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Group Work and Undergraduate Accounting Students: a Bourdieusian Analysis

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Biographical notes

WW Teviotdale

Head of Accountancy, Finance and Economics. Currently an ICAEW (the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales) Council Member and a member of ICAEW's Learning and Professional Development Board, developing its strategic direction.

Wilma is a past lead on teaching and learning in the Business School and created its Learning Development Group (LDG), which supports staff in developing innovative approaches to teaching and learning. She is Director of the Business Education Research Group (BERG) bringing together colleagues from LDG and disciplines within the School with a common interest in enhancing the student experience. BERG hosted the annual conference for the Association of Learning Development in Higher Education (ALDHE) in the Business School in April 2014.

Wilma was part of the QAA Subject benchmark review of Accounting statement in 2016 as a panel member, working with academics, professional bodies and employers nationally, to develop standards for undergraduate programmes.

David Clancy

David conducts research within the Business Education Research Group and joined the University in November 2012. His PhD explored the influence personal epistemology has on teaching and learning in a higher education context. As well as holding research interests and publishing in this area, David has also researched and written on a variety of topics. However, the focus of his research has remained on teaching and learning in HE.

His personal research interest is in the profound influence the teacher has on the learning of their students, more so than the subject matter and learning environment. More specifically, his interest lies in the epistemological, ontological, and axiological aspects of teaching and learning in HE.

Roy Fisher

Roy Fisher is Professor of Education and Head of the Department of Initial Teacher Education in the School of Education and Professional Development at the University of Huddersfield, UK. He was founding chair, then co-chair, of The Yorkshire and Humberside Learning and Skills Research Network from 1998 to 2008. Roy is a member of the editorial board of the Journal of Vocational Education and Training. His work has been widely published and has encompassed, inter alia, autodidactism, subject specialist pedagogy, vocationalism, teacher education, and representations of education in popular culture.

Pat Hill

Pat is an Academic Skills Tutor and her experience as a mature student gave her a deep interest in teaching and learning. This fascination grew as she engaged with students of vastly different abilities. Her PhD research began from the observation that students often graduated with the same idiosyncrasies in their writing that they started with. It has evolved into an exploration of the tensions and complexity surrounding the development of student writing in a higher education system which is struggling to move from the position of an elitist filter for high flyers to one which offers the opportunity for the realisation of potential to a much wider student body.

Her current research Interests include: the impact of feedback and assessment on student learning; curriculum integration of generic skills; writing development; and standard English as a tool of discrimination.

Group Work and Undergraduate Accounting Students: a Bourdieusian Analysis

ABSTRACT

This study investigated students' views and experiences of group work in a vocationally oriented undergraduate Accounting and Finance degree course in an English post-1992 university. In this context tutors prepare students for the profession and for the workplace, and the development of team-working skills is a core element in the curriculum. This presents a significant challenge to tutors given that students commonly report an aversion to aspects of group work, including a perceived loss of individual autonomy, and particularly the fear of a risk to grades arising from working with others. Theoretical constructs drawn from Bourdieu were used to develop an understanding of how tutors could be better informed of students' perspectives. This supports reflective behaviour by tutors when designing strategies to overcome both commonly reported barriers to effective group work and previously less well understood drivers of student behaviour. A focus group approach was adopted with 28 students participating. The findings have the potential to address the challenge of facilitating students' effective engagement in group work in Accounting and other vocationally-oriented programmes.

Keywords Vocational Accounting education; group work; assessment

Introduction

This study reports on student group work in a vocationally oriented undergraduate Accounting degree programme in a post-1992 university in England. The historical development of Accounting as an academic discipline, its relationship with the university, as well as some stereotypical and negative attitudes towards its nature as a subject, and as a profession, have been discussed by Fisher and Murphy (1995) as well as by a range of subsequent studies including, more recently, Wessels and Steenkamp (2009) and Wells (2015). Accounting has generally been characterised by terms such as "boring", "mechanistic", "tedious" and "conservative". Accountancy is a global and relatively internationalised profession, but it could be stated to have an image that paradoxically combines high professional status and low esteem, and this perception goes well beyond the Anglophone world – see for example, Sugahara, Hiramatsu and Boland (2007) in relation to Japan. Fisher and Murphy (1995) highlighted how universities in England had been slow to embrace Accounting as a discipline, leaving this to the more vocational polytechnic sector of higher education (transformed into universities by the Further and Higher Education Act 1992).

The status of vocational education in general in the UK has been problematic in consequence of some complex social class issues which arise from aspects of British and, especially, English history. Social hierarchies that emerged from the processes of industrialisation in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries led to a valorisation of classical and liberal modes of knowledge with a concomitant stigmatisation of vocational study and institutions. The complex mix of stakeholders and controversy around what vocational knowledge and education is (Bathmaker 2013; Horden 2014), have added to the issues. This is alongside research acknowledging the need to foster pedagogical content knowledge in business and economics tutors (Kuhn, Alonzo, and Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia 2016). In the last two decades of the twentieth century, vocational education in England saw an adoption of elements of progressive pedagogy leading to forms of vocational progressivism. These persist to the present day and encompass further education (FE) and large parts of the expanded higher education (HE)/university sector (see Fisher and Simmons 2012). The forms taken have included the wide-scale adoption of outcomes-based curricula, the promotion of student-centred learning, and a move towards more group work as an approach to student learning and assessment.

This paper develops perspectives that offer insights into Accounting students' dispositions and approaches to group work practices to inform the design of group work activities in Accounting undergraduate programmes and, potentially, some other vocational courses. Group work activities are commonplace within vocational and professional education but were given greater emphasis following widening participation in HE. Reviews such as Dearing (1997), which highlighted preparation for work, and various Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) subject benchmarks, have

served to embed group work into undergraduate programmes specifying Accounting students being able to demonstrate 'Working with others (such as through small group projects)' (QAA 2016, 9). Recent developments in the Teaching Excellence Framework (BIS 2015) give significant weight to metrics measuring graduate employability, further emphasising its importance.

Given our reference to negative stereotypes above, and our focus on group work, it is interesting to note that Steenkamp and Wessels (2014) have reported that Accounting students are less tolerant of ambiguity than the general population. Moreover, Mladenovic (2000) has argued that the introduction of non-traditional teaching methods, such as group work, does little to impact on students' negative perceptions of Accounting. Palm and Bisman (2010), in their Australian based study, have pointed to an increasingly diverse body of Accounting students in the context of a continued domination of traditional approaches to teaching and learning. Nevertheless, there is evidence Accounting students report overall benefits arising from group work (Cadiz Dyball et al. 2010; Shankar and Seow 2010). Where problems are experienced with group work and Accounting students dominant discourses emerge around relative power and autonomy. Complicating factors of who exercises power in the formation of groups of students (Kelly 2009; Popov et al. 2012; Shanker and Seow 2010) and perceptions of fairness around assessment (Gibbs 2009; Orr 2010) are illustrative of these discourses.

The literature suggests ways in which the forming of students into groups can affect how relative power and autonomy are exercised and, arguably, this is the bedrock for the effectiveness of the processes and products of group work. Consequently, there is likely to be a direct impact on how students exercise their agency within a self-imposed group structure or one imposed on them. Although, intuitively, tutors may consider that allowing students to choose their own team members is more appropriate, the evidence from empirical studies is mixed (Chapman et al. 2010; Myers 2012), and further complications arise from the presence of students with "loner" or individualist tendencies in either approach (Shankar and Seow 2010). Research regarding the fairness of assessment adds to the issues arising from relative power and autonomy. Orr (2010, 311) reported that '...students' approaches to group work projects are, in part, constructed by the assessment tools employed'. Of particular relevance to this study was Orr's (2010) conclusion that tutors do not sufficiently understand students' group dynamics, and that grades for process, not just product, may address students' demands for fairness in group assessment. The most significant aspect of assessment frequently relates to students' relative contributions to group work and how tutors may, or may not, recognise this. 'Free-riding, insufficient English language skills and students not communicating properly...' were the main challenges reported by Popov et al. (2012, 302) investigating multicultural group work.

In an attempt to balance relative power, and create more autonomy, it is not uncommon for tutors to introduce peer input to assessment of group work, yet there is equivocal evidence for its reliability

(Gibbs 2009). Gibbs's view (2009, 9) that 'In the end it is the creation of a healthy learning milieu that can contribute most to solving group work assessment problems...' followed his extensive review of assessment and group work and is a recurring theme in the literature [see Orr (2010); Cadiz Dyball et al (2010); Noonan (2013); Steel, Huggins and Laurens (2014)]. Gibbs's review emphasizes that social practices at the heart of the issues encountered in group work may remain unacknowledged by tutors. Acknowledging these social practices may provide more insights: '...social theory offers a sense of the world that is different from what is typically presumed, and so it provides a context for new associations and meanings' (Dressman, 2008, 64). Finding approaches to enhance learning and employability skills and which avoid unnecessary conflict between students working in groups is challenging.

Research Framework

Bourdieu's constructs of field, habitus and capital provide an opportunity to explore and challenge the practices in group work and to '...uncover the workings of power and inequality in particular social spaces.' (Bathmaker 2015, 65). Bourdieu's work on education systems, which he considered reproduced power inequalities to favour the elite, neglected business schools (Vaara and Fäy 2012) and is extended here to cover Accounting. The inequality inherent in group work exists alongside the mutual dependency of group members and Bourdieu's metaphor of "game" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) to explain activities encountered within a collaborative working field is relevant. The interaction of students in group work and the fundamental dichotomy between objectivism and subjectivism, reconciling structure and agency, can be investigated through Bourdieu's approach (Reay 1995; Thompson 2011). This focus on the dynamics within a social practice can inform tutors as they set the "rules of the game" within group work assignments. Bourdieu's concepts enable understanding of the social world, integrating a theory of social structures (field), a theory of relative power held by the individuals in the field (capital), and a theory of the individual shaped by their dispositions (habitus) (Bourdieu 1977; 1986; 1990). His praxeology is dynamic with interdependent key concepts operating to produce a framework of power relations (Malsch, Gendron and Grazzini 2011). In conceptualizing field, Bourdieu sees relationships as developed from the hierarchical positions held by individuals within their social space, creating and legitimizing activities (Bourdieu 1977). A later exposition (Bourdieu 1998, 40) explicates the dynamic context and the role of hierarchical social positions and power:

> A field is a structured social space, a field of forces, a force field. Constant, permanent relationships of inequality operate inside this space, which at the same time becomes a space in which the various actors struggle for the transformation or preservation of the field. All the individuals in this universe bring to the competition all the power at their disposal. It is this power that defines their position in the field, and as a result, their strategies.

This 'ordering of different aspects of social life' (Rawolle and Lingard 2008, 732) results in a structure in which the exercise of power is inherent producing a conflicted social setting or field of struggle (Bathmaker 2015). Students' group working practices represent a Bourdieusian field: a social space where they bring their relative powers to bear while negotiating with others to make sense of the given task. While this conceptualisation is adopted here, it can be questioned how autonomous this field is in relation to others that students can experience within HE. The extent to which this field can be controlled by others outside of the student group is pertinent to this study given the intent to uncover discourses that challenge practices. Rapid, and relatively recent, changes in HE regarding, *inter alia,* the diversity of the student population allow for new influences entering such fields with the potential to increase conflict. Tutors could reasonably be expected to implement strategies to encourage vocational educational outcomes anticipated from group work while minimizing the opportunity for conflict, yet evidence suggests that tutors do not always understand what is happening in group work social practices (Gibbs 2009; Orr 2010).

Increasing diversity in HE brings opportunities for personal development to a vocational programme. However, in the tension between structure (as the field of group work) and agency (of the student in the context of their habitus and capital), Bourdieu effectively casts doubt on the ability of students to change what they encounter; not everything is possible and complete freedom is not achievable (Bathmaker 2015). Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, 127) elaborated: '...when habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it finds itself "as a fish in water", ….and takes the world about itself for granted'. Nonetheless, habitus is not a fixed concept. Indeed, Reay (2004, 435) noted that various fields can restructure primary habitus and 'Implicit in the concept is the possibility of a social trajectory that enables conditions of living that are very different from initial ones'. In considering students' ability to develop as they encounter different fields, and interact with other students, exploring whether they are able to change, and/or adapt, and what form this takes will be of interest. Reflecting the nature of their subject, vocational tutors will set opportunities for the development of students' abilities (capital for their future careers) but success depends on meaningful engagement.

That engagement may depend on students' capital (economic, cultural and social), which can serve to either empower or disempower. Cultural capital '...includes all the things that help people gain access to, and position themselves strategically within, fields.' (Nolan 2012, 204). Students with less developed English language skills and different cultural and educational backgrounds may feel more, or less, power in group work, depending on the task assigned. This includes selection of group members, and tasks set, which may not cater for a range of cultural capital within the cohort. Bourdieu's metaphor of playing a game supports an understanding of the interaction of field, habitus and capital and allows the potential for doxa, which Bourdieu suggests is a view of the world that is beyond question, leading to misrecognition and symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1977).

Misrecognition – 'Being caught up in, and bounded by, what seems natural and normal in the world...' (Nolan 2012, 205) allows symbolic violence to occur where individuals accept their position in any power play as the status quo. The extent to which students take matters for granted has the potential to provide insights for tutors seeking to improve the effectiveness of collaborative work. Equally, Bourdieu's lens should reveal whether symbolic violence exists, arising from '...hidden structures that reproduce and maintain social domination in covert ways...' (Colaguori 2010, 389). Penalties may, or may not, result if the rules of the game are broken, for example a student who does not contribute fairly to the group task.

It is argued here that group work is a complex social phenomenon and that analysing student conversations through a Bourdieusian lens has something to offer to understand the implications of group work. Part of the complexities arise from a wide range of diverse factors which inform the social relations which form within student groups and can affect their cultural capital. In this case the participating students were Accounting undergraduates in a post-1992 university which has a commitment to widening participation. HESA (2017) statistics for UK domiciled young full-time first degree entrants in 2015/16 show that the University drew 17.9% of its entrants in that category from low participation neighbourhoods (as opposed to 3.1% at the University of Cambridge) and 98.7% from state schools (61.9% at the University of Cambridge). It has a far greater proportion of students drawn from manual occupational home backgrounds than would be found in a "Russell Group" institution.

Methodology

The research reported derives from a larger project investigating student and staff conceptions and experiences of student group work within an Accounting undergraduate programme. Only student perspectives are discussed here and views were drawn from seven small scale focus groups. Given the search for understanding how students were "playing the game" of group work, focus groups were considered more appropriate than individual interviews. The student participants were volunteers from the second and final years. Ethical approval was obtained and students were made aware that participation was voluntary and could be withdrawn at any time; none withdrew. All students signed consent forms which included permission for audio recording of the focus groups. "Member checking" was undertaken by reviewing notes summarising key points. 28 students (eight from year 2; 20 from the final year) participated. Difficulty with scheduling hindered an even spread of students across groups. Chinese students, the largest group of non-UK students, did not attend focus groups with others, but comprised a separate group; this restricted cross-cultural interaction that may have provided more insights.

Inequality can come from factors such as maturity (age), gender, country of origin, and social and educational backgrounds. The information obtained in Table 1 represents the available demographic detail for each focus group as part of the context and potential for further insights into cultural capital being revealed from illustrative quotes.

Table 1 here

Focus group questions were drawn from analysing a survey completed by students from all three years of the programme. The questionnaire, derived from the literature, covered: student attitudes to group work; the formation of groups; cultural diversity; management of the group; levels of tutor guidance; assessment and feedback. The questionnaire was completed by 315 undergraduates (response rate 60%). Further results of the questionnaire are not reported here except to set out how this influenced the focus group questions. The student responses were reviewed to look for consensus and differences in opinion regarding group working. This process helped to identify key question areas for student focus group meetings. Table 2 summarizes the key question areas which emerged, categorised according to the structure used for the questionnaire.

The conceptualisation of field for this study was the student group work projects. The following analysis is on dispositions emerging from student focus groups and considers where students can get "stuck" with particular situations indicating their relative power and autonomy are insufficient to succeed within the field. The transcripts from the focus groups were independently reviewed, with iterations to refine key interpretations, by the authors of this paper. Deductive content analysis (Krippendorff 2013) was used to identify the major issues within students' conversations regarding the context of the process and product of group work. Quotes from transcripts were selected to illustrate the evidence presented in Table 3 below which summarizes all the comments relating to the major issues raised.

Key Findings

Student attitudes to group work, as a general feature from Table 1, do not appear in the subsequent tables presented below as group work was reported positively as instrumental in helping students forge friendships and develop relationships. There was also clear recognition that employability skills were enhanced with Confidence a recurring theme. This reflects reports in the Accounting education literature that students find value for their affective development, noted above, and also found in other vocational education (Steel, Huggins and Laurens 2014).

Although the interpretation and classification of comments can be debated at the margins, areas emerged which provided significant evidence of student perceptions of conflict that could cause tutors concern for the effectiveness of processes and products of group work. These areas related

to (in order of highest to lowest commonality): perceptions of assessment risk; sticking to what is known; lack of expected participation; and ability to exercise group power. They are summarised in Table 3. The contexts are those derived from the literature. The number of comments students made within each context is noted.

Table 3 here

From Table 3, Areas 1 and 2 attracted most student comments at 64 and 60. The most common context was "Management of group" at 60 with remaining contexts clustered between 35 – 41. This was expected from the literature reporting the dissatisfaction with group work assessment and difficulty tutors have reported with approaches to the formation of groups. Given the porous nature of the process and product of group work and the holistic approach for this study, Areas 3 and 4 are construed as being in relation to the two major Areas 1 and 2. However, it should be recognised that all areas are likely to be relatively interdependent. Arguably, "Perceptions of assessment risk by students" (Area 1) as most dominant could then naturally lead to students minimising risk by "Sticking to what is known" (Area 2) when engaged in group work. Similarly, "Sticking to what is known" may have led to students' comments on the areas dealing with "Lack of expected participation" (Area 3) and "Ability to exercise group power" (Area 4) as further efforts are made to avoid risk.

Student comments from focus groups are now considered through a Bourdieusian lens to explore and illustrate how students are "playing the game", providing insights into any conflict and inequality in the field.

Although all focus group comments are in Table 3, illustrative quotes are taken from groups with three to seven members (five out of seven groups conducted) as it is considered these provide a richer, group-based, account of students' experiences; no further insights were gained from the remaining groups. Four groups were final year and one was second year, covering 24 students. The final year student focus groups are dealt with first as they had experienced more from three years of group work.

Final year student focus group (FG) comments

Perceptions of assessment risk and the potential impact on grades were expected significant concerns for students. Comments included:

'I think – it's final year and our degree is really important and it's our degree. I don't think that we should have to rely on other people to help get our grades' (FG4, seven students).

Even where some tutors apparently recognised students' perceptions of assessment risk and introduced peer allocation of marks, students adapted to the new rules in the field and adopted covert strategies in order to benefit from domination of the group:

'...this particular member decided to go for a peer mark and they all had allocated roles...but in the actual presentation he decided he would do more slides and speak for longer just to make him stand out and none of the group was very pleased'; 'just because someone has presented it doesn't mean to say that he has done all the work' (FG3, six students).

Problems still arose even if peer review was optional and risk was not mitigated:

'…there is not a lot of clarity on how that peer review is marked (FG5, four students).

A concern that tutors were unaware of certain assessment issues emerged:

*'...there was one guy in my group and it was really difficult to understand him but if you got past his accent what he was actually saying was really meaningful. I'm not sure how considerate assessments are of that' (*FG4, seven students).

"Sticking to what is known" was disrupted by some tutors with tutor-allocated groupings initially followed by a free choice. Students understood tutor allocation as a way of mixing up diverse groups but ambivalence was evident on its impact:

'I think sometimes if you are stuck in a group where the whole project is dependent on your work and other people aren't putting as much work in…you feel that you have a lot of burden' (FG3, six students).

'…. if you get to pick your group people are likely to put the effort in as much as you do. Whereas if you get put in a group with people that you don't know, you don't know how they work' (FG5, four students).

In allowing students to self-select their groups, tutors may not recognise that this can still encourage symbolic violence and evidence emerged indicating students' relative power and autonomy were unexpected conflict factors in relation to friends:

'…[It is] harder when I'm working with friends in a group because I think when it's your friends I find it harder to say I'm working with someone else in that module. When you are not friends and you are working together then it's not so bad but if you are friends then it can affect your friendship' (FG4, seven students).

A simple lack of participation was not the only issue. Not participating in a manner that recognised the need for collective working and taking responsibility for the whole of the product also arose:

'…so you are basically not giving much attention to the group work…you just scan it over and you just kind of say ok that's fine' (FG5, four students).

This would be a particular concern for tutors as students' division of labour in this manner undermines intended learning outcomes. Fragmented knowledge, without seeing its place in the completed work, is not what is intended from group work nor would this be expected in the workplace.

However, a more appropriate approach was explained by another group:

'Two heads are better than one always…members look at the work as a whole and if there is something wrong, for example, I said – oh, I think you've missed this out and he would go and correct it and he wouldn't mind because it's for a good mark and it's critical altogether' (FG3, six students).

Tutor guidance for support when dealing with personal conflict was seen to be lacking:

'What guidance?' 'I think from the tutor's point of view, they expect you to know everything about group work from doing so much in the first year'; 'Yes but like with the international students they don't know and the lack of guidance makes it unclear' (FG4, seven students).

'What we got told in the [module name] this year, if you don't get along outside the module that is entirely up to you, you have got to solve it outside the module. If you are having problems in your group it is your problem, sort it out as a group. …but if the lecturer is there then they should at least be there to support you' (FG3, six students).

Even where tutors asked for group minutes to be kept as evidence of group working, students were not convinced this produced fairness:

'The group minutes are not always representative…of what has actually happened' (FG3, six students).

Arguably, these are examples of symbolic violence where students are unable to exercise group power and point to the need for tutors to be aware of these issues and negotiate with students on what is fair and transparent given the examples of "gaming" strategies.

UK students generally considered that cultural diversity was a good product but wanted to avoid difficulties in the process that they could not control:

'I think if you are forced in a group with people you don't know, especially if they are foreign students…the learning is very difficult because you have to get over the language barrier which is always very, very difficult' (FG3, six students).

A recurrent theme was language barriers with international students, but there was evidence of understanding how difficult this was for overseas students in particular and how they could make valuable contributions:

'*We do group work in [module name] and that's quite good….I'm working with students from different countries and it gives you the opportunity to say you bring your knowledge from your country and I'll bring mine*' (FG 4, seven students).

Some students demonstrated a more nuanced understanding of international students being in a "game" they may not have engaged with before:

'*I think sometimes it might be that they feel their opinion isn't as valued as ours, that they might think – oh, we are international students and that these guys have been doing it for the last few years so they know more than us*' (FG5, four students).

This accorded with the Chinese students' view of themselves where they were looking to the UK students to share knowledge and '*to make the answers more valid*'; they were also looking for a leader for their group work: '*leader in the group is a good way to motivate other guys to finish the work*' (FG7, three Chinese students). The Chinese students did not volunteer to attend a focus group and only agreed to come to a group just for them. Their silences during the focus group raised a concern as to whether they were gauging the researchers' reactions before committing to a position, displaying, in this context, weak cultural capital and a disposition to be led. However, there was a clear view that they did wish to integrate when group working even though they too had encountered problems with lack of participation. '*I was disappointed*' [this was due to two British students not attending the group they had been allocated to]; '*You can't participate in that* [group] *if the majority is of one culture*'; '*We can't communicate with other students*' (FG7, three Chinese students).

Some students' ability to exercise their group power was very evident as they sought to mitigate assessment risk. One group had a trial run before accepting students into their group:

'*As harsh as it sounds, we just had to say – look – you are not contributing enough and at the end of the day it is our degree and we want to get a good mark and sorry you are going to have to find yourself another group*' (FG3, six students).

Further evidence of "gaming" strategies to control groups was clearly demonstrated:

'*if you are already in a group you have got your core team and you need to pull in a few more members and say if one person is good at maths or one person is really good at presentations you would bring these people in ….you would just pull in extra people who would be a benefit to the group as a whole*' (FG3, six students).

This reveals symbolic violence where students who are perceived as less able cannot participate with more able students. The overwhelming message here is that perceptions of assessment risk influence student behaviour most significantly. This offers threats to the effective working of groups of students. However, it is also an opportunity for tutors to harness this influence in a manner which could potentially mediate student behaviour to overcome any disposition to succumb to such domination and supporting the development of their capital. Ensuing discussions around how the assessment rules were set up by the tutor revealed instances where assessment criteria were not clear:

*'...we have been doing presentations; there is no clear guidance on marking' (*FG5, four students).

In the absence of clear tutor guidance students reacted in different ways to manage conflict, a further instance of symbolic violence. The relative power of certain students was apparent with some dominating the underperforming students. A reluctance to involve tutors appears to stem from a disposition not to "tell tales". Symbolic violence emerges not only with Chinese students but others who feel they "just have to get on with it". However, there was also clear evidence of students (FG3) exercising their cultural capital to control group work.

Second year students' comments (all FG2, four students)

FG2 was the only second year group with at least three students. This group was also able to provide a useful discussion on their first year experiences. Conversations around "Sticking to what was known" were linked to lack of expected participation and ability to exercise group power:

'…last year...we had someone who was supposed to be our team manager and then they didn't turn up to any of the meetings...so they didn't manage the team very well.'

'After that obviously bad experience with the team manager thing, I worked in a group with seven people that I already knew.'

'The presentations - I chose, like who I went with. I'm still friends with them and I still work with some of them this year but for the ones we were put into, I don't see any of those people.'

During the conversations, it became apparent that in their first year of study the students had been put in groups by a tutor who appointed team managers leading up to assessed presentations. While this is a reasonable approach to help students prepare for work situations where choice is unlikely, what may be less apparent to tutors is the strength of aversion to losing control of the formation of groups:

'So, if you are with good people who want to work and are the same kind of person as you it's really good and it helps you develop, but otherwise I don't like it'.

This last comment regarding working with people "like you" is concerning given the need to develop employability skills in a vocational profession with a clear identity but has various environments and operates globally. There is an implicit assumption here that learning from people who are not "like us" is not relevant. However, one group member did demonstrate some cognizance of how working with people not known could help development:

'*I think maybe because I work with friends and people that I was comfortable with, I don't think we did as well.*

Cultural aspects of working with others were raised in relation to tutor-allocated formation of groups that mixed nationalities. While comments related to expected language barriers, there was some recognition of useful cross-cultural exchange of knowledge:

'*I think people from different countries need to be included but a lot of the time they don't speak very good English…it's not that people want to leave them out but it is quite hard when you are trying to speak and they don't understand'.*

'*We had a Chinese girl in our group, so she was then able to talk about ethics from her country that she had knowledge of that we didn't have so I thought that was quite good'.* This related to an experience in the first year of study when tutor allocations occurred. However, when choice of formation was allowed:

'*…when everyone got their choice, the tutor even mentioned it, that you can go round the room and all the cultures are sat together'.*

Students' ability to exercise their group power was seen as weak and they would not cross perceived social barriers regarding their behaviour when problems were encountered:

'*…they just didn't turn up but nothing happened to them because we can't exactly go to the tutor and say what happened because they would find out you have been a grass…so you are kind of put in an awkward situation…there is no good way to handle it'.*

Discussion

Although commonly reported areas of complaint about group work emerged from the focus groups, further insights, and unexpected outcomes, have been revealed through a Bourdieusian lens. From this perspective, the demographic information in Table 1 provides some context for the illustrative quotes above. Table 1 showed that the majority of focus group participants were female and there was an older age range than would be expected of second and final year undergraduate students. The more reflective and inclusive comments mainly came from groups with either a higher proportion of females and/or an older age group (for example, FG3 and FG4). Although there were five non-

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UK/EU students, two had integrated into FG2 and FG4 and it was not noticeable from the interviews that they were unused to UK educational approaches. This was in sharp contrast to FG7 which comprised three Chinese students who displayed dispositions of weaker cultural capital and ability to deal with the "game". In further research, more insights could be obtained from detailed information on students' social and educational backgrounds as an influence on their cultural capital; for example, discussion with students about whether they were the first in their families to attend university.

Students did a lot of collaborative work in their first year, with more tutor input, and when marks did not affect their degree final grade. Their perceptions were that they had moved from a supported and lower assessment risk field, which made its contribution to shaping dispositions to group work. More difficulties were revealed when the rules of the game changed in subsequent years, including increased cultural diversity from overseas students as direct entrants to second and final years of study, and "winning the game" (getting good marks) became more problematic.

The reduction in tutor guidance is in line with much research on the second year experience which suggests that, following the intensive help students have in the first year, they can feel 'a sense of abandonment' (Schaller 2010, 13). Tutors, however, may feel the need to develop student autonomy in the second year and so a tension between different ideologies develops. There is a habitus/field misfit as students struggle with the lack of tutor guidance and the increased risk to grades. This permits symbolic violence to occur as some students' cultural capital is not adequate to deal with the gaming strategies adopted by other students. Even when tutors introduced peer assessment (as one of the potential "fixes" described by Gibbs 2009) in an attempt at fairness, students' conversations revealed this merely furthered symbolic violence with students helpless to challenge the strategy of the student opting for the peer mark approach (FG3, six students) and students reporting that even working with friends can be problematic (FG4, seven students; FG2, four students). Arguably, disempowerment of students resulted from tutors' misrecognition of what could have been seen as a natural response to students' complaints of lack of fairness in group assessment. This compounded the underlying symbolic violence as a consequence of the lack of tutor guidance as assessment risk increased.

Students' conversations revealed instances where they subsequently became "fish out of water". It was noted that self-selection of group members was preferred but tutors would allocate students to groups as they endeavoured to mix cultures and provide experiences more akin to that in the workplace. Regardless of country of origin, students reverted to who they knew as soon as choice existed, "sticking to what is known". While this accords with Kelly's (2009) findings, what is less clear is why this occurred. Through a Bourdieusian lens, potential explanations could rest with the

'reductionist tendency' outlined by Bourdieu where academic groups work to avoid risk by adopting conservative approaches which supports their particular hierarchical stance (Bourdieu, 1988: 14). In this academic context, an example would be students' dispositions having been shaped from past experiences of "free riders", whom they wish to exclude from group formations. Further evidence for this comes from Orr (2010, 306) who reported students using their first year experience of working with other students as '…information they acquire about other students' motivation and commitment to ensure that they work with students they feel they can rely on in Years 2 and 3'. Tutors need to be aware of possible areas of contention and discuss them with students in relation to forming groups. If the game analogy is used then it might be useful to show how overcoming obstacles is part of the game and can reap rewards; this could openly authenticate some of the more appropriate "gaming strategies" encountered in this study and help eradicate those which do not address perceptions of unfairness. For instance, the assessment criteria could include reflection on how to make the best of each person's talents.

While the conversations with students showed that they were drawn to the notion of fairness, it was not always realised in their descriptions. Not only are the "rules of the game" not explicitly clear, broken "rules" do not attract penalties. Nonetheless, there was clear sympathy with the plight of international students with their language difficulties and lack of adaptation to a "new way of doing things" which did not enable them to "stick to what they knew". Sugahara, Boland and Cilloni (2008) in their study of Chinese accounting students in Australia reported that they showed lower levels of creativity, their ability to adapt was limited, and home students perceived full engagement with them as risky.

Influenced by their past experiences of group work and assessment risk, students acted in ways that avoided dealing with conflict and displayed an inherent lack of trust in the process. Orr (2010, 311) reported '...students are sometimes unsure about the extent to which they can trust their fellow students and the assessment methods employed'. Equally, trust in their tutors to either "set up the game" to be fair or deal with resulting conflict was not evident from our study.

Although tutors were not interviewed as part of this study, students described experienced have offered an opportunity to "see" what is being provided pedagogically in group work. Pressures from institutional structures and from professional Accounting accreditation may be a systemic form of symbolic violence, accepted by tutors without question and which constrains their reflective pedagogical approaches but would need further research. Tutors need to be aware that assessment risk in the final year of study appears to overwhelm the full benefits of group working. It is notable that some students (FG3, six students) revealed higher levels of cultural capital and "changed the game", particularly when assessment risk was highest, to choose students whose abilities were a good fit with the field of the group assignment. These students displayed what Nolan (2012, 211)

called a 'smart/strong/better' label but, arguably, this has resulted in symbolic violence against students who do not share the same level of cultural capital and either cannot, or do not, exercise their power or recognise their autonomy. The transcripts of FG3 revealed that the exercise of group power comments came from the male members of the group who engaged in more "game-playing" in finding and discarding group members depending on their ability to contribute to the group task. Despite this higher level of cultural capital, even FG3 noted more tutor guidance would be welcome. Clear assessment criteria and the opportunity to discuss potential problems and benefits might result in a more genuine attempt to make the group element successful. An element of the mark related to the process might also encourage students to take more responsibility for being inclusive.

In considering whether it is appropriate to assess group work, Plastow, Spiliotopoulou and Prior (2010) argued that the reasons for assessment need to be made clear to students, linking these to module outcomes in overt criteria. However, this may not be sufficient. A greater awareness of what is being assessed (process and/or product) is required together with a deeper understanding of the social phenomenon that is group work. The range of student dispositions reported here requires tutor acknowledgement; this range is evident from Tempone and Martin's (1999) study which analysed six approaches to and understandings of group work by Accounting students. FG3 (six students) in this study were in the 'higher order categories' and saw the purpose of group work 'as being about advancing individual and collective knowledge' (Tempone and Martin 1999, 185). Arguably, FG3's cultural capital and their disposition to view group work as beneficial allowed them to deal with the conflict between 'collaborating or fighting for the marks' (Orr 2010, 301).

Our study showed that although tutor guidance and support for the process and product of group work was deemed to be missing when assessment risk was at its highest, some aspects of the existing guidance were not welcomed by students regarding group formation and peer assessment options. Tutors' own "feel for the game", overcoming systemic constraints, needs to be reviewed when faced with evidence of student dispositions and their gaming approach to group work.

Critiques of Bourdieu's approach argue that his concept of field is not as bounded and insular as he conceives (Marginson 2008), nor can field encompass all practice encountered (Warde 2004). Students' habituses brought to the field may be misconceived as a fixed disposition, or latent determinism (Reay 2004) but this study reveals how students can adapt their practices to "win the game". Bourdieu's development of his concepts, and his focus on practice informing theory then re-informing practice (Reay 2004), allows for their re-working; this has given the students in this study their "voice" as they know best their own social world. Nonetheless, this voice will only be effective if it challenges tutors' pedagogical habitus, arguably another instance of doxa, structured from their past assumptions on how students work in groups.

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The indeterminacy of Bourdieu's concepts and his aversion to providing definitions (Nash 1999) are not necessarily problems but effectively could serve researchers well to reflect on social practices from empirical work. This study has provided insights into students' practices revealing unexpected aspects of behaviour. Some of that behaviour may be socially constructed or socio-biological in nature and there is evidence for individual and class habituses that would require further research.

Conclusion

Our study has drawn on the experiences of students of Accounting in a post-1992 university in England, and we have outlined in our introduction some of the complex subject, professional and institutional identities which have afflicted developments in relation to pedagogy, assessment, status and esteem. In particular, the tensions between a disciplinary conservative culture and the exigencies of an applied vocational imperative work in ways which, whilst undoubtedly particular to Accounting, are likely to have significant purchase in other vocational areas.

There is a need to harness the power of the student voice to support their agency within a structure of group work which maximises opportunities for fairness and transparency. In seeking to develop Gibbs' (1999, 9) 'healthy learning milieu', the evidence from this study suggests a need to focus primarily on reducing the instances through which symbolic violence emerges. Merely providing the more detailed tutor guidance, frequently commented on as lacking by the focus group conversations, is not a universal panacea given some of the differentiated views between students and their relative understandings of the "game". In order to become active players in group work and for fairness to be overtly demonstrated, tutors need to challenge their own doxa and engage students in dialogues when designing the "rules of the game". From the conversations presented, it can be argued that tutors are unwittingly 'creating barriers rather than bridges' (Bathmaker 2015, 61) in relation to fairness in group work.

Group work is an area of learning where inter-personal skills and the component of emotion emerge through processes of social interaction. These are laden with power and hierarchies as well as the tensions that frequently arise from being subject to processes of assessment. McPhail (2001), having deployed Bauman (1996) to argue that accounting dehumanises through its relentless measurement and calculation, has argued for a "rehumanisation" of accountancy through accounting education. McPhail calls for the development of students' moral sensibilities and ethical awareness, suggesting that these can be promoted if courses "…try to encourage them to empathise with other individuals." (McPhail 2001, 285). It is proposed that the hermeneutic dimension of group learning "…could be most useful for educating for the other." (McPhail 2001, 287). Elsewhere, McPhail (2004) has made the case for developing accounting students' emotional intelligence. These are important considerations, and they go beyond accounting to permeate the various instrumental academic and vocational disciplines and associated professions that facilitate the accumulation of capital.

Notwithstanding this, before group work can be fully utilised in ways which enable its critical and democratic potential to be realised, it is first necessary to recognise and work to mitigate the inhibiting factors which a Bourdieusian lens can reveal.

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Tables

Table 1: Demographic data of students in focus groups

Focus Group (FG)	Students			Age/Age range			Country of origin			
	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	UK	Other EU	Non UK/EU	Total
FG 1	1	1	2	22	22	22	2	0	0	2

FG 2	1	3	4	22	23-24	22-24	3	0	1	4
FG 3	3	3	6	23-24	24-25	23-25	5	1	0	6
FG 4	1	6	7	25	24-33	24-33	6	0	1	7
FG 5	3	1	4	24-26	23	23-26	4	0	0	4
FG 6	0	2	2		22-23	22-23	2	0	0	2
FG 7	1	2	3	24	24-26	24-26	0	0	3	3
Totals	10	18	28	22-26	22-33	22-33	22	1	5	28

Table 2: Summary of key questions areas for student focus group meetings derived from questionnaire responses

Student attitudes to group work	Formation of group	Cultural diversity	Management of group	Level of tutor guidance	Assessment and feedback

Affective learning;

Employability skills development;

Team approach relating to collective responsibility;

Self-expression skills;

Views on extent of group working in programme;

Effect on speed of progress on task. | Self-selection and tutor-selection of group members;

Working with friends/people of similar background;

Changing group members for different tasks;

Preferences for working on own. | Effectiveness of multi-cultural groups. | Dealing with conflict;

Allocation of tasks;

Levels of interaction with peers;

Dealing with others' opinions. | Amount of contact with tutor;

Active tutor involvement in planning work;

Level of accountability to tutor during process;

Specific guidance on team working;

Clarity of tutor expectations. | Peer assessment; individual versus group marks allocation;

Transparency of mark allocation;

Levels of satisfaction with group mark;

Impact on course grades. |

Table 3: Summary of focus group comments

Areas from focus groups	Contexts					
	Formation of groups	**Cultural diversity**	**Management of group**	**Tutor guidance level**	**Assessment and Feedback**	**Totals**
Area 1: Perception of assessment risk	6	8	8	18	24	64
Area 2: Sticking to what is known	23	11	16	3	7	60
Area 3: Lack of expected participation	7	10	16	9	5	47
Area 4: Ability to exercise group power	3	6	20	11	2	42
Totals for contexts	**39**	**35**	**60**	**41**	**38**	**213**