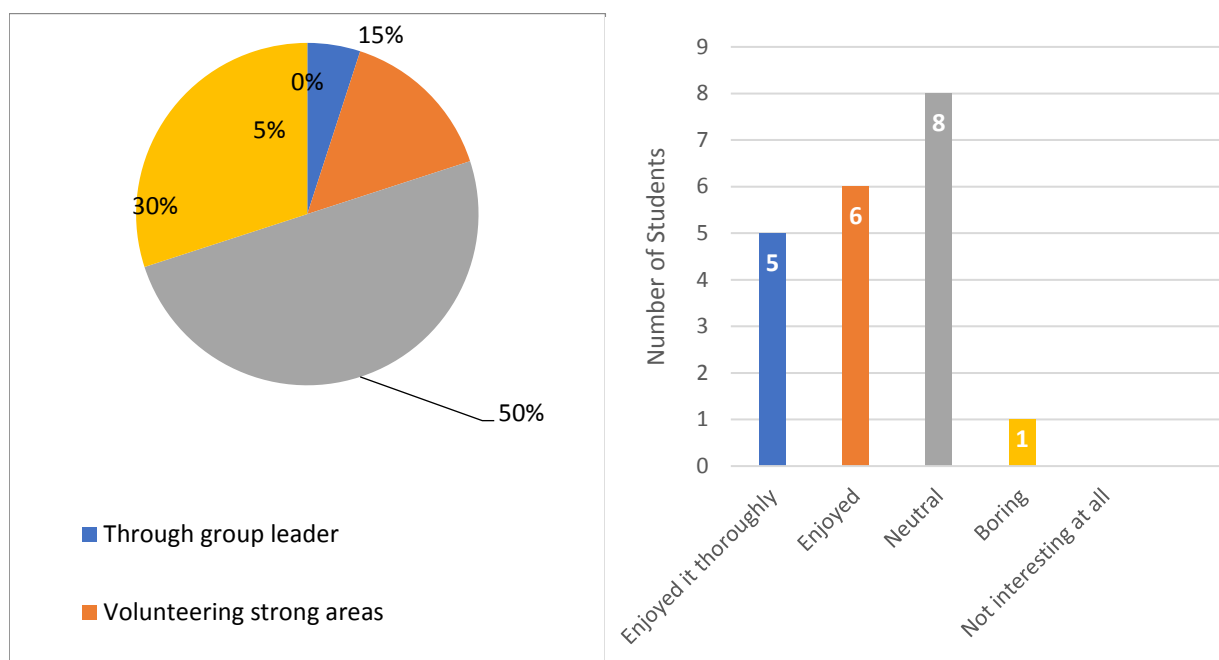


Figure 9.2: Task Allocation

Killen (2015) suggested that work should not be distributed but each member should attempt everything and then share findings, which is what 30% of the respondents did. Bridges (1990) cited in Booyse & Duplessis 2012 argued that for exchange of ideas, students should put forward more than one point of view in order to learn more as they will go through all the tasks together. This task allocation technique can result in surface learning especially if there is more work to be completed, unlike if they divide tasks there is time for in-depth research. Indeed, doing all the tasks will present the student with an opportunity to have first-hand research experience and be involved directly in learning process.

Another variation of sharing tasks was students volunteering to cover areas they are strong in; it was used by 15% of the respondents. This however, can be a negative learning experience for other members who might not volunteer, in most cases students that are gifted academically are the ones to volunteer and usually take the most challenging tasks because they want the group to succeed, (Killen 2015). This variation will definitely result in unbalanced workload and gives room for other students not to do their work knowing that members that always want to succeed will cover for them. It should be the responsibility of the lecturer to oversee that tasks are allocated fairly and check if each group member has done their part(ibid).

9.3 Member Contribution level, Justification and value of other members ideas

The researcher gave students an opportunity for self-reflection and evaluation in terms of their contribution levels, valuation and justify why it was like that.

9.3.1 Member Contribution level

Question 3 asked students to rate their contribution in group work on a scale of 1 to 5 (5 being the highest and 1 lowest). Figure 9.3.1. provides detail on how students assessed members' contribution.

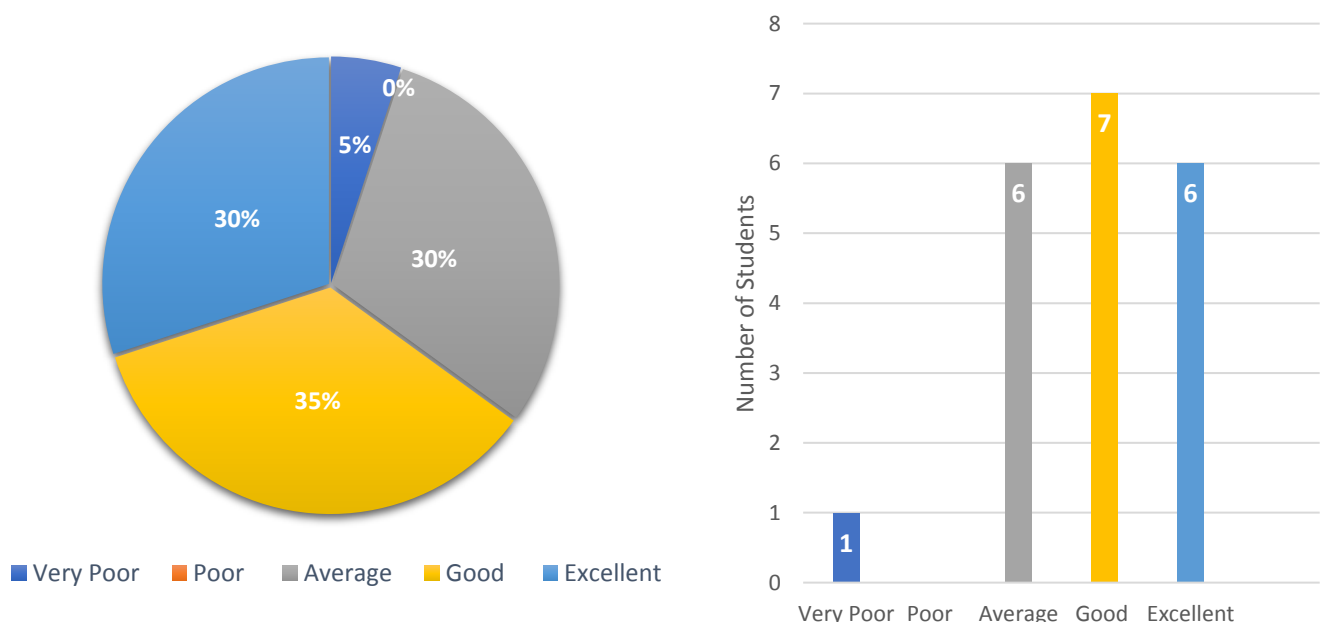


Figure 9.3.1 Member Contribution level

35 % of respondents indicated that their contribution was good, 30 % were average whilst 5% were very poor. The other 30% were confident of their efforts and felt that their contribution

level was excellent. Self-reflection provides student autonomy, which encourages students to monitor and notice their own progress and opportunity to self-regulate their learning (Killen 2015). Honesty is the first step toward effective evaluation and correcting mistakes (Skinner, Mersham and Benecke, 2016). 70% indicated that their contribution was not the best they could do.

9.3.2 Justification to contribution level

In a follow up question students were asked to justify their response on contribution levels. Bridges (1990) suggested that in order for exchange of ideas students should put forward more than one point of view, express their views clearly, open minded, consider different perspectives and most importantly, talk, listen and respond and listen to voice of reason. Figure 9.3.2 provides detailed data on students' justification for their contribution levels.

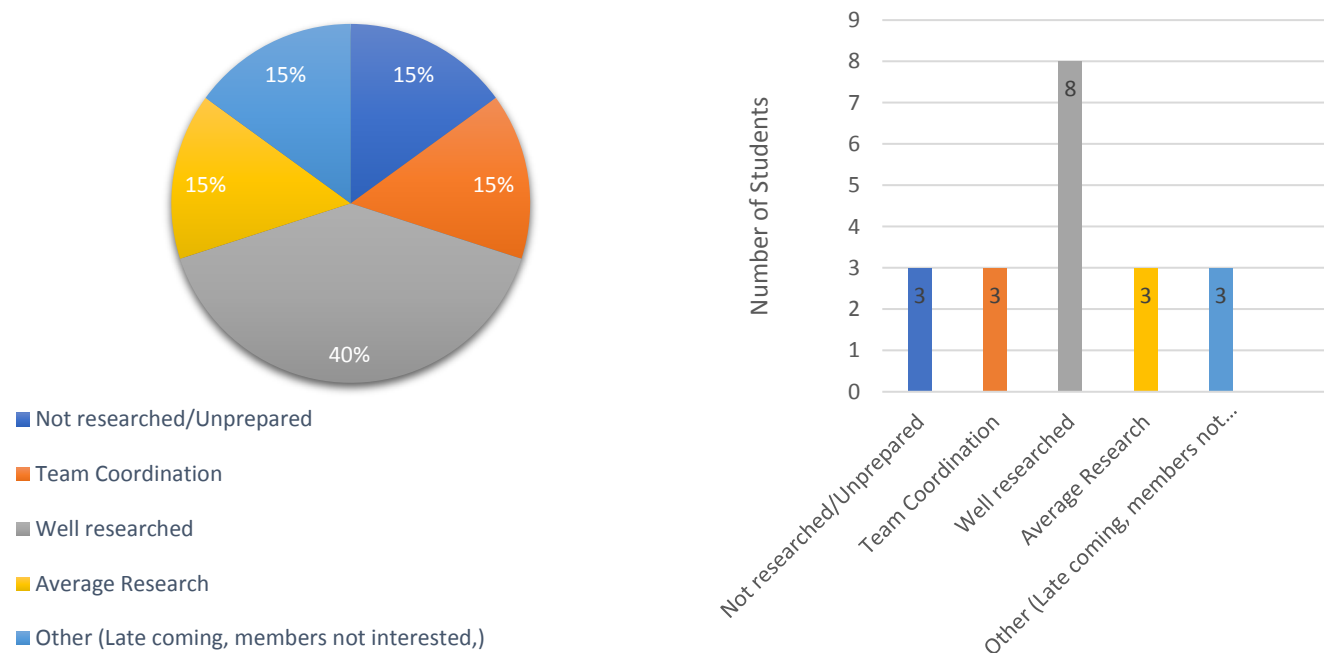


Figure 9.3.2 Justification for contribution levels

The justifications for negative contribution levels were mainly lack of research, limited research, team coordination and late coming or uninterested member. The four justifications each had 15% making it a total of 60% of students with potential to contribute positively only if they correct their weakness identified through self-evaluation. 40% with positive contribution cited thorough research prior to group work as part of preparation.

There are a number of factors that affect members' contribution levels like group dynamics, preparedness, dominating group members and lack of confidence etc.

9.3.3 Value of ideas contributed by members

Apart from self evaluation, students were asked to assess the value of ideas raised by other group members because it is important to review your contribution value through the eyes of group members (Hattie 2009). The question was posed as : *Did your group members come up with valuable ideas and opinions about non-verbal communication that you were unaware of?* Results are depicted on Figure 9.3.3.

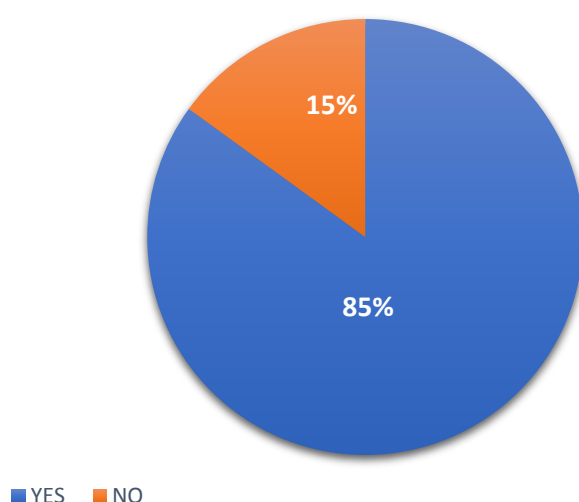


Figure 9.3.3 Value of Contributed Ideas

In this study, measuring the value of ideas contributed by members was a way of demonstrating the value of group work and evaluating members' contributions. 85% of the respondents were confident that their members contributed positively to the group and valued their efforts. This evaluation method was meant to bring significant positive changes to group contribution practices in terms of controlling group dynamics like task allocation, selection of members, fostering group cohesion, offering encouragement, lecturer mediation in reaching compromises, holding members accountable and checking if the group contribution value was reached, (Killen 2015).

9.4 Group work output

The group work output depends on students' collaboration, characteristics, group work experience, available resources, academic content and social objectives to be covered, research skills and members' communication skills (Orlich et al 1994:234). Findings

presented in Figure 9.4.1.1 as after group work implementation, final product assessment is key, (Nieman and Monyai 2012:128). For validity, a follow up question was asked to ascertain how students benefited as presented in Figure 9.4.1.2.

9.4.1 Group work results

Respondents were asked: *Can you say group work helped you to understand non-verbal communication? Select the option most relevant to your experience.* 10% strongly agreed whilst 70% just agreed that group work helped them to understand the concept, making it a total of 80% of the research respondents with positive outcomes. 20 % were not certain as they were yet to process the output. No one was of the view that group work did not help.

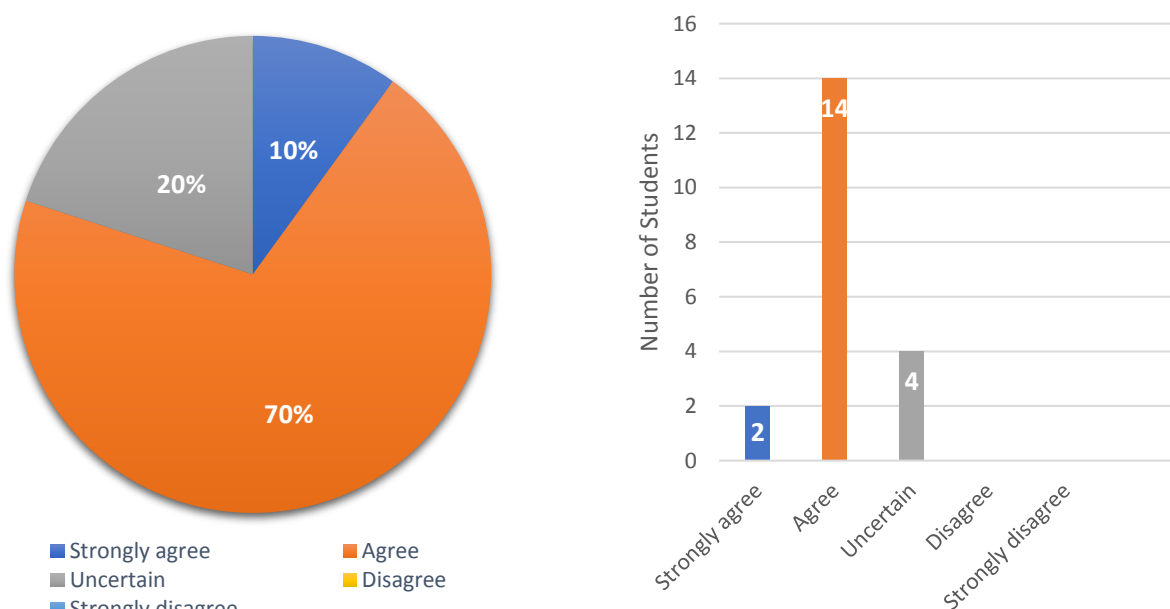


Figure 9. 4.1.1 Did group work help you to improve concept understanding

Group work might have helped students to understand the concept but do students view it as beneficial to their learning? The above group results were cemented by the statistics presented in Figure 9. 4.1.2;

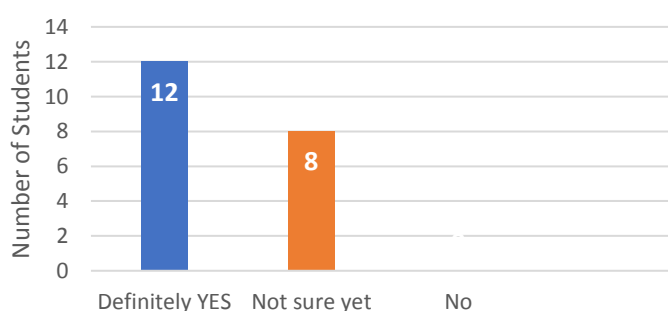


Figure 9. 4. 1.2 Was group work helpful?

60% (12 students) found group work beneficial. 40% were uncertain; these could be slow learners that take time to process information, and may later on realise that it was beneficial (Nieman and Monyai, 2012).

9.4.2 Factors contributing to positive group work output

In a follow up question, students were asked to motivate why they said group work helped them to understand non-verbal communication. Findings are presented in Figure 9.4.2.

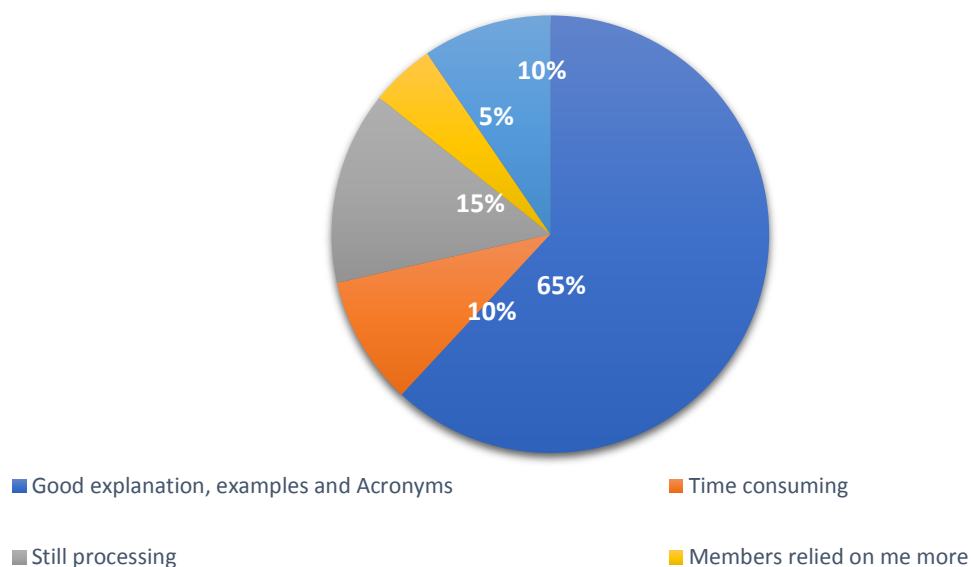


Figure 9. 4. 1.2 Why positive output?

65% cited good explanation from members. Barkley (2010) argued that learning outcomes can be achieved more easily when working collaboratively than individually as students become responsible for each other's learning. 20 % attributed positive output to sharing the workload to allow in-depth research and positive group environment. The 15% that were not certain cited poor group coordination and unprepared members as a draw back. The responses pointed out to all advantages of group work as cited by Barkley (2010:215) as a more focused framework to nurture individual intellectual growth, higher academic skills and interchange from lecturer to peer to peer learning.

Figure 9.4.2.2 results indicate that 75% view group work as beneficial whilst 25% disagreed.

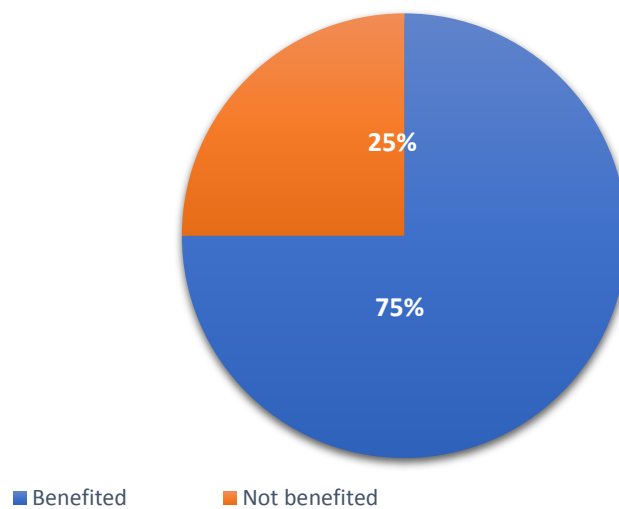


Figure 9.4.2.2 Was group work beneficial?

This statistic might seem contradictory given that 60% pointed out that group work helped them to understand the concept but 15% are not sure if they understood as a result of the onetime group work intervention. Students might have attached different meanings to 'helpful' and 'beneficial' hence contradicting results.

9.5 Non-verbal communication understanding

In order to assess concept understanding, aspects learnt and how students valued use of group work, qualitative questions were asked. However, non-verbal concept has many alternative narratives and interpretations thus aspects learnt were sought after in order to ascertain if the concept was understood.

9.5.1 Non-verbal communication aspects learnt

Students were asked to indicate the non-verbal communication aspects they learnt; from definition, types, functions, all the aspects classified as non-verbal concept and group work dynamics. Findings are presented in Figure 9.5.1.

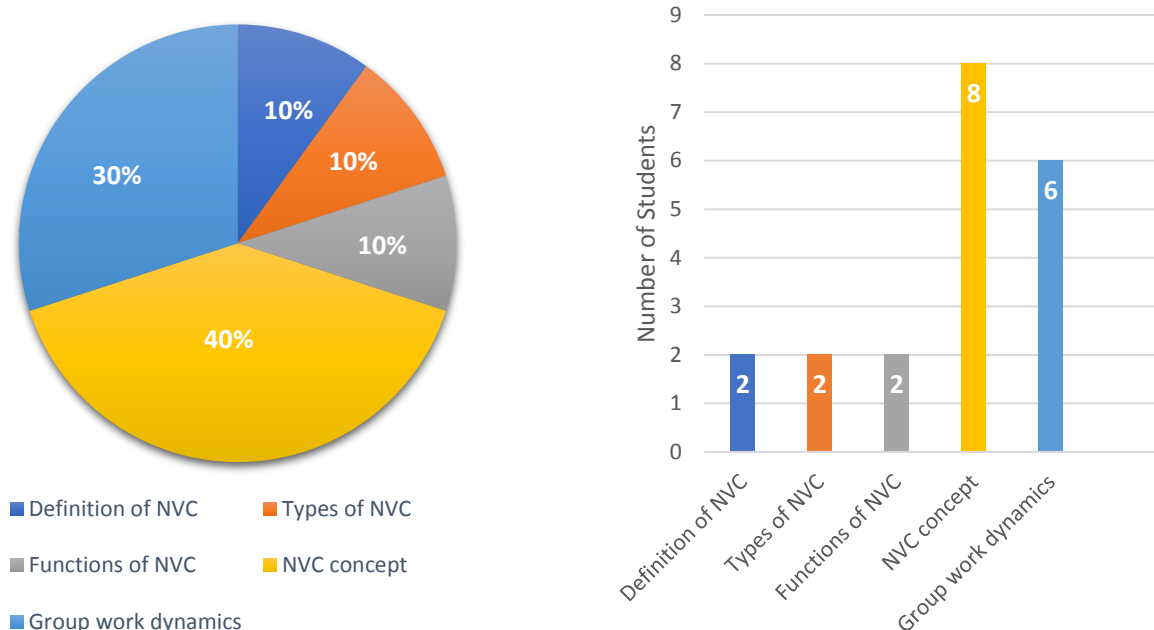


Figure 9.5.1 NVC aspects learnt

40% of respondents mastered and understood non-verbal communication as a concept and can apply it in real life. The other 30 % was divided equally into respondents who are confident that they understood the definition, types and functions of non-verbal communication at 10% each. Apart from learning about non-verbal communication, a third of respondents learnt about group work dynamics, an important aspect if students are to benefit from cooperative learning in the near future (Barkely 2010).

9.5.2 Concept Understanding

In order to explore if group work improved understanding of non-verbal concept, a follow up question was asked; to briefly summarise in a paragraph what they learnt about non-verbal communication. Findings are depicted in Figure 9.5.2.

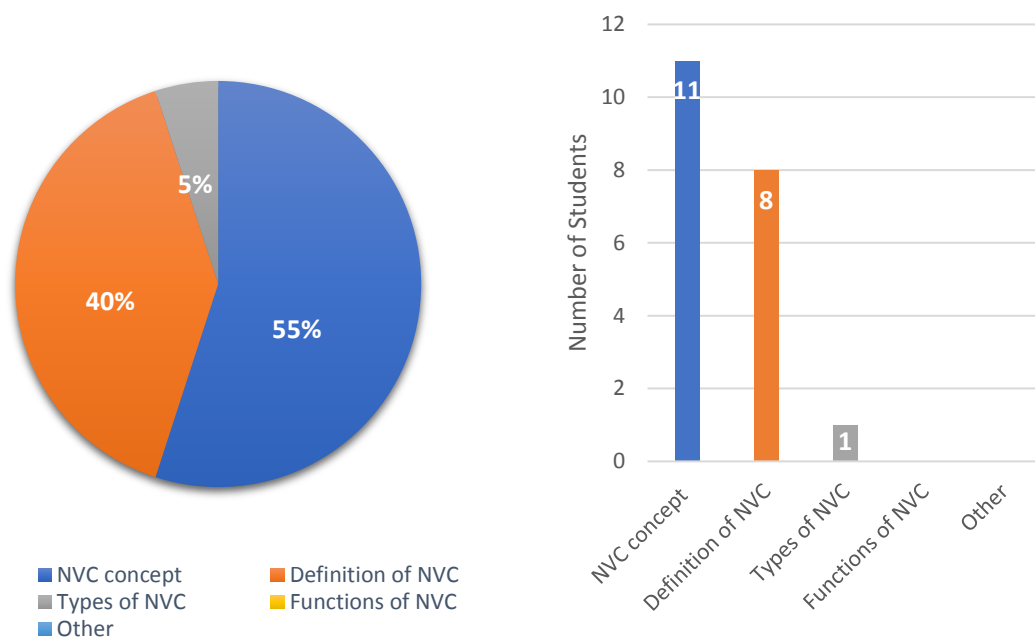


Figure 9.5.2.1 Concept understanding Versus Aspects learnt

55% of respondents said they understood the concept of non-verbal communication; meaning from definition, types and functions. 40% said they only understood the definition; a starting point in the right direction. 5% were confident that they understood different types of non-verbal communication. Students have a tendency of cramming content word for word without really understanding as a precautionary measure to reproduce information in the exam (rote learning) (Kllen 2015).

The above question answered the research objective partly hence the qualitative question results were analysed further to evaluate the type of understanding with regards to words used to summarise what was learnt. Findings are presented in Figure 9.5.2.2.

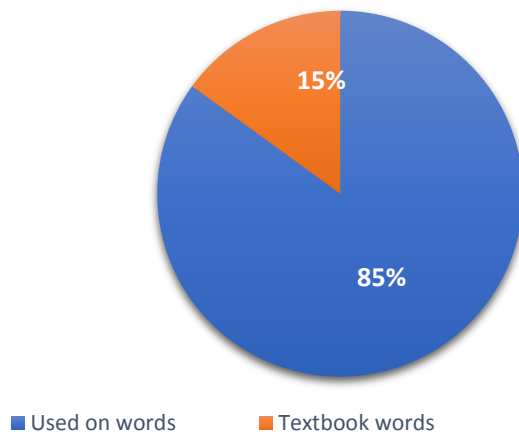


Figure 9.5.2.2 Concept understanding assessment

85% of students used their own words to summarise non-verbal communication concept whilst 15% were rote learning as they used textbook words in their summary. Based on 85% of the summary, it can be argued that group work was effective in ensuring concept understanding. It can be concluded that group work was an effective teaching strategy that can be used to improve the students' non-verbal concept understanding and pave way to high order thinking skills and can improve pass rates, (Fry, Kitteridge and Marshall 2009:11).

9.5.3 Respondents recommended group work for concept understanding

In order to ascertain if group work appealed to students, students were asked if they would recommend use of group work to improve understanding of other concepts related to the module. Results are presented in Figure 9.5.3.

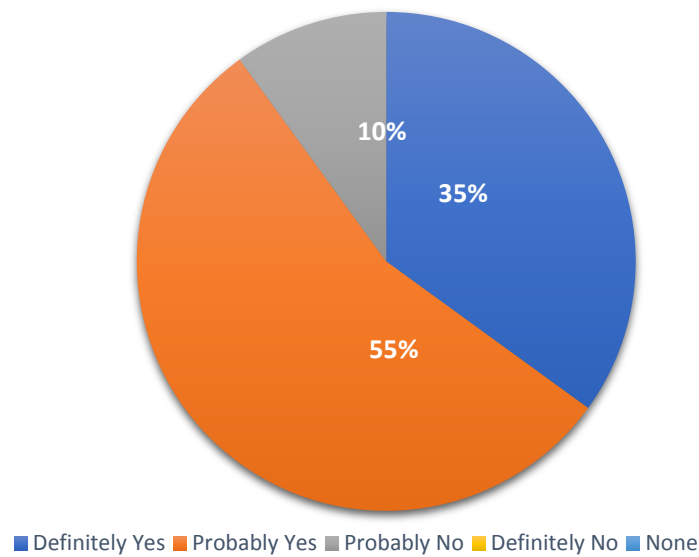


Figure 9.5.3 Recommending group work for other modules

35% were definite about their recommendations whilst 55% were in agreement but with a probably yes. This gives a total of 90% of respondents interested in using the teaching strategy in other modules to improve concept understanding. The effectiveness of a teaching strategy should be based on its effectiveness, efficiency and level of appeal to students as suggested by (Reigeluth 1999). Only 10% did not recommend the move. Recommending the activity means students realised benefits of group work and that there is need for active participation on their part for active learning and better understanding, (Fry, Ketteridge and Marshall 2009).

9.6 Group Work challenges and solutions

Students have different backgrounds in terms of language and learning abilities, as such they learn in different ways (Hedge, 2000) yet in a group they are expected to be at par with other members.

9.6.1 Group work challenges

The reasons behind not recommending group work and not benefiting from it were sought after and answers were centred around group dynamics. Figure 9.6.1 presents findings on group work.

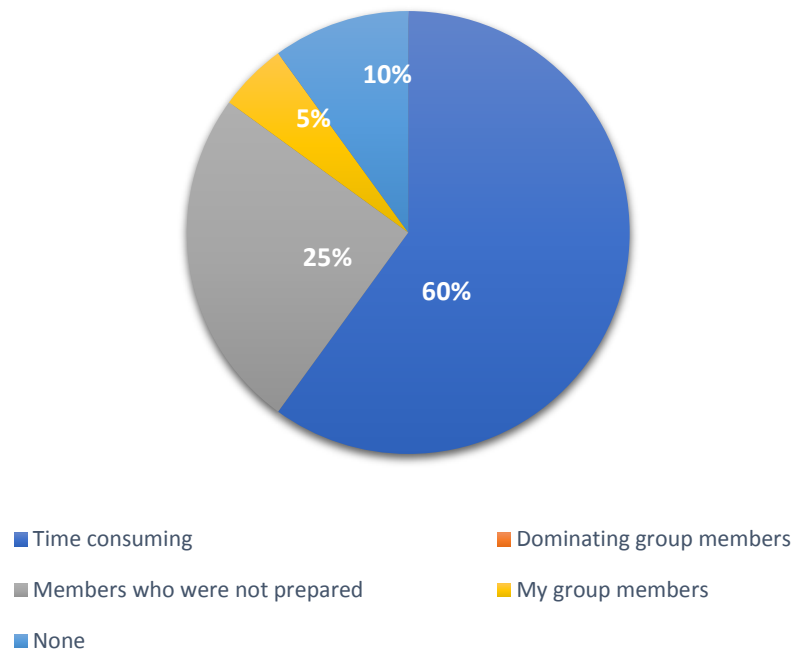


Figure 9.6.1 What students like/disliked about the group work?

60% indicated that it was time consuming to listen to each member's contribution and try to convince each other that their views are better instead of helping each other to understand the concept (Killen 2015:168). 25% were not happy with unprepared group members who wasted time asking questions on areas that they could have researched on. Asking a question for clarity is acceptable in group work but unpreparedness is not tolerated by members (Barkley 2010). 10% of respondents did not face any challenges.

9.6.2 Factors pushing for changes in group dynamics

Students were asked if they could have changed something if given a second opportunity to do the same task in order to make their group work successful.

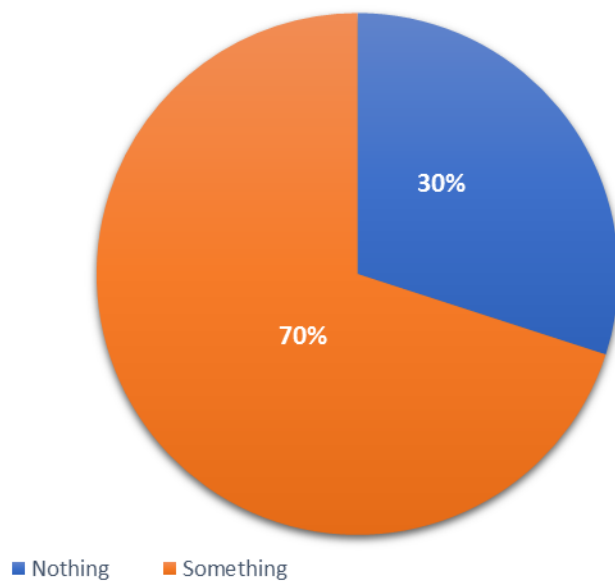


Figure 9.6.2.1 would you change anything on your group work?

Despite facing challenges, 30% of respondents were interested in having another task without any changes whilst 70% indicated that they would want to change something.

In a follow up question, those that cited that they would want changes were asked to point out what they would change. Students' responses were connected to findings presented in [Figure 9.6. 1](#). The suggested changes were related to the planning and implementation of group work, group members, their contribution levels, time management and more research prior to class. It is worth noting that none of the respondents had a group with dominating members. This validates Hedge's (2000) cautionary warning that if the collaborative groups are not well constituted, then there is a risk of having a context that is counterproductive to learning.

The proposed changes are presented in [Figure 9.6.2.2](#)

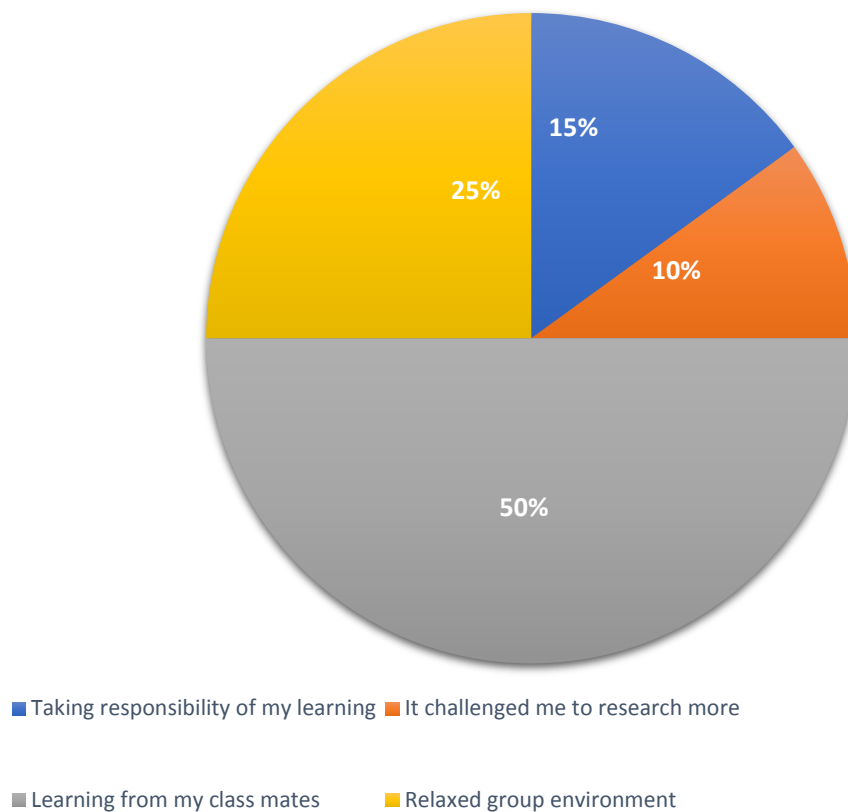


Figure 9.6.2.2 What would you change on group work?

50% said they would change their attitude towards learning in a group as they realised that learning from peers was valuable and requires paying attention and giving peers the opportunity to share their knowledge. 10% were challenged by the activity to prepare so that they can share ideas and ask where they do not understand. 15% were challenged to take responsibility of their learning by being self regulated. Snowman and Biehler (2012) argued that true learning involves figuring out how to acquire knowledge in order to go beyond and generate more information in a critical way. 25% noted that if learning environment is very relaxed with less supervision, little or no progress might happen.

10. Recommendations

Based on above findings and discussion, the researcher recommends that further extensive investigation be done on other teaching strategies that can enhance concept understanding apart from group work as an explanatory or descriptive research using different paradigms and methodology. As demonstrated, group dynamics determine the success or failure and effectiveness of group work. Another grey area is on how facilitators use group work to ensure concept understanding through active participation of all group members as they will be graded as a team and individually not for concept only but on the ability to cooperate or meet

deadlines. Exploring use of technology as teaching medium for concept understanding could be researched with an opportunity for assessing team and individual students.

Conclusion

The research findings have established that group work improved concept understanding in non-verbal communication even though respondents faced challenges due to group dynamics. More benefits of group work in developing high order learning skills, team work skills and ability to explain content in own words emerged. Peer to peer teaching proved to be fun and effective as students used examples they could all relate to. The positive results, however, pointed other grey areas that could be explored for concept understanding like inquiry methods and discussions using social media. Respondents' answers pointed out the need for lecturers' close supervision and monitor from group member selection in terms of characteristics, academic abilities, communication skills and group work preparation and implementation. Where possible, incentives should be given in the form of grading for both group and individual work.

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Annexure 1

Questionnaire

Dear Respondent

My name is Respect Bangu. I am currently conducting research on how group work can be used to improve non-verbal communication understanding in first year communication science students. Your input is highly appreciated in answering the following questions based on the group work we engaged with in class in relation to non-verbal communication types and functions. You are encouraged to answer all questions in an honest manner.

Please note that for ethical purposes your feedback will remain anonymous and you can withdraw from the research at any time without being penalised. Findings will be used for purposes of this research only and you are welcome to contact me should you be interested in the final results.

Please answer all the questions below.

Please tick the best answer and provide brief explanation on the space provided.

1. Which of the following best describes your group work learning experience?

5. Enjoyed it thoroughly	
4. Enjoyed	
3. Neutral	
2. Boring	
1. Not interesting at all	

2. How did you allocate the tasks to be completed by individuals in your group? Select ONE option.

Through group leader	
Volunteering strong areas	
Randomly	

We did everything together	
Few members did everything	

3. On a scale of 1 to 5 (5 being the highest and 1 lowest) please rate your contribution in group work. Tick the most applicable option

1-Very Poor	
2-Poor	
3-Average	
4-Good	
5-Excellent	

4. Please provide a reason(s) for your contribution level.

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.....

5. Did your group members come up with valuable ideas and opinion about non-verbal communication that you were unaware of? Select the most applicable option.

YES	
NO	

6. If your answer to question 5 is **YES**, please indicate what is that you learned that you find valuable?

.....

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.....

.....

7. Can you say the group work helped you to understand non- verbal communication?
Select the option most relevant to your experience.

Strongly agree	
Agree	
Uncertain	
Disagree	
Strongly disagree	

Please motivate your answer to **Question 7**.

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8. Was the group work beneficial to you?

Definitely YES	
Not sure yet	
No	

9. Briefly explain how you benefited/not benefited from the group work?

.....

.....

.....

.....

10. What is it that you did not like about the group work? Please select one aspect only from the list below.

Time consuming	
Dominating group members	
Members who were not prepared	
My group members	

11. If you were to be given a second chance to re do this group work what is it that you would change? Explain your answer.

.....

.....

.....

.....

12. What did you like about the group work? Select the option that best describe your experience.

Taking responsibility of my learning	
It challenged me to research more	
Learning from my class mates	
Relaxed group environment	

13. On a scale of 1 to 5 (5 being the highest and 1 lowest, how much did the case studies you group used helped to understand nonverbal communication better?

Very helpful	5	4	3	2	1	Very unhelpful

14. Would you recommend group work to improve understanding of other content related to Communication 1?

Definitely Yes	
Probably Yes	
Probably No	
Definitely No	

15. Briefly summarise in a paragraph what you learnt about non-verbal communication.

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Thank you very much for your participation.

END