Using group work in teaching, learning and assessment:

Computer Games Design at the University of Suffolk

Contact: Rob Kurta, Course Leader

The BA (Hons) Computer Games Design course at the University of Suffolk offers students a studio-based games production experience. From day one, students are engaged in making games and gaining practical experience of the full production pipeline, from initial pitching, iterating and play-testing through to the completion of both 2 and 3 Dimensional digital games.

As an integral part of the course, students develop practical skills in project management by acting as scrum leaders in small cross-level development teams (2 to 5 students).

At Level 4, students work in development teams in the Group Project module, and they are project managed by Level 5 students undertaking the Managing Games Production module. The approach produces an effective feedback loop, whereby Level 4 students are able to take on board what they learn from their Level 5 project manager when they take on the role themselves a year later. These small projects are run across semesters, which means that by the time a student reaches Level 6 and undertakes their Games Project module, they will
have experienced four full team development cycles in addition to a range of smaller games projects from other modules within the course.

Every four weeks, every student is asked to present their group project game to the course team. This ensures that staff members are aware of the performance of all students, and also provides a series of focal points for students and staff across the academic year. The presentations are recorded and made available to students through the virtual learning environment, Learn. Through accompanying tutorial sessions, students are able to reflect on their performance in pitching and talking about their games in a focused, accurate and engaging manner.

Teaching staff act as project stakeholders and monitor all group communication regularly. This is achieved through:

- stipulating that all email communication between group members should be sent using the students’ University email accounts, routinely copying in relevant teaching staff
- staff access to group SVN folders to check work uploaded to projects, including weekly sprint meeting minutes (SVN refers to apache subversion, which is a software versioning and revision control system used to maintain current and historical versions of files)
- staff access to the JIRA project management tool to check on the progress of the week-by-week sprint management of the projects.

This enables any emerging issues to be picked up promptly, and provides an opportunity to provide formative feedback on group progress. It also provides an auditable assessment of an individual’s contribution to the work of the group.

Where a group member is unable to function appropriately within a team, opportunities are made available for that student to either be transferred to another team; for further teams to be formed; for the student to work directly with the stakeholders; or for projects to be forked.

Assessment of group work is designed to ensure that there is sufficient commitment to the group outcome (the completed game), while at the same time offering the opportunity for students to have their individual contribution credited if they efforts are either greater or less than other group members. Students receive a shared mark for the game (20% of their overall mark) and an individual mark reflecting their own contribution to the game (the remaining 80% of their mark). This approach helps to ensure a flexible but robust set of procedures that enable quality product to be produced by student teams, while at the same time reducing the potential for disruption that can inevitably occur when teams are put together to develop a product over an extended period of time.

These group projects help to embed the skills required for agile team-based games development, reflecting the skills needed to become effective professionals within the games and related industries upon graduation. They also allow for a significant amount of high quality peer assisted learning, which provides opportunities for students to mentor others and pass on their developing skills.
This approach to group project work and peer learning is valued by students and employers, and has been praised in recent years by external examiners. It was also commended at the 2015 course re-approval event.

A comprehensive understanding of games design is extremely important in the gaming industry and has a direct impact on the quality and success of our products. We have a number of graduates from the course on our staff and their ideas and skills have helped them to excel and push our business forward.

Matt David, Ludo Logic

The teaching team have adopted an innovative and highly effective approach to the teaching and assessment of project management, where students from the first levels take on development team roles with students from the final year taking on project management roles. Not only does this encourage course cohesion, but also allows students to fully appreciate how project management of teams works from both sides. The teaching team have now fully moved to Agile development and project management methods and incorporated the use of Jira project management software which is highly relevant for future employment and allows the team a more complete picture of student contributions to group work.

Stacey Pogoda, University of East London
2012-13 external examiner report

A good balance between individual and group work is in place, with a clear rationale and set of supporting evidence in place for when an individual’s mark deviated greatly from the rest of the group. The project management tools (Jira) put in place by the team are commendable as it allows for decisions to be audited and verified easily. I was concerned initially that this might cause too much focus to be placed on the process rather than final product, however after spending time playing through the sample work and then viewing the development logs these were set at ease.

Christopher Joyce, University of Bath
2013-14 external examiner report