Assessing the “Softer Skills”
Learning Outcomes in Group Projects

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Overview

- List of some “softer skills” (aka personal and professional skills)
- Problems assessing with “traditional” methods
- Methods and tools used at QUB
- Observations
Group DBT Projects: 
“Softer Skills” Learning Outcomes

• Team working
• Communication
• Leadership
• Conflict resolution
• Mentoring
• Time management
Group DBT Projects:
Traditional Assessment Methods

- Group technical reports
- Group oral presentations
- Prototypes
- Individual interviews
- Project logbooks
Problems Assessing “Softer Skills”

Traditional assessment methods don’t easily align with desired learning outcomes:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Outcomes</th>
<th>Assessment Methods</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Team working</td>
<td>Technical report</td>
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<td>Communication</td>
<td>Oral presentation</td>
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<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Prototype</td>
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<td>Conflict Resolution</td>
<td>Interview</td>
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<td>Mentoring</td>
<td>Log Book</td>
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<td>Time management</td>
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Assessing “Softer Skills”

“New” assessment methods used to assist in assessment of personal and professional skills learning outcomes:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Outcomes</th>
<th>“New” Assessment Methods</th>
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<tr>
<td>Team working</td>
<td>Peer Assessment</td>
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<td>Communication</td>
<td>“Feedback” interviews</td>
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<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Design review meetings</td>
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<td>Conflict Resolution</td>
<td>Google Groups</td>
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<td>Mentoring</td>
<td>Peer voting &amp; ranking</td>
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Does accurate assessment of “softer skills” require face to face contact?

"On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog.”

Published in The New Yorker 7/5/1993 - Peter Steiner
Problems Assessing “Softer Skills” Through Direct Faculty – Student Contact

- Time (too many groups, too little time)
- Student behaviour changes in the presence of faculty
- Having sufficient faculty with real world experience of DBT projects (and associated skill sets)
TRIZ – Common Features of Good Solutions

Easily available, idle resources are used

DBT Project idle resources = Students
By the end of year 2 all students will have worked with all of their cohort on at least one DBT project.

Confidentially rank all the students in their cohort for preference as a partner for the capstone project in year 3.
Based on a zero mean contribution, each student scores themselves and all other members of the group in each of fifteen categories, which are aligned with the deliverables and learning outcomes of the project.

*Unskilled and unaware of it: How difficulties in recognizing one’s own incompetence lead to inflated self-assessments.*

Student Input – Online Collaboration

Google Groups:
• Free private groups (by email invitation only)
• Threaded discussion forum (blog)
• Shared file space
• (Tutor) rating mechanism
• Email notifications (instant / daily digest)
• Posts can include embedded hyperlinks
• Weekly CA – quality and volume
• Instant feedback (* ratings, posts)
• Useful tool for students and assessors
Group Leader Rôle

- Weeks 1-12; each student gets equal time as leader
- Week 13; feedback of tutor observations and peer assessment via individual interview
- Weeks 13-24; regular secret ballots (ranked list) to elect leader every 3-4 weeks
- Weeks 16-18 parallel seminars on building effective teams, delivered by external practitioner.
Observations (Issues)

Nullius in verba (take nobody’s word for it). Caveat on the reliability of peer assessments and the “above average” syndrome.

Ganging up / bullying is a possibility in peer assessment

Limitations of Google Groups. Better in the research than prototyping phase

Subjective nature of the assessment of these skills

Limited relevant experience of faculty
Observations (Successes)

Improved understanding of student abilities beyond academic knowledge

Better alignment of assessment with learning outcomes

Information was gathered from students about their peers that is not easily obtained otherwise in a time efficient manner
Questions?