AN ANONYMOUS APPROACH TO GROUP BASED ASSESSMENT

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Background and Problem

Last year, a revolutionary new idea was presented at the CAA conference introducing VorteX, a collaboration tool that allows fairer grading of group based assessments through its monitoring of group work, and the presentation of statistical information.

Since that time, further research has been carried out at Aberystwyth to improve the effectiveness of group-based assessments, and to ultimately improve students results and learning. Although VorteX has helped students collaborate and work as a team, it has become apparent that there are still several issues when working in a group. As soon as students are monitored, it appears that many of the standard issues of team-working are overcome, in particular the problem of students not putting in their fair share of the effort. What is difficult to overcome is the clash of personalities and biased preconceptions.

Approach

Using VorteX, users were set up with new userids so that when they logged into the server, they would appear with unidentifiable userids within the team list in place of their usual user name.

During the project, users would work with their team member without knowing who they were working with. No attempt was made by the lecturer to shield identities. Students were free to find out if they so wished. Surprisingly only 1 out of over 20 groups did so (and not so surprisingly they were least happy with the results!)

Findings

After the group project finished, the students were interviewed to assess how they found the project when not knowing who they were working with. The

majority of students found it exciting working with unknown people, so immediately found the task interesting. Students also found that they were able to express themselves more freely when they were unaware of whom they were working with. Even when working remotely over a network, interacting via the inbuilt chat tool, student's expectations of other student's behaviour still exists. A student who is normally reserved and doesn't contribute as much is sub consciously expected to behave within the same boundaries. Conversely, a student who is strong willed, confident and who likes to take control is expected to act in the same manor.

Anonymity goes some way to breaking down these boundaries. Students who are reserved are able to take a more active role within the team. The most outstanding example of this was a student who is profoundly deaf. In the past the student had struggled when working in groups due to communication problems, and as a result had found it difficult to actively contribute to the group work. With the student being anonymous, all preconceptions were ignored. On completion of the project when the members of the group were announced, the rest of the team were surprised (yet thrilled) that they were working with this particular student having been previously of the qualities that the student was able to bring to the group even though they had worked with the student before.

It is often the case that when working in groups, two conflicting personalities can be a destructive force for the team. Instead of working together for the greater good of the team, they often oppose each other and degrade the teams overall performance. With no previous "baggage" brought into the group anonymity can allow individuals to start again enabling more harmonious relationships.

Conclusions and Further Work

From our research it is clear that anonymous group working has much to offer over standard group working in many situations. It is believed that there are many other advantages to anonymity other than those discussed within this paper. We have also found that certain types of students are able to perform better through anonymity, though the extent to which this is true requires further investigation.

VorteX is currently in beta testing stages and will be available to purchase from Khaydor Ltd, a spinout company from the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, from June 30th 2004.

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