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Paradox of Collaboration: Assessing Challenges and Improvement Strategies for Group Work Among Sociology Students

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Abstract. Collaborative learning, designed to foster teamwork and collective problem-solving, has become a cornerstone of pedagogical practice in higher education. However, significant challenges often obstruct students from fully realizing the benefits of these social learning environments. This study explored strategic interventions to optimize group work as a teaching and learning tool by providing a platform for students to articulate their experiences and perspectives within a South African university context. Adopting a qualitative research methodology, the study used in-depth, face-to-face interviews with a diverse cohort of Sociology students. The study consisted of 40 participants, 10 students from each level: first year, second year, third year, and honors. This study employed non-probability sampling, using a purposive sampling technique to select participants. This broad participant base allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the evolving challenges across different stages of academic development. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings indicated that students encounter multifaceted barriers, including systemic social loafing, lack of participation, perceived negative impacts on academic performance, and an instructional void characterized by insufficient support from academic staff. Furthermore, logistical hurdles such as spatiotemporal constraints (clashing schedules), interpersonal disagreements, and a general lack of cohesive teamwork were identified as primary friction points. In response to these challenges, students proposed actionable strategies to enhance the efficacy of collaborative assessments. These included the mechanical equalization of workloads to ensure fair participation, the strategic adoption of virtual meeting platforms to circumvent physical distance, and a call for pedagogical scaffolding. Specifically, students argued for lecturers to provide explicit training on the value of collaborative efforts and the institutional consequences of non-participation.

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1. Introduction

Research on student engagement and teaching in higher education has gathered rich data about which activities typically result in good quality or more profound learning for students (Käpylä et al., 2025; Hassanién, 2006; Healey & Healey, 2019). A deeper approach to learning involves students synthesizing knowledge and making new connections between new or prior knowledge through an integrative process. Group work in higher learning is defined as students working together to complete a task that allows them to solve problems and generate knowledge. Thondhlana and Belluigi (2014) asserts that group work gives students a chance to learn through engaging, evaluating, and analyzing new knowledge.

In addition, group work fosters understanding between members of the group on how to collaborate and learn from each other's experiences (Rezaei, 2018). Group projects encourage students to discuss concepts, share insight and teach others, leading to a greater grasp of the course material. Students who participate in collaborative learning are more likely to acquire a thorough comprehension of the material and remember it better than those who study alone (Darby & Tallontire, 2016). In higher education, group work has been a practice for many years; its emergence can be traced back to the transformation of education in the early 1990s.

Because of curriculum changes in the 1950s and 1960s, educators began using group work as a means of strategic learning more frequently (Eriksson & Forslund, 2014; Goodman, 1995; Kliebard, 2002; McCombs, 2017; Yee & Kirst, 1994). In the field of higher education, students are expected to collaborate with one another in joint assignments. When students are asked to work in groups, they are frequently expected to complete group projects, write reports, compile presentations, and write some type of assessment in which each member is expected to contribute to the final product (Burdett, 2007).

Group work can be used as a formative and summative assessment that allows academics and students to keep track of the accomplishment of learning goals (Parameswaran, 2023). Although group work is widely recognized as a valuable learning method, it undeniably poses certain challenges that must be addressed. McKay (2023) argues that in many cases, academics use group work to manage their workload, with the focus shifting from the intended use of group work. He further argues that group work may cause resentment and division among students in less ideal situations. The issue of students receiving the same mark can be difficult to explain, particularly in cases where some students spend significant time on the assignment and eventually must carry those students who do not make much effort and thus contribute less (McKay, 2023).

Various strategies are employed by different researchers to solve the many challenges that are associated with group work and to improve its effectiveness. These strategies may include making workload fair, determining methods of team formation, assigning different specific goals, managing interpersonal dynamics, and peer evaluation (Griffiths et al., 2007; Nipp & Palenque, 2020).

Hence, this study aimed to address the following objective:

- To explore strategic interventions for optimizing group work as a teaching and learning tool by analyzing students' lived experiences and perspectives within a South African university context.

2. Discourse on Group Work in Teaching and Learning

When implemented effectively, group work is not just a teaching method; it is a powerful learning experience that equips students with the essential transferable skills that are needed in today's job market. For years, educators have advocated group work as an effective means to cultivate a diverse array of vital competencies that modern graduates must possess. McKay (2023) identified 67 benefits, including psychological, social, and academic aspects such as improving self-esteem, reducing anxiety, establishing connections, and fostering critical thinking. Group work is a teaching strategy used at all levels of the educational system, from basic education to higher learning (Francis et al., 2022). As much as group work has advantages, there are often challenges that students face.

According to studies, there are many reasons why implementing group work in higher learning can be challenging and difficult (Alfares, 2017; Chang & Kang, 2016; Fujimoto, 2010; Heitz et al., 2024; Koh & Hill, 2009; Parameswaran, 2013; Popov et al., 2012; Taqi & Al-Nouh, 2014). For many students, group work assessments are frequently frustrating and unsatisfactory experiences. In summative assessment, group activities often prevent students from receiving individual grades. Some students have complained that group work is not structured to ensure that each student's unique contributions are assessed fairly. Moreover, regarding group projects, students have more bad than good experiences. To assist students when needed, lectures need to be aware of these challenges and make efforts to lessen them by thorough preparation and oversight (Burgan, 2006; Chiriac, 2014; Hontarenko & Kovalenko, 2024).

Francis and O'Toole (2010) ascertained that two forms of group work assessments are frequently used in higher learning formative and summative assessments. A formative assessment is an informal assessment in which students are grouped by the lecturer to assess students' understanding and to guide their lessons (Ruiz-Primo, 2011). Conversely, a summative assessment is a formal and important assessment at the end of a course in which students receive marks for completing the assessment (Chiriac, 2014). Group work is often used in higher learning as an educational method in the classroom and is considered more like other teaching methods such as whole-class lessons or individual tasks (Francis et al., 2010).

Group work tasks serve two main purposes; they help develop teamwork skills and they act as tools for academic learning. According to Johnson and Johnson (1999), cooperative learning promotes essential social skills such as communication, conflict resolution, and leadership, which contribute to students' interpersonal development. When group work emphasizes skill development, it can significantly enhance students' social and interpersonal abilities. Dillenbourg (1999) highlights that collaborative learning environments encourage peer interaction, allowing students to practice and refine these skills in real time.

Conversely, when group work is used for academic purposes, the assessments related to group projects provide a solid foundation for learning. A study by Laal and Ghodsi (2012) indicates that collaboration in academic settings not only improves content mastery but also leads to deeper engagement and retention of knowledge. This combination of skill-building and academic achievement underscores the importance of structuring group work effectively to maximize its benefits in educational settings. Academic performance is improved because of the group's stimulation of learning and contribution to knowledge acquisition (Davies, 2009).

Clearly group work can be viewed as a learning environment in which it serves as both an objective and a method; the goal of group work is not only to achieve but also to promote collaborative learning. However, group work benefits are limited in higher education because the institutions have prioritized teaching over learning facilitation. Therefore, it is important for higher education to give students the chance to learn these skills and grow as individuals (Francis et al., 2010; Stephenson, 2013; Walker & Finney, 1999).

2.1 The Experiences of Students on the Use of Group Work

A study conducted by Chan and Pheng (2018) revealed that many students prefer group work assessments over individual assessments. They find group work to be a valuable teaching and learning tool that encourages interaction with others. This collaborative environment helps them to improve their focus and memorization skills, enhancing their overall learning experience. Students who participate in group work assessments in which all members contribute and typically collaborate to complete the assessment are the ones who have the most positive attitudes toward group work.

Because of their ability to collaborate with others, these students generally perform well on group work assessments (Chan & Pheng, 2018; Hall, 2018; Wilson et al., 2018). The findings of the studies above assert that certain behaviors and characteristics motivate students to engage in group work, characteristics such as friendliness, the capacity to exchange ideas, and good academic success (Chan & Pheng, 2018). Students grouped with committed peers can trust that there will be no pressure to participate and that their academic efforts will be taken seriously.

As discussed above, group members' behavior affects students' enthusiasm for group work assessments. Students can have positive group work experiences when teamwork is strong; each student attends and everyone tries to engage. Students collaborate to achieve their group objectives, and the group work process becomes easier when everyone is present to participate. When group members connect, they can communicate clearly and freely with one another, which improves the group dynamic and makes it easier to discuss assessments without disagreement. From the discussion, participation is crucial for group work assessments; each member must take part for group work to be successful. Without equal contribution, the group will not function as well as it should and there will only be resentment.

According to Marks and O'Connor (2018), not all students have positive attitudes toward group work. Many students indicated that they genuinely dislike group work assessments. Cultural differences that exist add to the problem. Students face a variety of difficulties, including skill-level disparities, difficulty making decisions, and difficulty building strong relationships with their peers. Moreover, Cantwell and Andrews (2002) stated that psychological differences are linked to discomfort, dissatisfaction, or resentment that arises during group work.

These issues include weak students complaining about being overlooked or neglected in a group and exceptional students feeling overwhelmed by group members who need additional support, thus holding them back. The findings from the study of Cantwell and Andrews (2002) revealed that 80% of the students who participated expressed dissatisfaction and anger toward free riders. Exceptional students always strive to get higher marks but when grouped with free riders, they become frustrated that they will have to work harder and the free riders will be awarded free marks without doing anything.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

Collaborative learning theory is a teaching method that uses groups to improve learning through collaboration. Students collaborate in groups of two or more to solve issues, finish assignments, or acquire new ideas from their fellow students. Students who collaborate on group assignments must understand the concepts being taught. Students can share their viewpoints, exchange ideas, and learn from one another's strengths and weaknesses to support the group's success (Novita et al., 2020). This theory was developed by Lev Vygotsky who believed that students can easily complete their assignments or tasks when working with peers (Novita et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the traditional student-facilitator relationship in the classroom is redefined through collaborative learning, prompting discussions about whether group work is more beneficial than detrimental. This theory emphasizes the crucial role of social relationships and communication in learning. While each student is responsible for their own work individually, they are all in charge of the group's overall output. Collaborative learning aids the development of students' conceptual thinking, verbal communication, self-management, and collaboration abilities. In addition, students can improve their leadership and organizational abilities (Vygotsky, 2019).

For this study, collaborative learning theory was appropriate because it emphasizes strategies for collaborative learning to enhance students' teamwork skills. As such, the collaborative learning theory was used to assess sensible strategies for students to improve their group work experience, which will lead to positive learning and teaching outcomes. The theory considers strategies such as active participation, the fostering of open communication, equal work distribution, and peer evaluation, which can serve as a basis for understanding the different strategies that allow students to evaluate their work and how each member contributes to the assignment. However, this theory does not acknowledge the challenges students may face when working in a group.

Therefore, this study provides insight into the challenges that students face when collaborating with others. It is for this reason that this theory was used to understand the strategies for improving group work among students. Students collaborate with one another on group assignments in which they must comprehend the concepts that are being taught. Students can share their viewpoints, exchange ideas, and learn each other's weaknesses and strengths for the success of the group (Novita et al., 2020). This theory was developed by Lev Vygotsky who believed that students can easily pass their assignments or tasks when working with other peers (Novita et al., 2020). Furthermore, the traditional relationship between students and facilitators in the classroom is redefined through collaborative learning, which gives rise to discussions about whether group work is more beneficial than detrimental.

This theory emphasizes how crucial social relationships and communications are to learning. While each student is individually responsible for their own work, they are all in charge of the group's overall output. Collaborative learning aids in the development of student's conceptual thinking, verbal communication, self-management, and collaboration abilities. In addition, students' leadership and organizing abilities may improve (Vygotsky, 2019). For this study, collaborative learning theory was appropriate because it places a strong emphasis on the strategies regarding collaborative learning opportunities for students to enhance their teamwork skills.

As such, collaborative learning theory was used to assess sensible strategies for students to improve their group work experience, leading to positive learning and teaching outcomes (Vygotsky, 2019). The theory considers strategies such as active participation, fostering of open communication, equal work distribution, and peer evaluation; these can be used as a basis to understand the different strategies that will allow students to evaluate their work and how each member contributes to the assignment. However, this theory does not acknowledge the challenges that students may face when working as part of a group. Therefore, this study contributed insight into the challenges that students may face when collaborating with others.

3. Methodology

This study used an interpretivism research paradigm. Interpretivism is a research paradigm that seeks to understand people's lived experiences and the meaning they attach to their social world or how people make sense of their social world (Chowdhury, 2014). This paradigm allowed the researcher to gain a rich and deeper understanding of the use of group work from the viewpoints of students (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). The study employed a qualitative research method. Qualitative research design is a technique from interpretivism, and it is defined as an approach that gathers and analyzes non-numerical data to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' behaviors, experiences, and opinions (Hennink et al., 2020). This method allowed the researcher to understand student's experiences completely, the challenges they face, and possible strategies for enhancing the use of group work at North-West University (NWU) Mafikeng Campus.

3.1 Sampling

This study employed non-probability sampling, using a purposive sampling technique to select participants. According to Showkat and Parveen (2017), non-probability sampling is defined as a method whereby participants are chosen by the researcher using their own subjective opinion and, therefore, not all the members of the population have an equal chance of being selected. Purposive sampling was important to the study, as it allowed the researcher to choose participants who have experience with group work as a formative and summative assessment. Forty Sociology students at a South African university took part in the study; ten students from each level, first, second, and third year together with honors students were interviewed.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

This study used face-to-face interviews. According to Bhasin (2023), the face-to-face interview is a form of qualitative research or a technique for gathering data that involve direct communication between the participant and the researcher. The face-to-face interviews included open-ended questions, which gave the participants freedom to express themselves and allowed the researcher to lead the conversation (Hyman & Sierra, 2016). The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, allowing the researcher to familiarize themselves with the data, to code the data, and to formulate themes.

The researcher further reviewed the themes, allowing the researcher to make sense of the data. Thereafter, the researcher compiled the data in line with the research objectives and questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Dawadi, 2020). The scope of the study was limited to Sociology students; students from other fields were not included. Moreover, the study sought only to capture the lived experiences of the students, and other factors such as the frequency were not explored.

4. Results and Findings

4.1 Barriers to Effective Collaborative Learning

4.1.1 Inequitable Participation and Social Loafing

The data indicated a pervasive dissatisfaction with group work, largely attributed to social loafing where specific members fail to contribute sufficient effort. This lack of commitment creates a burdensome environment for proactive students. While group work is theoretically designed to foster a multiplicity of perspectives and deeper comprehension, Davies (2009) notes that a lack of motivation remains a primary barrier. This study observed that students perceived the failure of peers to engage seriously as a sign of disrespect toward the collective academic goal.

“Personally, I think group work should be removed from higher education ... If you are grouped with people who don’t like working, you won’t learn anything, and you will end up doing all the work by yourself” (In-depth, female, Participant 1).

“When it comes to group work, I don’t really like it because students do not really show effort, they do not feel entitled to work because they know that those who are serious will do the work” (In-depth, female Participant 2)

"I am not going to lie; group works are exhausting. Like some of the group members are not really contributing so we have to beg them to participate; its hectic. Somethings you lose marks because other group members are not contributing". (In-depth, male Participant 4)

Contrary to Davies (2009), the findings of this study indicate a different aspect. Participation and lack of effort from other students is a demotivating factor for group work among Sociology students, leading some students to believe that they have nothing to learn and feeling exhausted from taking part in group activities.

4.1.2 Impact on Academic Performance

Contrary to studies such as Chiriac (2014), which suggest that collaborative work enhances mathematical performance, participants in this study reported that group assessments negatively affected their overall marks. There is a strong perception that individual assessments yield higher grades because the student has total control over the quality of the output. They perceived group work as a 'grade suppressor' rather than a 'grade enhancer.'

"I don't think so because I always aim to achieve good marks, but when I think about group work, I get worried about my marks because I feel like group work will bring down my marks "(In-depth, female Participant 4).

"Not necessarily, I think if the assignment was not a group work, I would have performed way better because I would have been on my own. I think most of the group work assignments I have been in have not really contributed in any way". (In-depth, female Participant 5)

This suggests that the transactional costs of group worktime spent arguing, chasing members, and fixing inconsistent writing outweigh the cognitive benefits of collaboration. When students state that individual assessments result in 'significantly better performance,' they are highlighting a failure in the integration of ideas. Instead of 'two heads being better than one,' the findings suggest that 'too many cooks spoil the broth' when teamwork skills are absent. This implies that the often-perceived numerical advantage thought to reduce the individual workload is accompanied by more strenuous challenges than the supposed performance benefits.

"I always perform badly in group works than when I do assessments alone ... other students don't participate fully, thus affecting our academic performance" (In-depth, female, Participant 2).

The findings indicate that students in Sociology experienced feelings of dissatisfaction and poor performance, and they attributed this to the lack of collaborative effort and teamwork spirit, among other things. Perhaps this speaks directly to the outlook of learners in Sociology, their interest and keenness in studying social sciences, their reasons for enrolling in this field, their background in basic education, and their overall interest in their daily lives.

4.1.3 Poor Academic Performance

Students reported that group work assessment negatively affected their overall academic performance. The findings of the study demonstrate that the group assessments have a negative effect on the students' academic performance. When students work on individual assessments as opposed to group work assessments, their individual marks are seen to be higher. Group work assessments have caused students' overall marks to drop; individual assessments alone would have resulted in significantly better performance from students.

Unlike the Sociology students in this study, Chiriac (2014) argues that students in mathematics obtained lower marks individually than when they are in groups. This contrast in performance speaks not only to factors around work ethic but reveals an interesting perspective that students in different fields such as mathematics see academic benefits of working in groups. These differences in performance need to be explored to help understand the factors affecting these contrasting research outputs.

"I always perform badly in group works than when I do assessments alone. Group works is problematic, as other students don't participate fully, thus affecting our academic performance" (In-depth, female, Participant 2).

Poor performance obtained during group work can be attributed to the above discussed factors such as poor work ethics and division of work in which a few members of the group are tasked with doing most of the work for the rest of the group while other members attend to commitments outside the given exercise. This has the potential to affect the overall-mark output for the entire group due to the work being done by a few committed students who are under stress and pressure imposed by time.

4.1.4 Lack of Support from Lecturers

The findings revealed what can be termed an 'instructional void.' Students did not view group work as a self-sustaining process; they saw it as a pedagogical tool that requires active monitoring. The phrases *"they just give us the task"* and *"we must figure it out ourselves"* point to a perceived abandonment by lecturers.

"Lecturers don't assist us enough with group work; they just give us the task. We don't get much help from them" (In-depth, female, Participant 4).

"They do not do any follow-up; they give you the assignment and that is it. Everything else we must figure it ourselves" (In-depth, female, Participant 1).

According to Burke (2011), effective group work requires scaffolding the temporary support provided by an educator to help students reach a higher level of comprehension. In this case, the lack of follow-up and the absence of guidance on how to collaborate indicated that group work is often treated as an administrative convenience rather than a deliberate teaching strategy. This

finding implies that for hybrid or traditional models to succeed, the lecturers must move from being a distributor of tasks to a facilitator of dynamics.

4.1.5 Clashing Schedules

The issue of clashing schedules was deeply rooted in the socio-economic reality of the student body. In a South African university context, many students were commuter students or had significant domestic and work responsibilities. The finding that students stay both off-campus and on-campus highlights a geographical divide that makes physical meetings a privilege rather than a standard. This spatiotemporal constraint led to 'roadblocks' in the early stages of the project, causing a loss of momentum. The resulting frustration was often directed at peers and interpreted as a lack of 'compromise' when it may have been the result of rigid socio-economic schedules.

"The challenges that we had was that some stay off-campus and others stay on-campus, so meeting was problem because of time, and we had clashing schedules" (In-depth, male, Participant 7).

In the study of Li and Campbell (2008), every student had a different schedule, which prevented them from meeting to discuss the assessment. To complete the group work assessments, the students needed to arrange their own time rather than being allocated class time for them to meet. As a result, time management became a significant problem. Finding convenient times to meet was a challenge due to having different commitments (Li & Campbell, 2008). Finding appropriate times to meet could be time consuming for students. Scheduling problems can create barriers to starting or completing the group work assessment. This can cause frustration for those who show for meetings, making them believe those who do not arrive are not making any compromises or taking their circumstances into account. To complete the group work assessment, students need to plan time to collaborate outside of classes.

4.1.6 Disagreements

The results of this study demonstrate that group work assessment usually involves inequalities and quarrels. Students who are outspoken tend to make all the decisions, while others who are not vocal tend to agree with the decisions taken. This is consistent with the study of Darby and Tallontire (2016) who argue that some students may have difficulties in communicating their views or ideas due to their personalities, for example, being shy or not being outspoken enough to express themselves. This shows that when given a group assessment, students often struggle to reach a common ground.

"We ended up losing marks because of different views to the same questions and people not agreeing to have a common answer to that problem. So, we ended up losing a lot of marks due to that" (In-depth, male, Participant 3).

"Working in groups is challenging because we all have different views; thus, there is always clash of characters and views. This affects the

working progress and outcomes of the group work" (In-depth, male, Participant 7).

Students are used to working independently, which is why, most of the time, they believe that they are always correct. Considering that they now must collaborate with other students, it becomes challenging for them to hear what other students have to say. Instead of using the time to examine the assessment's results constructively, students argue over who is correct or incorrect.

4.1.7 Lack of Teamwork

The findings of this study revealed that when completing a group work assessment, students often worked alone. Each student selected their own questions and completed them on their own; they did not address the questions together. Students must collaborate in group work for their assessment to be consistent throughout. However, in this study, the results of the assessment were not the same because the students worked independently. The students approached the group work assessment as an individual task, which made it difficult for them to understand what was expected of them. It became challenging to combine everything and have it appear cohesive when the group did not work together to answer all the questions. Below are quotations from the students:

We just are like, you take this part and I take that part and we write and submit; we don't check each other's work or write the questions together. I feel like had we worked together, we would have produced something better. (In-depth, female, Participant 10)

"I think some students believe group work is about doing their parts and that's it; we do not work together to write the assessment" (In-depth, female, Participant 9).

Students indicated that working in groups is challenging, as many students lack the ability to work as a team. Collaborating with other students facilitates an increased number of ideas and viewpoints, helping the team learn from each other and succeeding as a team. Students should perform better when working in groups than when working alone due to the different perspectives and additional insight. However, the students performed lower in the group work assessments than they did individually on the assignment.

This is in support of the study conducted by Payne and Monk-Turner (2006) who argues that all members of the group must be willing to work with one another. When students depend on one another, they can provide outstanding results, as two or more brains are better than one. It is necessary for students to have good teamwork skills because working as individuals in group work assessments can yield poor outcomes caused by the absence of coherence and overall flow.

4.2 Student-Recommended Strategies

While students identified significant barriers to collaboration, the findings also highlighted a high degree of student agency. Participants developed informal

strategies to mitigate structural and interpersonal challenges, ranging from workload management to technological integration.

4.2.1. Systematic Workload Equalization

The most common strategy identified was the equitable division of tasks, or "*sharing questions equally*." Students used this as a mechanical form of accountability to ensure that no single member was overburdened. This practice is supported by Martins et al., (2024) who argues that clear workload distribution is essential for long-term project sustainability. Moreover, sociologically, this strategy serves a dual purpose; it also acts as a risk-mitigation tool. By assigning specific ownership of questions, the group can easily identify non-participants. As Participant 4 noted, this makes the gap left by a non-contributing member visible, allowing the group to redistribute that specific portion rather than jeopardizing the entire project. While this promotes fairness, it may inadvertently lead to siloed learning where students master only their assigned sections rather than the holistic curriculum.

"We shared the work among ourselves equally ... for instance, if the assignment consisted of ten questions and there were five participants, each got two questions. Because once you do not participate, your gap will be filled by someone else, which means there is more work for them." (In-depth, female, Participant 4)

4.2.2 Transitioning to Virtual Collaboration

A significant finding was the shift toward online meetings as the primary mode of collaboration.

"We make a schedule that is flexible for everyone ... we opted for group calls instead of meeting face-to-face; we even took the calls to night sessions so that everyone could attend" (In-depth, male, Participant 7).

Defined by Loode (2021) as a reliance on electronic communication for geographically separated members, this strategy has become a staple of post-pandemic student life. Applying the Replacement, Amplification, and Transformation (RAT) model represents an Amplification of the student experience. Students used tools such as WhatsApp and digital call platforms to overcome the clashing schedules and geographical distances that traditionally stalled group progress. The flexibility of night sessions mentioned by Participant 7 suggested that students are redefining the boundaries of the 'classroom,' moving away from rigid campus hours to accommodate the diverse commitments of the student body. This digital transformation allows for a more inclusive environment where off-campus and working students can still participate effectively.

4.2.3 Formal Skills Training

Perhaps the most critical finding was the student-led demand for explicit instruction on collaborative skills. Students argued that lecturers should not assume that the ability to work in teams is innate. Instead, they advocated a more hands-on approach by academic staff, moving beyond simply assigning tasks to

actively teaching the importance of group work. As James et al. (2002) contend, group work is most effective when students are equipped with a toolbox of collaborative techniques. The findings suggest that students view group work as a professional competency that is essential for their future careers. They desire a curriculum that includes sessions on conflict resolution, leadership, and time management. This request for increased involvement from lecturers highlights a need for the institution to transition from a passive model of group work to a facilitated, skill-building model that prepares students for the collaborative demands of the workforce.

"Maybe we can have sessions where they can teach us about the importance of group work because it prepares you for your career ... lecturers should ensure that everyone knows the consequences of not participating" (In-depth, female, Participant 9).

"Personally, I think group work should be removed from higher education because when it comes to group work, some students are not serious. Once you are not serious about yourself, there is no way you can take other people seriously. If you are grouped with people who don't like working, you won't learn anything, and you will end up doing all the work by yourself." (In-depth, female, Participant 1)

The findings showed that the students disliked group work assessments. These negative experiences were fostered by students who fail to apply themselves or to participate as much as they should.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study revealed a complex interplay between pedagogical design and student agency in the context of group work assessments. The primary themes identified lack of participation, poor academic performance, and a lack of support from academics, suggesting a breakdown in the traditional collaborative model. The lack of participation, often sociologically defined as social loafing, appears to be a central catalyst for student dissatisfaction. When students perceive an inequitable distribution of labor, it not only leads to disagreements and a lack of teamwork but also directly contributes to poor academic performance, as the cognitive load shifts unfairly to a few members.

Furthermore, the logistical hurdle of clashing schedules underscored the challenges faced by students in a modern, often commuter heavy, campus environment. This finding highlighted a gap in institutional support; when support from academics is perceived as lacking, students are left to navigate complex interpersonal and logistical conflicts without a formal framework for mediation.

5.1 Student-Led Mitigation Strategies

In response to these challenges, students demonstrated significant agency through three primary strategies:

- **Equal Division of Labor:** By sharing questions equally, students attempted to create a mechanical form of accountability. However, while this ensures all

parts of a task are covered, it can sometimes undermine the teamwork aspect of collaborative learning, turning a group project into a series of isolated individual tasks.

- **Technological Adaptation to Online Meetings:** The transition to online meetings to resolve scheduling conflicts is a significant finding. Applying the RAT model represents an Amplification of the learning process. Technology here is used to overcome the physical limitations of the campus, transforming the way students coordinate their academic efforts.
- **The Call for Explicit Training:** The suggestion to teach students about group work indicates that students recognize collaborative work as a distinct skill set rather than an inherent ability. This aligns with the pedagogical theory that for group work to be successful, it must be preceded by formal instruction on conflict resolution and project management.

6. Conclusion

This study illuminated the multifaceted challenges surrounding group work assessments among students within a South African university context. The findings revealed a significant level of student dissatisfaction with collaborative assessments, primarily driven by the unequal participation of peers and a perceived lack of adequate pedagogical support from lecturers. Furthermore, participants identified that ineffective group dynamics characterized by internal disagreements, conflicting schedules, and a lack of cohesive teamwork frequently compromised their academic performance. Despite these obstacles, students acknowledged the inherent value of collaborative learning, noting that it facilitates peer-to-peer knowledge exchange and the development of the teamwork competencies that are essential for their future professional careers.

To mitigate the identified challenges, students implemented self-directed strategies such as the equitable division of tasks and the transition to virtual meeting platforms to circumvent scheduling conflicts. Crucially, the findings highlighted a demand for more equitable grading rubrics that recognize individual contributions alongside a call for increased lecturer involvement in monitoring group processes. By integrating these student-led strategies and institutional recommendations, universities can transition group work from a source of academic frustration to a transformative educational opportunity that effectively prepares students for the collaborative demands of the modern workforce.

Conflict of Interest

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