One avenue for ASPERA research: Tackling assessment in media project work

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Abstract:

This paper describes aspects of a project funded in 2006 by the Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (now the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC): **Assessing Group Work in Media and Communication**. The project tackled a tension commonly found in teaching media production in Australian universities between, on one hand, the importance of collaborative group work, and on the other, negative student attitudes to one of the almost inevitable consequences of such group work — that is, group assessment. Such negative attitudes stem generally from the perception that group assessment does not reflect individual contributions and may compromise the best students' chance of receiving a fair mark. The project sought some practical methods that academic staff might use to reduce the impact of the issue.

The paper summarizes the approach and findings, and looks also to the already-emerging possibilities for ASPERA to systematically assist in building on this research field, to the benefit of both its members and their students. It also canvasses some of the conceptual and design difficulties that may beset projects of this kind, and briefly covers the strategy that successfully addressed those difficulties. These are offered in the spirit of collaborative advice to other ASPERA members who may become involved with education-research projects, and in the context of assessment being possibly one of the most significant issues for ASPERA to pursue within that domain.

Introduction

The final practical outcome of this project, the website *Assessing Group Work in Media and Communication*, can be seen at:
http://creative.canberra.edu.au/groupwork/

Formal reporting for the project was completed in 2008, and the report can be seen on the ALTC's own site at:
http://www.altc.edu.au/resource-assessing-group-work-media-communications-canberra-2008

The need to use collaborative group work tasks in teaching arises through the independent influence of several different factors. Professional employment practices and workplace models such as in film or television, where cohesive group functioning is required both for managerial and creative reasons, inevitably and properly drive the imposition of group tasks in tertiary education; in tertiary and secondary education sectors, the expense and consequent scarcity of learning resources such as high-quality cameras, multiple editing facilities and well-equipped studios enforces group work even in circumstances which do not mirror any reasonable simulacrum of professional practice.

These same factors also affect the teaching of media skills in related disciplines such as advertising, journalism as well as many design- and performance-oriented disciplines.

Other more complex factors also affect negative student attitudes to group assessment. In designing assessment to positively guide and shape the direction and effort of student learning, a common constraint arises in any discipline involving the production of media content; this is the time that must be invested by students to complete even simple production projects to a polished standard. The demands of production dominate time and energy for both students and staff, and production work may appear to students as little more than the exercise of physical and/or software skills. Attempts to provide a theoretical framework, no matter how motivated by a desire to impart practical and useable understanding, may be perceived as irrelevant and ignored by students.

Similarly, assessment criteria that are inadequately integrated with the ongoing process of production work, and make no room for student input, may appear to students to be superfluous or even unfair. A critical issue is whether there is a broad distribution of marks that reflects differentials in individual inputs during group processes, or whether assessment marks cluster around a common standard. There is no doubt that in many groups students find it stressful and sometimes confronting to be assessing their fellow students but as Melrose and Begeron (2007) argue, conflict within group work is to be expected and can enhance learning when it is managed well. After graduation, students working in media, design and performance for instance, will commonly encounter critical assessment of their work that is often negative and not always fully informed; group assessment anticipates these professional realities.

Projects in time-based media - the essence of content production in Media and other Communication disciplines - present the further difficulty that annotation of comments on the work cannot easily, unlike comments on an essay, is done within the work itself.[1] Consistency of assessment across projects and across staff thus becomes much more difficult.

Such production work has, however, enormous potential value. It may be used to simultaneously teach not only professional skills in technique and procedure, but generic skills of the sort cited by James et al (2002) as being facilitated by group work: teamwork, leadership, analysis and problem-solving, collaboration and organization/time management. It can also be highly effective in teaching critical thinking, creativity and innovation. Assessment and feedback are the keys to integrating and embedding not only good production skills, but also the cooperative learning and management practices that have the potential to generalise positively to students' wider studies.

Working from the perspective of producing Media content - a task common to several Communication disciplines - the project described in this paper sought to explicitly link assessment, student learning and feedback in the creation of a range of flexible assessment tools that might enhance learning in broader areas of Communication.

The approach used was to identify examples of best practice and to present them in an assimilable form, within a context of selected relevant learning theory, and supported by access to other course information.

Description and process:

The project began with a series of exploratory meetings between the collaborating institutions (University of Canberra, University of NSW/COFA, and Macquarie University) clarifying what each member might best offer in the way of experience and expertise. We adopted a fairly comprehensive definition of Media and Communication, to include not just television and multimedia, but performance-based disciplines (particularly theatre and dance), as well as creative courses in design and writing which had some elements of collaborative work and/or peer assessment. We were also anxious to include courses taught fully or partly on-line where collaboration was associated with assessment.

We used a two-pronged approach to gathering data: (a) an on-line questionnaire sent to more than 30 Australian universities teaching media and communication, and (b) the project manager visited universities in Australia and overseas to present the project and interview lecturers and students on current practice. While the presentations and interviews elicited a great deal of interest and provided valuable input to the project, the survey had a relatively poor response rate.

In retrospect this is possibly not surprising. Group assessment is a contentious topic, particularly among students, and teachers are eager to receive information on how their experience compares with work in other institutions; on the other hand, teachers are not always willing to share their own practices through an impersonal survey.

Much of 2006 involved the development of a conceptual model with which underlying theory could best be illustrated by best-practice case studies in group assessment. Our process was:

1. We collected video interviews with staff and students, including video footage of actual classes, course outlines and related materials, and student work samples. We collected this data in the partner universities and beyond, deliberately reflecting diverse practice as well as good practice.

1. This information was collected for a range of disciplines, since useful principles and strategies clearly extend beyond the discipline/s under study, and might well come from quite different frameworks and activities.

2. The video material was edited into chapters, facilitating access to either the whole, or to issue-related segments.

3. The resulting video content was linked to textual information including course structure, assessment items, and formal academic resources.

Into the Maze:

This, however, is where things become complicated for a while. As Einstein is alleged to have remarked, "everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler." We had always intended that the project's main result would be a website, with backup CD distribution. However, we originally had many other ideas for both extra content, and different handling of some of that content; for example we had initially intended to produce a hard-copy manual containing the text items (assessment items, academic papers etc), but these ended up being built into the site, making site bigger, but also making access easier.

Inspection of this early model, as evidenced by the initial project interface design below, reveals that the aims of the original project have been realized to varying degrees. Certainly it has managed to link learning outcomes, assessment criteria and assessment products; and at least partly, to facilitate and encourage using the same instruments for both formative feedback and summative assessment. While it does not directly, itself, constitute a framework catering for group and/or individual feedback/assessment, it does provide tools for thinking about that and for doing it well, and thus it is likely over time to increase consistency of assessment, within and between different teachers. On the other hand it has not yet fulfilled some of our original hopes that it would:

- Allow student input, on an ongoing basis, to the design of feedback and assessment, and
- Operate via electronic tools that allow internal annotation of production tasks.

We began with a generic model for the assessment of group work in Media and Communication tasks: a set of clearly defined stages, based on the conventional steps of media production work. Each stage in the process has an assessment component; we hoped to provide separate resource materials for each aspect (some print, some online, etc). This generic model gradually became our heuristic model —useful for collecting information, but gradually more of a barrier to understanding what we were doing.

This, in turn, was mostly because our initial (but evolving) model of *how group work operates* became the default *interface for the website*. This didn't happen deliberately, it just happened. A sample of some of our attempts to reform the interface shows some of the problem:
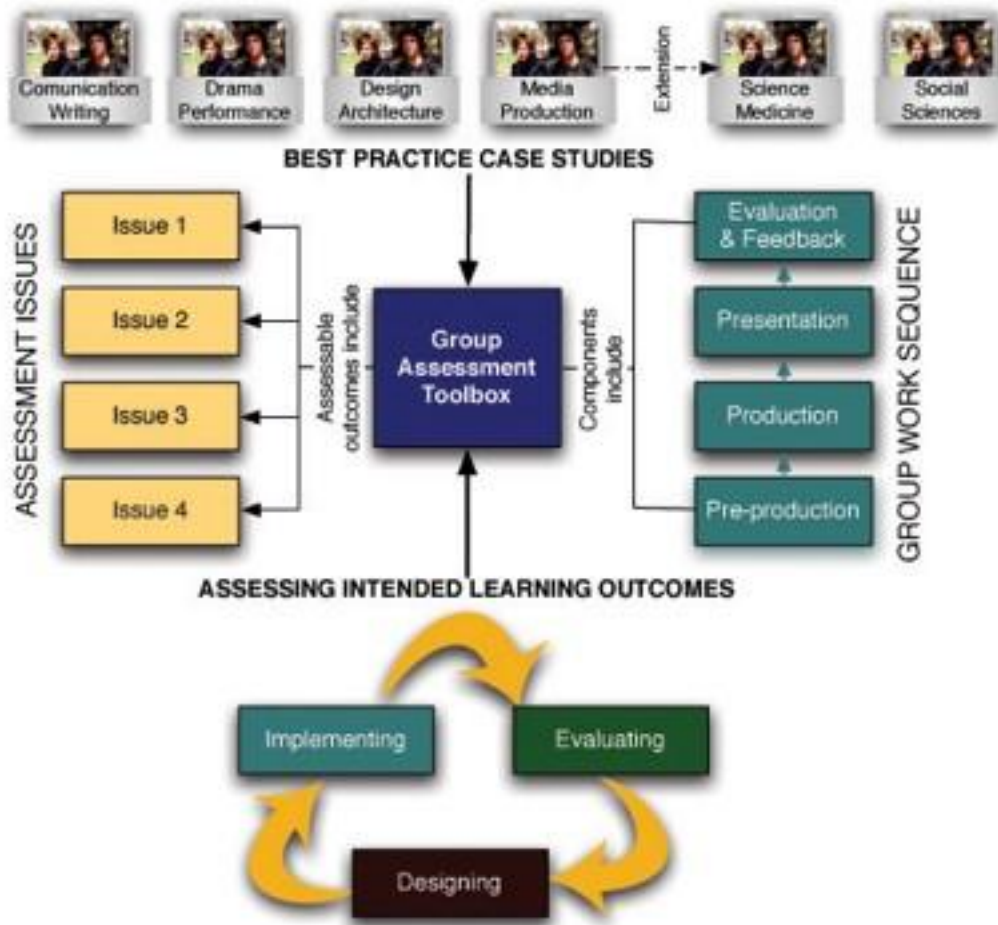
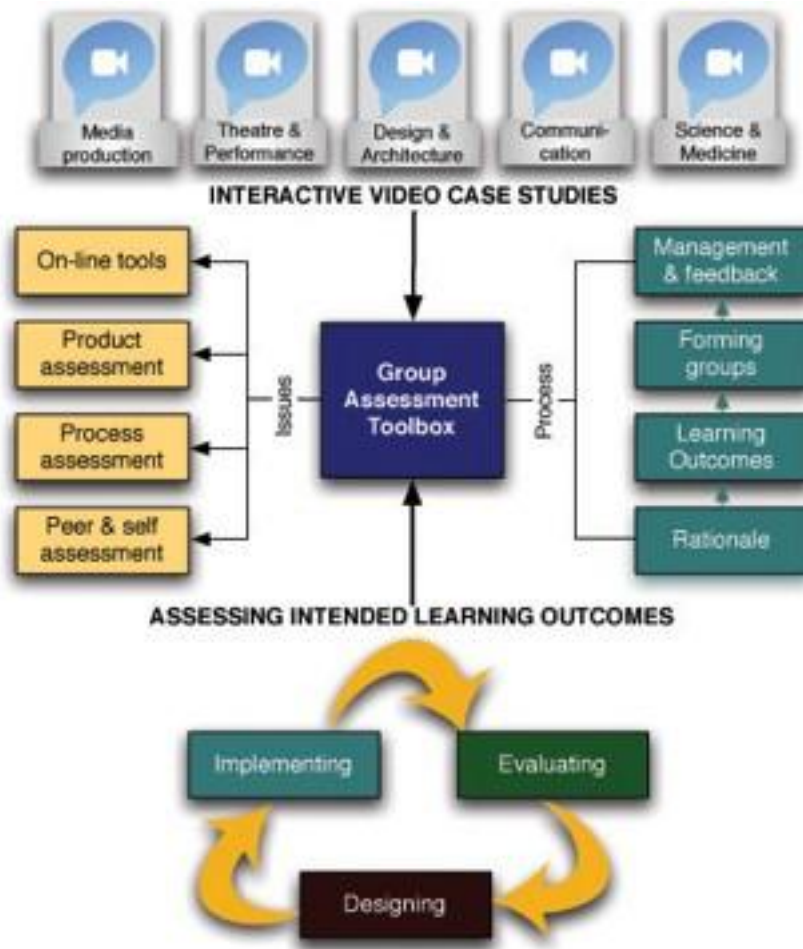The proposed interface in December 2006:
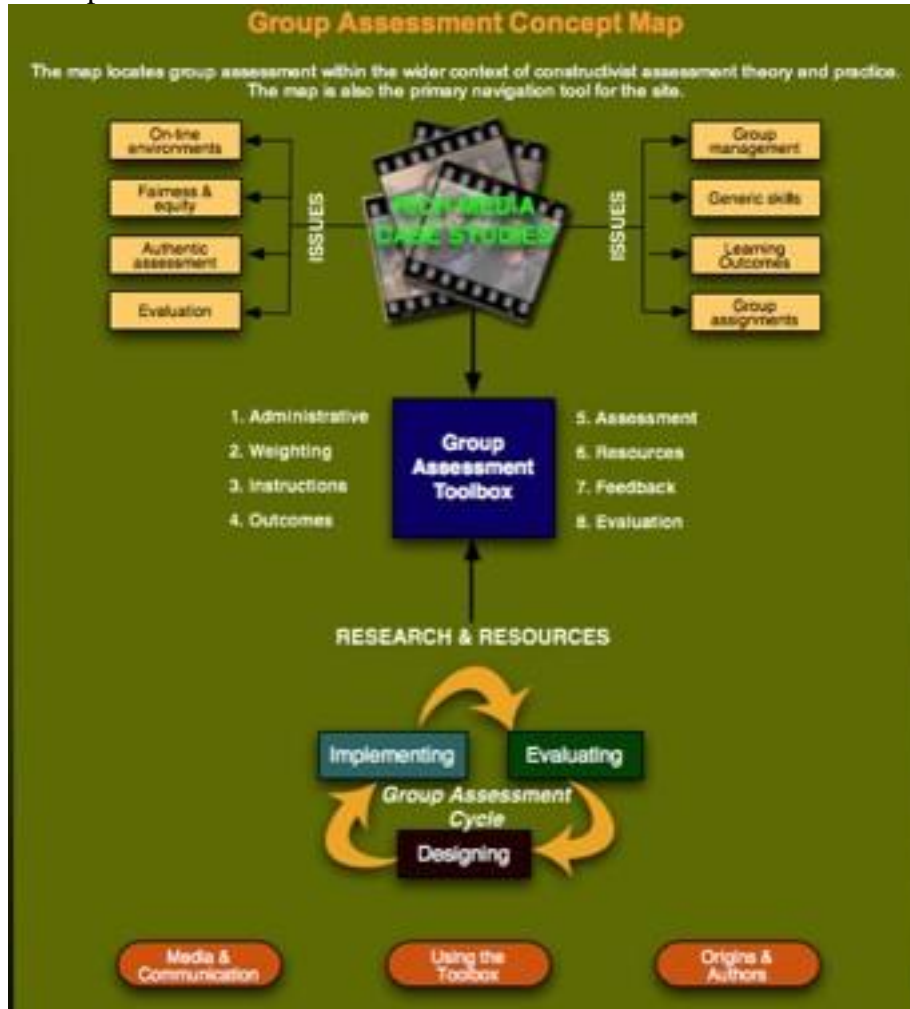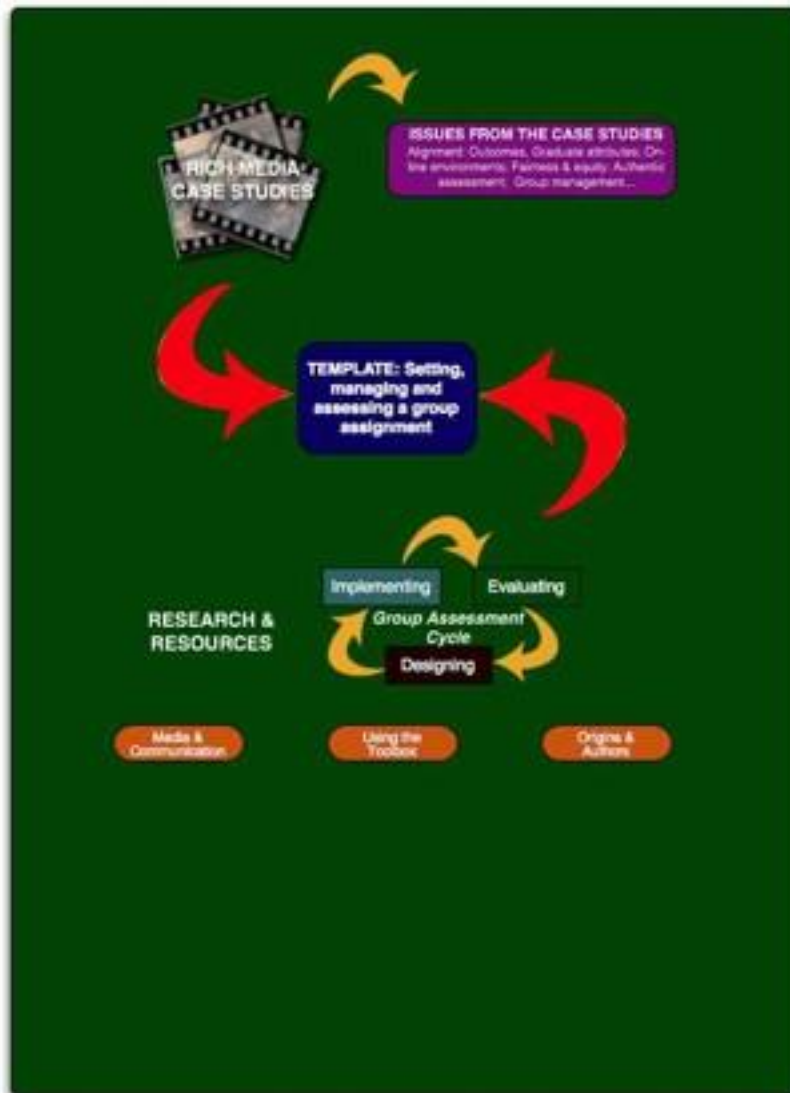
In March 2007:
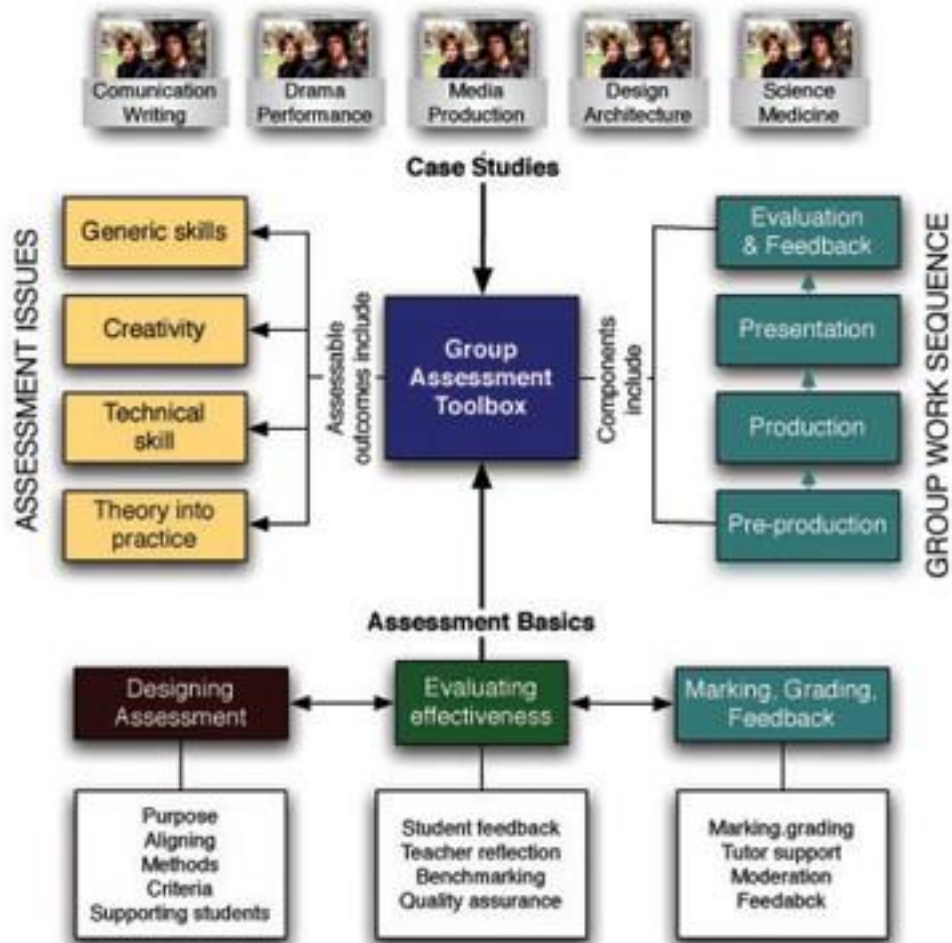
In April 2007:

In June 2007:

INTERACTIVE VIDEO CASE STUDIES

ASSESSING INTENDED LEARNING OUTCOMES

On September 2 2007:

… and by September 6 2007:

A recipe for success:

At about this time (November 2007) we held a scheduled workshop for key project stakeholders and advisers — to review progress, collect feedback, and provide opportunities to play with the latest interface and accumulated video content. All those who had offered any form of support for the project to date were invited; the fifteen participants who attend at various times over the two days included project team members, reference group participants, some of the interviewees, and some expert advisors.

The workshop was structured informally: project team members shared their original design intentions and the rationale for site development to that point (the September 6 interface design, above, was the one presented to the group), and this was followed by

general discussion, presentations from the expert advisers, then plenary conversation and dinner. The production team made overnight alterations to the site based on the events of the first day, and re-presented next morning.

What our workshop participants had spotted, as a result of this fairly simple and straightforward feedback opportunity was the complexity of our initial interface and model, contrasted with the "straight from the horse's mouth" appeal of the video content, as a 'way in' to what the site offered. They noted that it was highly unusual, but very valuable, to have teachers' and students' views of the same learning situation, contextualized by formal learning materials such as unit/course outlines for the same activities.

Noticing the necessity/opportunity for such changes is one thing, but making those changes effectively — systematically retaining the information about what needs to be done, so that it can be acted upon — is another. The combination of a simple and open discussion format with input, in the same session/s, from both expert advisers and participants at all levels, meant that website metaphor/design could be challenged, changed, quickly re-evaluated, and if necessary changed again. Without this, project team would have remained fixated on a version of the original design concept. A better interface model was already present, nested in early designs of the site — but we couldn't see it.

Involvement of your subjects — depending on the nature of your study — is crucial. Our interviewees felt included and committed to the project.
Our experience has led us to believe that involvement of all stakeholders on multiple occasions, if possible, in a project of this kind is always likely to improve results. We didn't notice at the time, though now it seems obvious, that there is an analogue here between involvement of stakeholders in aspects of a project, and involvement of students in their own assessment.

Some last thoughts on research for ASPERA:

Post-Bradley, University funding is firmly based on research, and on teaching being identifiably tied to that research. Promotion and other rewards will be increasingly closely tied to research-grant success.

In some contexts there may be distinctions as to the merits of discipline-based research vis-à-vis research in pedagogy. Typically, research, which advances the discipline itself, is seen as more valuable than research related to the pedagogy of a discipline. Recent funding for pedagogical research (e.g. through ALTC) has also been more generous — but is now starting to be more competitive, if only because of the increased number of applicants.

With visual media becoming a central aspect of all learning, ASPERA and its members are well placed to be a focus for both creative and applied research within the discipline and, in particular, for research which advances pedagogical or professional practice in another discipline. With increased awareness of the centrality of visual and aural representation in fields beyond media and screen production themselves — Law, for instance, provides many good examples — there are

increasing opportunities for research that simultaneously advances core knowledge in media disciplines while addressing another, separate, goal in another area, thus diversifying potential funding sources. Fruitful research careers can be carved out by linking these in various combinations. We are also at a better stage in development of recognition of *creative work as research* than has previously existed, and thanks to ASPERA's significant role in the process, we have clearer publication pathways after the ERA journal ranking exercise.

The future looks good, and ASPERA is in it.

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[1] This would appear to be a very fruitful field for ongoing education-oriented research for ASPERA members.

References:

James, R., McInnes, C. and Devlin, M., (2002) Assessing Learning in Australian Universities, University of Melbourne, Centre for the Study of Higher Education.

Melrose, S. & Begeron, K. (2007). Instructor immediacy strategies to facilitate group work in online graduate study. *Australian Journal of Educational Technology*, 23(1), 132-148. http://www.ascilite.org.au/ajet/ajet123/melrose.html.