EXPLORING GROUP LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION USING DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

A thesis submitted to The University of Manchester in part fulfilment of the degree of

Doctor in Education (EdD)

in the Faculty of Humanities

2010

Derek Davies

School of Education
# CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List of Appendices</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Declaration</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Copyright statement</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 The Context and Rationale for the Study</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Introduction</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Aims and approach to the study</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 Rationale for this thesis</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4 Shifts in teaching and learning in HE</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5 Institutional context</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.6 The course</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.7 Study outline</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Review of Group Learning Literature</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Introduction</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 The purpose of a higher education</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 Skills development and the ‘self-directed’ learner</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4 Learning together: background and perceived benefits</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5 Group cohesion</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6 Summary</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Group Work in HE: Key Findings and Research Methods</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 Introduction</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 Empirical studies into cooperative learning in groups</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 Undergraduate perceptions of group work</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3.1 Interviews</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3.2 Questionnaires</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4 The nature of group talk</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4.1 Mercer: an overview</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4.2 Tan: an overview</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5 Mercer and Tan: relevance for this study</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Study Design</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1 Introduction</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2 The inquiry as evaluation</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3 Data sources and analysis: some considerations</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4 Discourse Analysis: a brief literature review</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5 Approaches to discourse analysis in the present study</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.6 Gathering student and tutor perceptions of group work 52
4.7 Gathering data as an ‘insider researcher’ 53
4.8 Summary 55

5 Data Gathering 57

5.1 Introduction 57
5.2 Gathering student and tutor data 57

6 Data Analysis 1: Transcript 1 61

6.1 Introduction 61
6.2 About Transcript 1 62
6.3 Applying Tan’s framework 63
   6.3.1 Adapting the framework 64
   6.3.2 Evidence of learning in Excerpt 1 66
   6.3.3 Evidence of learning in Excerpt 2 67
   6.3.4 Evidence of learning in Excerpt 3 71
6.4 Sociocultural discourse analysis of Transcript 1 76
   6.4.1 Applying sociocultural analysis to Excerpt 1 77
   6.4.2 Applying sociocultural analysis to Excerpt 2 79
   6.4.3 Applying sociocultural analysis to Excerpt 3 84
   6.4.4 Social exchanges 86
6.5 Discussion 89

7 Data Analysis 2: Transcripts 2 - 4 95

7.1 Introduction 95
7.2 Sequence of learning 96
7.3 Analysis of Transcript 2: peer review 97
   7.3.1 The initial discussion and emerging themes 98
   7.3.2 Argumentation 100
   7.3.3 Coherence and structure 103
   7.3.4 Concluding remarks 107
7.4 Analysis of Transcript 3: reaction to feedback 109
7.5 Analysis of Transcript 4: the redrafting process 112
7.6 Summary and discussion 115

8 Data analysis 3: Student and Tutor Perceptions 120

8.1 Introduction 120
8.2 Tutor meeting and student interview data 121
8.3 Group member selection 122
   8.3.1 Student accounts of group member selection 122
   8.3.2 Tutor accounts of group member selection 124
8.4 Student perspectives on the group task 126
   8.4.1 The challenges of collaborative writing 126
   8.4.2 Getting the job done 129
8.5 For tutors, what does working well mean? 131
8.6 Summary 136
9 Conclusions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9.1 Introduction</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.2 Researching group work</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.3 Researching as an 'insider'</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.4 The value of group work for learning</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.4.1 Group work and skills development</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.4.2 The value of group work in the HE classroom: lessons from this study</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.5 Further research</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

References 150

Appendices 156

Final word count (including front matter but excluding references, appendices, and extended transcriptions of group work interaction included within the body of the thesis in Chapters Six and Seven for the convenience of the reader) = 51,977
# LIST OF APPENDICES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Appendix</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Course Description</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>Types of transferable skills</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>Transcription conventions</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abstract

For some considerable time, group activity has been an accepted feature of teaching and learning practice in Higher Education (HE) (Tennant, 1997). This exploratory study has the broad aim of investigating group learning on a Communication Skills course unit of a Foundation Year programme at the University of Manchester. Alongside the aim of identifying evidence for learning in groups, the study is also concerned with developing new understandings related to research methodology in the area of group learning.

The study first sets the unit under investigation in the context of relevant current national and institutional policies that have played an important role in shaping the development of university teaching over the last 20 years, particularly with regard to supporting economic development through the provision of an appropriately skilled workforce. The aims of such policies are considered as well as empirical research carried out into cooperative learning in education generally, and group work activity in HE institutions in particular.

There are two main elements to the empirical inquiry: (i) discourse analysis of verbatim transcriptions of student group talk, and (ii) content analysis of student group interviews and tutor discussions. Particular emphasis is given to the discourse analysis element as a means of critiquing the effectiveness of group work in facilitating learning. To this end, two specific approaches to discourse analysis are utilised: ‘Idea Framing’ (Tan, 2000/2003) and sociocultural discourse analysis (Mercer, 2005). These approaches to uncovering evidence of learning in group talk are critiqued and the findings reported. These finding are then considered alongside the data that emerged from the staff and student discussions.

The investigation revealed methodological insights in researching group work in the HE classroom as well as new understandings about what ‘learning’ means in this context. Firstly, in terms of methodology, the inquiry suggests that the combination of the two approaches to discourse analysis adopted provide an effective means of identifying instances of learning as well as insights into the group environment that influence such occurrences. Secondly, with regard to group learning in the HE context, the data highlight (i) the importance of social aspects of group activity for students, and (ii) the link between evidence for learning and the nature of the task they were asked to perform. However, in terms of acquiring ‘transferrable’ or ‘employability’ skills, the data reinforce many of the reservations voiced in the literature about the potential for developing such skills.

The implications of these findings for task design are highlighted and suggestions provided in terms of how the course unit may be adapted. In addition, the wider applicability of the findings are considered in terms of improving understanding of aspects of group processes as they occur in the context of undergraduate HE.

The study concludes with reflections on the impact of doctoral study on my professional development and practice, and suggestions for further research.
DECLARATION

No portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

COPYRIGHT STATEMENT

I. The author of this thesis (including any appendices and/or schedules to this thesis) owns certain copyright or related rights in it (the “Copyright”) and s/he has given The University of Manchester certain rights to use such Copyright, including for administrative purposes.

II. Copies of this thesis, either in full or in extracts and whether in hard or electronic copy, may be made only in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (as amended) and regulations issued under it or, where appropriate, in accordance with licensing agreements which the University has from time to time. This page must form part of any such copies made.

III. The ownership of certain Copyright, patents, designs, trade marks and other intellectual property (the “Intellectual Property”) and any reproductions of copyright works in the thesis, for example graphs and tables (“Reproductions”), which may be described in this thesis, may not be owned by the author and may be owned by third parties. Such Intellectual Property and Reproductions cannot and must not be made available for use without the prior written permission of the owner(s) of the relevant Intellectual Property and/or Reproductions.

IV. Further information on the conditions under which disclosure, publication and commercialisation of this thesis, the Copyright and any Intellectual Property and/or Reproductions described in it may take place is available in the University IP Policy (see http://www.campus.manchester.ac.uk/medialibrary/policies/intellectual-property.pdf), in any relevant Thesis restriction declarations deposited in the University Library, The University Library’s regulations (see http://www.manchester.ac.uk/library/aboutus/regulations) and in the University’s policy on presentation of Theses.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank a number of people who have given me support and encouragement in writing this thesis. Firstly, I would like to thank my supervisor Jo Frankham for the generosity of her time and her valuable insights. I would also like to thank Pat Campbell and other colleagues at the University of Manchester for support at different stages of the research, as well as the students who participated in the study. A very special ‘thank you’ goes to my wife, Charlotte Woods, whose patience, help, understanding and encouragement was crucial in allowing me to undertake and complete this work.
Chapter One

The Context and Rationale for the Study

1.1 Introduction

This chapter will begin by outlining the overall aims, approach and rationale for the thesis, followed by a description of the institutional context in which the study was carried out. These elements are intended to provide the reader with a sufficient understanding of the background to the research questions which follow at the end of the chapter. In carrying out the above, I will draw on the literature in the field of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (HE), as well as relevant policy papers at institutional and national levels.

1.2 Aims and approach to the study

This study is exploratory and has the broad aim of investigating group learning on a Communication Skills course unit of a Foundation Year programme in the Faculty of Engineering and Physical Sciences at the University of Manchester. The research is relevant to my professional practice as a member of the programme team, and therefore in keeping with the purpose of a professional doctorate. The study findings will inform development of this unit and in this sense have an evaluative dimension. In particular, the study will examine in detail one aspect of the course unit: its group work component. To this end, the inquiry will have the following elements: (i) discourse analysis of student group talk, and (ii) analysis of student interviews and tutor discussions. However, the main element of the study is the discourse analysis of student group talk where the aim is to critique the effectiveness of group work in achieving the unit aims, in addition to addressing other questions about group work processes. In relation to this, a further aim of this study is to assess the usefulness of two approaches to discourse analysis (Tan, 2000/ 2003; Mercer, 2005) for understanding the student data.

In addressing these aims, reference will be made to current national and institutional policies, perceptions of group work provided by staff and students on the programme, and insights from the literature. Implications from the findings of this inquiry are proposed for the overall development of the course as well as for specific practice in teaching and
learning. Furthermore, ideas are provided of how the findings will have wider applicability through improving our understanding of aspects of group processes as they occur in the context of undergraduate HE.

1.3 Rationale for this thesis

This study has particular relevance both to my professional practice in my role as tutor on the Communication Skills unit, and more widely in my role of providing academic literacy support to students at the University Of Manchester. It is the latest stage in a series of action research projects I have undertaken related to my professional interest in academic literacy support for students in HE. Most relevant to the present study was my involvement over a 2-year period in the design and delivery of a ‘Study and ICT’ skills undergraduate unit in the School of Education at the University of Manchester. Action research carried out on this unit (Davies, 2005) highlighted group work as a popular feature of the programme, and in particular, the opportunity to review the writing of other groups. This knowledge played a role in influencing the subsequent design of the Communication Skills unit.

The aims and rationale for this thesis relate to the rationale for the Communication Skills unit under investigation. This in turn reflects a prevailing view of an important role of HE that has developed over the last 20 years: supporting economic development through the provision of an appropriately skilled workforce. This has occurred at the same time as other important changes in the sector. These are outlined in the next section.

1.4 Shifts in teaching and learning in HE

Higher Education has undergone profound changes in recent years which have resulted in significant changes in institutions and student experience. One of the main drivers has been government policy and the aim of substantially increasing the proportion of young people attending HE institutions (Bocock, 2003). This situation is attributed to the demands on universities from an increasingly competitive global HE market place (OECD, 2004). The consequence of this has been the creation of a mass system of education where increased student numbers have resulted in larger classes and more diversity in terms of student type, for example, those entering through non-traditional channels such as widening
participation programmes as well as increasing numbers of overseas students (Stewart, 1995; Pokorny and Pokorny, 2005).

The emergence of a larger and more diverse student body has coincided with a movement towards courses incorporating group work and problem-based learning techniques. This has caused considerable consternation among some who work in the sector who view this trend more as a result of economic than pedagogic considerations. Advocates of the more learner centred approach, however, point out that it is consistent with the nature of the university experience for students, where there is the expectation for them to develop greater autonomy (Garrigan, 1997), and where this autonomy is perceived as a desirable and necessary ‘skill’ for tertiary level students (Fazey and Linford, 1996; Janssen, 1996). Support for students to develop such skills has typically been addressed through the implementation of study skills and independent learning support programmes (Norton and Crowley, 1995). Indeed, at the University of Manchester, Faculty concern for such support was reflected in an officially sanctioned study into student and staff perceptions of such needs (Deignan, 2002).

Occurring alongside the student number and developing autonomy debate is an increasing interest in the relevance of HE for employment. Encouraged by government policy and rhetoric, this has created what may be described as a more employer-oriented approach to HE (Coffield, 2000), an approach that includes focusing the role of British universities on having a more effective contribution to the improvement of the economy and wealth creation (Dearlove, 1997:59). However, this perspective of the role of HE is not entirely new; for instance, the UK Enterprise In Higher Education (EHE) initiative of 1987 included raising awareness of the demands of future employers and to foster in students the kinds of skills (transferable, organisational and communicative) that employers valued (Humphreys et al., 1997). More recently, this has been reflected at various educational policy levels; for example, Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) benchmark statements referring to “transferable skills necessary for employment” (QAA, 2010:06). Such statements are also seen to be made explicit in publications for tutors to incorporate into their teaching (e.g. Gibbs et al., 1994). However, the ability of HE to address the perceived needs of employers for a more flexible and adaptable workforce has not been without its critics. For example, Kemp and Seagraves (1995) in a report on the findings of a study of the provision of transferable skills concluded that “Radical rethinking of course structuring
and delivery is required if these skills are to be addressed seriously in higher education” (p.327).

Of particular relevance to this thesis is the relationship between employability and group work. This theme is taken up in the literature with particular reference to the role of group work in developing ‘generic’ skills (e.g. Laybourn et al., 2001). However, some writers refer to certain assumptions that appear to prevail in this area. For instance, Humphreys et al. (1997: 63) point out that although institutions that adopted the EHE initiative became increasingly aware of the importance of group work for self and peer assessment skills, this was based on the assumption that group activity and assessment practices are a significant feature of an individual’s work practice. Similarly, Mutch (1998:50) refers to how there are “assumptions, more or less explicit, that forms of group work in higher education are, first, modelled on the patterns encountered in working life and second, will prepare students for such patterns.” Yet the extent to which such assumptions are valid remains unclear.

The relationship between group work and preparing students for employment is also set alongside the role group work has in the learning process more generally (Mutch, 1998; Goldfinch et al., 1999; Laybourn et al., 2001). For instance, in a study of a British Petroleum sponsored programme with ten HE institutions which looked at group work, Dunne and Rawlins (2000) give particular emphasis to the theoretical underpinning for the use of group work. Drawing on work in clinical psychology and fieldwork in HE, they assert that “groups and teams can provide a powerful context for learning” (p.362), but that emphasis needs to be placed on “the application as well as the accretion of knowledge and skills, with the processes of learning being valued alongside the disciplinary content.” (p363).

The types of shifts in HE referred to in this section highlight some of the main trends, relevant to this thesis, that have occurred in teaching and learning practice in the sector over recent decades. These include increasing student numbers, increasing emphasis on student autonomy, the increase in focus on the development of transferable skills, and the assumption that learning takes place through group work. Many of these trends have representation in the Communication Skills course unit. The institutional context for the unit is provided in the following section.
1.5 Institutional context

Since the merger of Manchester (Victoria) University and UMIST in September 2004, the new University of Manchester has emerged as one of the largest HE institutions in the UK. The restructuring process of the old institutions that took place to create the new institution resulted in the formation of five Faculties, including the Faculty of Engineering and Physical Sciences (The University of Manchester Website, 2010a). The Foundation Year programme of interest to this study serves as a feeder for the undergraduate programmes in the nine Schools that make up this faculty. Many of the students who enrol on the programme have either previously failed to achieve the required A-level grades to enter an undergraduate programme or have arrived on the course from non-traditional backgrounds (such as widening participation programmes) or from overseas. The accommodation of such students is encouraged by university policy (The University of Manchester Website, 2010b), and since 2006, the number of students following the programme has risen from ninety in 2004/5 to 187 in 2008/9. In the latter cohort, the vast majority of students were made up of recent school leavers, and over 90% were male.

The Communication Skills course unit under investigation in this thesis is one of four course units the students follow during their one year term of study on the Foundation Year programme in the Faculty of Engineering and Physical Sciences. Historically, this unit has been coordinated and delivered by the English Language Teaching section of the University Language Centre, which means that the teaching staff involved in its delivery were, and remain, tutors trained in the teaching of English to speakers of other languages.

The reason for the Language Centre’s role in the delivery of the Communication Skills unit can be traced back to a period prior to this study when the students were predominantly from overseas, and whose first language was not English. At that time, the course was more language oriented, while in terms of skills development, the focus was very much on oral presentation skills. Over the years, the trend has emerged whereby more and more native speaking British students came on to the course to the extent that currently there are far more British students than overseas students. In 2005/6, the total number of students registered on the main course was approximately 160. Of these, 140 students were made up of British home students and overseas students who had already met the English Language
requirements of their departments (IELTS 6 or 6.5). This left another 20 students whose level of English needed to be brought up to the required IELTS level for their department.

1.6 The Course

The result of the changing profile of the students on the course became increasingly apparent in the two years up to 2006. Tutors began to report how they felt that although the materials they were using were appropriate for non-native speakers, they did not provide sufficient challenge for native speakers who were making up the largest proportion of students. Poor attendance at classes became increasingly problematic, as native speakers perceived that they could meet the requirements of the course without attending. There was, however, still the perception among tutors that native speakers could improve in terms of their oral and written communication, but that there needed to be changes if these students were to be sufficiently challenged and engaged in the course unit. One of the key problems reported by tutors of this course unit prior to the current version was the perceived lack of commitment from the students. Apart from the view that the course content and course structure played their parts in this, there was also the perception that the changing make up of the students themselves was significant. As a result, in 2005, the course was revised in a number of ways. Firstly, the writing skills component became more focused, involving the writing of a problem/solution essay. This essay had to be on a science subject, and it also formed the basis of an oral presentation at end of the course. Although there were reported improvements in attendance and student engagement in course content as a result of these changes, the two x 2-hour sessions were still viewed by the tutors as too much input time for the topic. Indeed, this sentiment was reiterated by students in feedback on the course, where a common complaint was that there were ‘too many lessons’.

The unit coordinator, whose tenure began in 2006, was responsible for redrafting the course unit into its current format containing the group work component. The outcome of this revision process was a set of aims in which group work was firmly embedded. The ‘new’ 13-week course had the following weekly components:

- 1 x hour lecture
- 1 x 2-hour input session on writing skills related to the group assessed task
course material on aspects of academic literacy made available in the University’s chosen Virtual Learning Environment.

As indicated in section 1.2, this study focuses on the group assessed task where the student groups were expected to work on their task both during the input session as well as outside the classroom. The group talk data was gathered when the students were engaged in this task during the sessions.

1.7 Study outline

This chapter has set out the aims of the study and located it within the institutional and wider HE context. In order to achieve its stated aims, the investigation is guided by the following exploratory questions:

1. What new understandings do I have about research methodology in the area of group learning?
2. What evidence of learning can be seen in the transcriptions of student group work in the Communication Skills course unit?
3. What implications for professional practice arise from the study findings?
4. What new directions for further research are suggested?

Chapters Two and Three review the relevant literature concerned with the assumptions, theoretical claims and empirical data related to group learning, especially in the context of HE. Chapter Four outlines the rationale and design for the study, while Chapter Five describes the data gathering processes. Chapters Six and Seven provide analysis of verbatim transcripts of four student group meetings. Chapter Eight analyses recorded student and tutor discussions of the group work experience. Finally, Chapter Nine offers conclusions and implications arising from the study.
Chapter Two

Review of Group Learning Literature

2.1 Introduction

Group activity has been an accepted feature of teaching and learning practice in HE for some considerable time (Tennant, 1997), and continues to be underpinned by research into how learning takes place in peer groups (e.g. Arvaja, 2002; Tan, 2000/2003; Bourner, 2001; Volet and Mansfield, 2006). Ahead of a review of empirical work on group activity, this chapter examines some of the conceptual territory in the field, focusing mainly on literature that considers such activity in the context of HE.

The review begins with a brief overview of historical perspectives on the purpose of HE up to and including more recent changes in the sector, as referred to in Chapter One. The link between the workplace, current educational policy and skills development in HE will then be considered, focusing in particular on the claims that group activity fosters these skills. The relationship between cooperative group work and student learning is explored next. The chapter concludes by highlighting the relevance of social processes in group activity, and in particular the role of group cohesion.

2.2 The Purpose of a higher education

Although there are frequently different emphases in the literature with regard to the general aims of HE, areas of commonality may also be identified in terms of how the sector has been viewed over time. For instance, Ramsden (2003:21) describes these aims as changing little over the years, referring to accounts of the importance of students developing the ability to think critically as dating back to the 19th century. Knowles (1980:18) refers to the traditional conception of education as producing the “educated person” who will “know how to make use of their knowledge”. Northedge (2003:23) summarises the role of education as supporting “participation in the discourses of unfamiliar knowledge communities”, which necessarily involves intellectual as well as social challenges. Indeed, for Northedge, it is the process of developing increasing competence in such knowledge
communities that is central to his conception of learning. This conception will be returned to in Chapter Six of this thesis.

The spirit of these aims continues to be found in more recent considerations of the purpose of HE. The influential report by The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (Dearing Report, 1997) makes reference to ‘traditional values’, such as the notion that “higher education continues to have a key role in developing the powers of the mind, and in advancing understanding and learning through scholarship and research” (Dearing Report, 1997: Terms of reference). However, compared to this more traditional perspective, a shift in emphasis is clearly visible with regard to a large proportion of the report’s recommendations, purportedly reflecting a rapidly changing social context. As referred to in Chapter One, examples of developments in the sector arising from this changing context include the shift from an elite to a mass higher education system and the development of closer links between HE and employment.

One is also able to see how these changes in perspective regarding the purpose of HE occurred alongside changes in the way in which students were expected to learn. In the sphere of adult education, Knowles (1980) describes the emergence of competency-based education in the seventies and into the eighties as replacing the content-transmission model that had prevailed up to that time. This change signalled the emergence of features of self-directed learning such as the focus on individualised learning, learning contracts and attention to the structuring of learning experiences (Knowles, 1980:19). An important element of thinking in this learner autonomy movement was learning through cooperation with peers, rather than solely through tutor-directed activities.

While it may generally be considered that self-direction as a concept has implicitly characterised the student learning experience throughout its history, it has only relatively recently been incorporated into sets of principles, theories and practices that have taken over the centre ground of the HE learning experience. For instance, the perceived benefits of cooperation between peers as a means of enhancing learning has resulted in group learning becoming commonplace. This has been further embedded into university teaching practice via assessments applied to this mode of learning.
From the above, it is possible to identify two central themes associated with the use of group work in HE. The first is the closer orientation to employment, and the second, interest in student autonomy in teaching and learning. The former has led in some cases to employer sponsorship of HE programmes (e.g. Dunne and Rawlins, 2000). A key driver for this association was the notion of developing skills in the HE environment which may subsequently be transferred to the workplace, and several studies (e.g. Laybourn, 2001; Humphreys, 1997; Dunn and Rawlins, 2000) highlight group work as particularly appropriate in fostering these skills. The second theme relates to providing opportunities for developing greater student autonomy. In reducing reliance on the tutor, group learning in HE is seen (i) as a means of pooling valuable sources of knowledge and (ii) as proving a supportive environment for learning more generally through cooperation. Laybourn et al. (2001:368) neatly summarise the relationships between these themes and group work as follows:

Group work in undergraduate programmes retains a prominent role, partly due to its recognition as an important core or generic skill, highly valued by employers ... and also as a potentially valuable vehicle for co-operative learning.

With regard to skills development, the above draws attention to the use of different terms in the field (core/generic), and the tendency to use them somewhat loosely and interchangeably (Bridges, 1994). However, as Bridges (1994:09) clarifies,

... transferable skills (author’s italics) tends to be preferred when people are talking about application of skills across different social contexts. Skills in interpersonal communication, management skills and collaborative group working skills are all perhaps examples of this kind.

The way in which group activity is viewed as generating such skills and developing learner autonomy is discussed next. This will be followed in 2.4 by consideration of ways in which groups are seen as vehicles for social learning.

2.3 Skills development and the ‘self-directed’ learner

Discussion of skills development in the literature appears to be bound up with notions of ‘learner independence’ and the ‘self-directed learner’, and there is almost a contradictory sense in the accounts of how skills and autonomy are engendered through groups: “one of the ways of supporting independent learners can be through the use of groups or teams” (Dunne and Rawlins, 2000:362). However, the perspective of the learner as developing independently but in a group environment is central to much discussion of adult education
and groups. Tennant (1997:109) summarises how proponents of group work perceive this precept of adult education to be realised through group learning:

Groups are said to promote self-understanding through shared support and mutual feedback. They generate the experiential base for learning; they encourage interaction, self-determination and trust. It is the group that challenges the traditional relationship between the teacher and the taught and insists on equal input into planning. Ultimately, it is only through the group that ‘learning how to learn’ can be achieved.

An important theme that emerges from this is the claim that ‘self-understanding’ and ‘self-determination’ are promoted by cooperative behaviour, and vice versa. This relationship is echoed by Jaques (1991:83) when he claims that “an important function of group work in higher education is to enable students to know enough about themselves and about others to enable them to work independently and yet cooperatively within a team.” Jaques attaches a set of aims to this statement which reflect the relationship between these functions and group work. They include the development of the following: understanding; critical thinking; personal growth; communication skills; group and teamwork skills; (Jaques, 1991:82). According to both Tennant and Jaques, therefore, self-development and skills development are perceived as operating in tandem (or dynamically) in a cooperative environment referred to as a group. Such an environment is also seen to underpin more widely the prevailing view of adults as learners in HE (e.g. Fazey and Linford, 1996; Janssen, 1996).

A central concept underpinning the rationale for group activity referred to by Tennant and Jaques is self-direction. Support for the self-directed nature of adult learning was drawn from empirical work in the field as well as theoretical and empirical work related to the psychology of life-span development (Tennant, 1997:10). This review will now briefly summarise the work of two influential contributors to these fields. This aims to provide a clearer understanding of its characteristics and, in turn, why HE has embraced self-direction so enthusiastically through group work.

Key contributions to the field of self-directed learning can be seen in empirical work conducted by Tough (1971), whose studies of adult learning projects culminated in the identification of a set of ‘abilities’ deemed to be central to self-directed learning, such as the ability to set one’s own learning objectives and the ability to maintain motivation (Tennant 1997:10). Tough (1971:136-139) also set out a range of ‘attractive’ and ‘negative’ characteristics associated with self-directed learning in a group environment:
many of the attractive characteristics relate to the various forms of emotional and practical support group work can provide; negative characteristics typically refer to impractical aspects of working with others, such as coordinating activity and interpersonal difficulties, as well as inefficiencies in the learning process for certain kinds of tasks.

As a prominent theoretical contributor to this field, Knowles (1980:19) asserted that the primary concern in adult education should be to provide resources and support to adults in order for them to become self-directed inquirers. The model of the lifelong learner developed by Knowles portrays such a learner as possessing a set of skills; for example, “The ability to locate the most relevant and reliable sources of data” and “The ability to organize, analyze and evaluate the data so as to get valid answers” (Tennant, 1997:09). Knowles also derived a set of assumptions from the model aimed at informing the teacher in the task of deriving the best approach to foster these skills in the adult learner. These assumptions include the following: “Adults have a deep psychological need to be generally self-directing...”; “As people grow and develop they accumulate an increasing reservoir of experience that becomes an increasingly rich resource for learning ...”; “Learners see education as a process of developing increased competence to achieve their full potential in life” (Knowles 1971: 43/44). Indeed, from these assumptions about the adult learner, Knowles (1971:381) devised his ‘learning contract’ which learners could use to guide and plan their learning, and which required the learner to state explicitly a series of objectives and strategies they will adopt during the learning process.

These accounts of self-directed and lifelong learning provided by Tough and Knowles present the self-directed learner, as Tennant (1997:10) points out, as one who “masters a range of learning techniques and processes”. This language implies a cause and effect relationship, where “techniques” can be “mastered”, suggesting in turn that self-directed learning can unproblematically be accomplished via a systematic or principled approach. Moreover, there is the sense that the abilities and skills referred to by Knowles and Tough are acquired without specific recourse to the context in which their ‘learning’ occurs. Indeed, this leaching out of context would appear to lend weight to the argument that such skills and abilities are therefore ‘transferable’ between different contexts. As Bridges (1994:14) reminds us, “what is supposed is that there are skills which can be deployed with little or no adaptation in a variety of social settings.”
However, the contention that skills may be ‘deployed’ between different settings is frequently viewed as problematic. For Barrow (1999:136), such a notion reflects a “purely atomic view of humans and their interactions; humans are no different from atoms running about knocking into each other in ways that just need to be understood and harnessed.” Elsewhere, Whitston (1998) asserts that it is both impossible as well as undesirable to assess ‘personal skills’ objectively, and also that “there is no very clear idea what key skills are wanted for” (p313). More generally, the notion of ‘skills’ itself is brought into question when considering the link between transferability of skills and student employability, due to its perceived inadequacy in describing what employees are required by to deal with (Whitson, 1998; Holmes, 2001; Knight and York, 2003). Although such views throw into doubt the basis of the notion of transferable skills, there remains considerable commitment to the concept in HE policy and practice. For example, as explained in Chapter One, university mission statements can be seen to follow QAA guidelines in featuring transferable skills as one of the goals of teaching in degree and module specifications (e.g. see Manchester 2015, Goal 2: 2008/9), while such specifications are a focus of external examiner reports and other audit processes and procedures.

This section has shown how the role of the group in skills development is seen to be closely linked to the development of the ‘self-directed learner’ in current thinking. The two are also presented as having a cyclical relationship: the group is instrumental in developing the skills required for self direction, which in turn better equip the individual to be a more effective group operator. Indeed, notions of both self-direction and working in a group are set out as aims in the Course Description (See Appendix I). These are described as ‘opportunities for working in groups’, and providing students with the ‘experience of studying autonomously’, notions which adhere to the principle of students operating independently of tutor guidance. The following section will now consider the second perspective of group activity: as a vehicle for social learning.

2.4 Learning together: background and perceived benefits

Whereas the previous section focused on cooperation in groups in terms of promoting skills development, self-direction and the management of one’s own learning (e.g. Bourner et al., 2001; Garrigan, 1997), social activity is also viewed as offering benefits for learning in its own right. As Tennant (1997:108) explains:
The claim is that group learning is better, say, than the lecture format, because it encourages the pooling of resources, builds a sense of group belonging, allows participants to express their views, helps them to clarify their thinking, and so on ... The ultimate aim is to establish a smoothly functioning, cohesive group in which individuals can learn together and learn productively.

This section will consider some of the theoretical perspectives that link the social aspect of group work and learning, beginning with the twin notions of cooperation and collaboration.

Firstly, cooperation is referred to as having a clearly defined structure, where group work participants adopt a systematic strategy as they strive toward achieving a common goal (Springer et al., 1999). This is described as being realised through utilising a series of procedures such as “assigning interrelated and complementary roles and tasks to individuals within each group” and “holding each individual in each group accountable for his or her learning ...” (Springer et al., 1999:24). Secondly, collaboration is presented as having broadly “unstructured processes through which participants negotiate goals, define problems, develop procedures, and produce socially constructed knowledge in small groups” (Springer et al., 1999:24). It would therefore appear from these definitions that the former refers more to organisational issues of group work, while the latter would seem to relate more to the creative aspect of group activity. With regard to cooperation, Smith (1996:72) sums up what is portrayed as a ‘common view’ when he asserts that “Cooperation among students typically results in higher achievement and greater productivity; more caring, supportive, and committed relationships; and greater psychological health, social competence, and self-esteem”.

However, in seeking a theoretical basis for supporting the ‘common view’, one finds that the rationale for small group learning is not informed by one single theory or tradition, but many. Within the philosophy of education, one view from the experiential tradition is that “if humans are to learn to live cooperatively, they must experience the living process of cooperation ...” (Schmuck, 1985:02). Within cognitive psychology, associated with Vygotsky and Piaget, cognitive growth is dependent on social interaction: “Central to the Vygotskian view is the role of a more knowledgeable other in guiding social interaction and providing the conceptual scaffolding for the gradual internalization of knowledge” (Hertz-Lazarowitz et al., 1992:02). With regard to social psychology, Lewin’s field theory identifies two important notions: firstly, the notion of the ‘dynamic whole’ of a group
achieved through interdependence between members; secondly, that “an intrinsic state of tension within group members motivates movement toward the accomplishment of the desired common goals” (Johnson and Johnson, 1992:175).

From a motivational perspective, Springer et al. (1999:24) outline how group goals or the valuing of group success is viewed as forming an incentive structure, i.e. valuing the success of the group encourages students to help each other. Underpinned by motivational theorists’ emphasis on individual accountability, Springer et al. (1999) refer to the assumption that students would be encouraged in the task of helping each other to achieve, and that this behaviour can be brought about as a result of opportunities to negotiate meaning, manipulate ideas collaboratively and reflect on learning. Regarding tutor motivation, the idea that “students can help other students who are having difficulty learning or understanding the material” is presented as a “primary motivation” for establishing small groups (Webb, 1992:103). Slavin (1992:148), however, sums up a more measured perspective: “the degree to which help is valuable for performance depends on the task and outcome measure”, suggesting that task design will be significant in ensuring student motivation and learning outcomes in learning together.

This section has highlighted how various theories informing group learning contain within them a strong social element. On the whole, this element is assumed to have a positive effect on the group in terms of students being, for instance, positively predisposed towards the kind of cooperation championed in the philosophy of education and educational psychology. From a motivational perspective, there is the assumption that the fact that “students can (my italics) help each other” (Webb, 1992:103) means that they will. Even when there is “an intrinsic state of tension” (Johnson and Johnson, 1992:175), this is first and foremost seen as working positively towards the achievement of group goals, as opposed to any less positive outcomes that may occur through social processes, and which may ultimately lead to the group task breaking down. As with the review of self-directed learning research earlier, assumptions appear to play a central role with regard to student behaviour in groups. On this theme, the literature refers to aspects of group cohesion as significant in moderating this behaviour. These aspects are considered in the next section.
2.5 Group cohesion

In the literature, the level of group cohesion is described as being closely related to the level of effectiveness of group activity (e.g. Baron and Kerr, 2003; Douglas, 1995; Houldsworth and Mathews, 2000; Slavin, 1992). Defined by Forsyth (1990:83) as “a feeling of group unity, camaraderie, and esprit de corps”, this literature refers to various phenomena and theories that explain group cohesion. These are seen to have both positive and negative influences on group effectiveness, as well as being significant in understanding group structure and functioning.

One of the most significant phenomena referred to for determining group cohesion is the establishment of group norms. Houldsworth and Mathews (2000:43) define these as follows: “a scale of values that defines a range of acceptable (and unacceptable) attitudes and behaviours from members. Norms specify certain rules for how group members should behave and thus reflect the mutual expectations amongst group members.” Also described as evolving in groups over time, norms are viewed as necessary for the survival and success of a group by facilitating specific conditions, such as codes of behaviour. The establishment of norms are also seen as leading to a reduction in uncertainty and confusion (Baron and Kerr, 2003), while group norms that favour achievement are associated with increased performance, including learning (Slavin, 1992:153).

Two other key phenomena frequently referred to as affecting cohesion in learning groups are ‘social loafing’ and ‘free riding’ (Baron and Kerr, 2003). Social loafing is described as a form of motivation loss, where effort may decrease amongst individuals due to large group size or where the possibility for evaluation is less likely; ‘free riding’ can occur when individuals understand that there are others in the group who are prepared to do most of the work, and where it is possible for the success of the group to arise from one member (Baron and Kerr, 2003: Ch 4). Slavin (1992) links these phenomena closely to “diffusion of responsibility”, which can lead to a net decrease in performance and have a negative effect on individual performance:

Diffusion of responsibility is highest when group members can substitute for one another in performing the group task. When this is possible, some students are likely to do the minimum, hoping that their teammates will pick up the slack.

Slavin (1992:154)
A number of theories attempt to explain group cohesion and motivation in terms of metaphors or pseudo-scientific formulae. One example is Exchange theory, which is concerned with notions of material and psychological costs and rewards of group membership (Baron and Kerr, 2003: Ch 1). This costs and rewards metaphor in Exchange theory, together with motivational considerations and the various phenomena referred to above (group norms, social loafing and free riding), are embedded within Steiner’s concept of Process Loss (Baron and Kerr, 2003: Ch3). This concept is described as having two elements: the first is coordination loss when coordination between members is not optimal; the second is motivational loss when members are not optimally motivated. Thus, the actual productivity of a group is expressed as potential productivity minus process loss. According to Houldsworth and Mathews (2000:44), “the potential for process loss comes from social loafing, free riding ... withdrawing, low norm setting and the relative proportion of anxious/moody members to stable/self-confident members in a group. On the other hand, the potential for process gain comes from cohesiveness combined with positive normative influence.”

The expression above of the dynamic interplay between group members can be seen to be couched in the language of a mathematical formulae or monetary exchange, through terms such as ‘productivity’ and ‘loss’. This is contained within a general framework which perceives groups, in Steiner’s terms, as having a level of ‘potential productivity’, a notion which is inherently finite. This representation suggests a view of group functioning that is reduced to the level of a cause and effect relationships that operates to make a group cohesive. This view of group functioning may in turn suggest that raising the norm setting would result in a corresponding change in the productive capacity of the group. Such an argument, however, may lead to a restricted or oversimplified view of the relationship between the social elements that contribute to the way a group behaves, and as a result limit a proper understanding of that behaviour.

The influences of ‘social’ factors are seen in another strand of work on group cohesion which draws on notions of social identity and self-categorisation. Theories associated with these notions refer to self-identity as being determined by our perceptions of social categories we perceive ourselves to belong to (e.g. cultural; occupational), and which help to clarify who we are (Baron and Kerr, 2003: Ch 1). According to these theories, we as individuals have our own unique self-concept or personal identity, aspects of which form
part of our social identity linked to (or in the context of) social group memberships. Garcia-Prieto (2003:419) explains social identity theory as follows:

According to social identity theory, our self-concept consists of aspects of the self that are unique to us, known as personal identity, and aspects of the self linked to our social group memberships, known as social identity.

Garcia-Prieto et al. (2003:417) also refer to diversity within groups as being determined by context and multiple social identities and that this feature may have a bearing on how group members engage with discussion topics. In their characterisation, the authors make a distinction between visible and underlying diversity. Visible diversity refers to the characteristics we are born with (e.g. gender), and may lead to stereotyping with associated negative affective processes; underlying diversity refers to the acquisition of characteristics which may be changed (e.g. attitudes, beliefs, values). In this account, then, group cohesion and group work is affected by the positive and negative responses individuals have to the various forms of diversity they encounter in their groups.

2.6 Summary

This chapter has established the rationale that underpins group activity in HE today. It is based on a perception that regards group learning as fulfilling particular needs. These needs relate to the dual aims of HE in terms of developing skills, including transferrable skills for the workplace, and the perceived benefits of learning with others as informed by cognitive, educational and social psychology.

However, various social processes are seen as central to the effectiveness of group performance. It is regarded that aspects of group cohesion have a key role in this respect where variables such as individual contribution, mutual expectations and group norms, together with motivational and social identity aspects, are all viewed as contributing to a group’s cohesiveness. It is the relative strengths or effects of these variables which determine the extent to which a group is seen to be ‘cohesive’, according to this literature.

Chapter Three will present an overview of empirical research relevant to group work in HE.
Chapter Three

**Group Work in HE: Key Findings and Research Methods**

### 3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter outlined thinking that underpins the use of group work in HE. This chapter presents a critical overview of the methods and claims found in empirical research relevant to group work in HE. The purpose of this overview is to inform my own research design for the present study by examining and developing an understanding of the approaches taken by other researchers in the field, including their limitations. This will involve consideration of research carried out in both cooperative learning and group work in order to establish a broad overview of the methods researchers most commonly use when inquiring into the merits of students working together for the purposes of skills development and learning more generally.

In any research project, the researcher makes choices regarding data collection methods, the focus of inquiry, and the way in which the findings are presented (Scott, 2000:44). In reviewing the studies in this chapter, consideration will be given to the philosophical perspectives that underpin such choices. As McKenzie et al., (1997) point out, such perspectives illuminate the research and the researcher, and as a result, the way the reader ‘reads’ the research report:

> Any research method or procedure is ... inextricably embedded in commitments to particular versions of the world and to particular ways of knowing it, and the researcher, by using these methods and procedures rather than others, reproduces and strengthens these commitments… It follows from this that there is no means of carrying out research which is neutral and self-validating…

(McKenzie et al., 1997:04)

A search of group work research literature reveals that empirical studies fall mainly into three broad areas, and these are dealt within the three main sections in this chapter. Section 3.2 draws largely on meta-analyses of studies into cooperative learning in school and college contexts. These studies are usually quantitative and often based on field-experiments and measures of student achievement. Section 3.3 refers to more recent work focusing on student perceptions of group work specific to the HE classroom. Finally,
section 3.4 considers work in the field of discourse analysis and, more specifically, analysis of verbatim transcripts of students working together and the insights this form of inquiry provide with regard to the nature of talk and student learning.

### 3.2 Empirical studies into cooperative learning in groups

Historically, much of the empirical research activity into group work in education has tended to foreground the notion of ‘cooperative learning’ without necessarily identifying the group as the context for this activity, as is generally the case in more recent studies. However, earlier studies into ‘cooperative learning’ and more recent studies into ‘group work’ are both concerned with interpersonal communication. As a result, I feel that consideration of some of these earlier studies provides a more complete overview of empirical work in the field as well as providing insights into the methodological approaches that were employed, including their limitations.

The range of empirical studies that focus on student achievement in the field of cooperative learning groups is vast, rendering a thorough overview of this body of work beyond the scope of this thesis. I have therefore chosen to base this section of the review on a restricted range of examples of empirical work which I feel are representative of the areas of research activity and research methodology employed. To this end, I intend to focus on the work of Johnson and Johnson (1985), two researchers who have made significant contributions towards cooperative learning inquiry. Two examples of their work will be considered: firstly, a brief review of a meta-analysis of empirical research in this field; secondly, a consideration of the methodology used by these authors in their inquiry into one specific aspect of cooperative learning. Both of these examples will be considered in the context of the commonly stated aims for these studies referred to by the authors, namely, to establish “the relationship between cooperation and (1) productivity and (2) interpersonal attraction among students” (Johnson and Johnson, 1985:103). These issues will also be considered with reference to the wider literature.

In their meta-analysis of 122 studies carried out between 1924 and 1981, Johnson and Johnson (1985) categorise a wide range of studies according to areas of research focus in cooperative learning. These categories were the following: internal dynamics of cooperative learning groups; type of talk; quality of learning strategy; controversy versus
concurrence seeking; time on task; cognitive processing; peer support; ability levels of group members; psychological support; attitudes towards subject areas and fairness in grading (1985:113-120). Based on statistical analysis of the conclusions of the studies in these categories, the authors’ report focuses on the positive effects of student cooperation. These positive effects included the promotion of “higher achievement and liking amongst students”, and “the promotion of high-quality reasoning strategies, the constructive management of conflict over ideas and conclusions, increased time on task...”, amongst others (Johnson and Johnson, 1985:120).

However, these unequivocally positive conclusions from this analysis were challenged by Slavin (1992:152) when he pointed out that the studies Johnson and Johnson considered were mostly conducted in cases where “group productivity was obviously more effective, such as jointly solving mazes, number problems, scramble words, and so on.” This criticism refers to the convergent nature of the tasks, i.e. tasks with one correct answer, where one would expect the involvement of more than one student to improve the chances of a successful outcome.

In the second example of their work considered here, Johnson and Johnson (1985) focused on the specific theme of conflict in cooperative learning groups (‘controversy versus concurrence’), within the general context of understanding “the relative impact of cooperative, competitive, and individualistic learning experiences …” (1985:103). In this study, they describe adopting the field-experimental approach in their attempt to impose uniform conditions on data gathering, involving attempts to standardise aspects of teaching and learning as well as group participants. With regard to teaching and learning, the following attempts at standardisation are referred to: the training of teachers, and their requirement to follow scripts; observation of teachers; standardisation of teaching ability through teacher rotation; and students studying the same curriculum. Standardisation of group participants is also referred to. This is described as follows:

In order to ensure that there would be no differences among the students in each condition, we randomly assigned students, making sure that there was an equal number of males and females, majority and minority members, and high-, medium-, and low-ability students in each condition.

Johnson and Johnson (1985:104)
However, these attempts at standardisation draw attention to contentious aspects of the field-experimental approach to inquiry in this context. The first of these is the claim that this approach ensures ‘no differences’ between students ‘in each condition’. In this drive towards ‘standardisation’, assumptions appear to have been made with regard to variables that are deemed significant, such as “an equal number of males and females.” On this point one may question the rationale for making the apparent assumption that the influence of gender is the same in each condition. Other questions related to the standardisation of participants may include how and why criteria for ‘majority/minority’ members were derived, as well as the basis of judgements on, or criteria for, student ability. Secondly, with regard to attempts at controlling the content and delivery of instruction, there is no apparent acknowledgement of the notion that every learning situation brings with it its own set of unique variables, which interact dynamically and which inevitably impact on the way communication unfolds in a social situation. This situation-dependent nature of learning is referred to by Parlett and Hamilton (1977:10) as the ‘learning milieu’, and is explained as follows:

The learning milieu represents a network or nexus of cultural, social, institutional and psychological variables. These interact in complicated ways to produce, in each class or course, a unique pattern of circumstances, pressures, customs, opinions and work-styles which suffuse the teaching and learning that occur there.

Thus, given this complexity, one may suggest that claims from such research aimed at controlling the social context should be regarded with some degree of caution. For example, in their study into ‘controversy versus concurrence’, Johnson and Johnson (1985:115) claim the following:

When managed constructively, controversy promotes epistemic curiosity or uncertainty about the correctness of one’s views, an active search for more information, and, consequently, higher achievement and retention of the material being learned. Individuals working alone in competitive and individualistic situations do not have the opportunity for such a process, and therefore, their achievement suffers.

There are two points that can be made with regard to these claims. The first is general, and concerns the future certainties conveyed in the language used: ‘controversy promotes epistemic curiosity ...’; ‘achievement suffers’ (my italics) if individuals work in non-cooperative modes. This language performs the function of expressing certainty through a cause and effect relationship. Yet it is difficult to be persuaded of these certainties from the perspective of the dynamic learning situation if it is characterised as a “network or nexus
of cultural, social, institutional and psychological variables” (Parlett and Hamilton, 1977: 10). The complexities of such a situation resulting from the interaction of these variables would render each learning group context unique. As a result, it would seem inappropriate to be certain about what would enable a group to function effectively in all contexts.

The second point regarding these claims concerns the specific assertion that controversy stimulates reflection, and how this relates to higher achievement. This notion is not without some consideration elsewhere. For Lyotard (1984: xxv) “invention is always born of dissension”; Lewin’s field theory (Chapter Two) refers to the positive effects of “an intrinsic state of tension within group members” (Johnson and Johnson, 1992:175); Lizzio (2005:375) refers to how the key to success in group activity is found in the ability to make effective use of differences between individuals as a means of facilitating deeper understanding. However, it is also surely the case that ‘dissension’ or ‘tension’ can lead to relations that are so poor as to seriously hinder group performance, or even to a breakdown in communication resulting in the failure to achieve a task altogether.

Similar expressions of certainty to those seen in Johnson and Johnson (1985:115) are encountered in Springer et al. (1999) in their meta-analysis looking at the relationship between small group work and achievement in a university setting. These authors report that cognitive growth is facilitated through information processing at a greater level of intensity in groups and promoted through participation in tasks which are open-ended:

... the opportunity for students to discuss, debate, and present their own and hear one another’s perspectives is the critical element in small-group learning. Students learn from one another because, in their discussions of the content, cognitive conflicts will arise, inadequate reasoning will be exposed, and enriched understanding will emerge. (Springer et al., 1999:25)

In this example, as in the case of Johnson and Johnson (1985), there is once again the suggestion of an assumed cause/effect relationship: “cognitive conflicts will arise, inadequate reasoning will be exposed, and enriched understanding will emerge” (my italics). Although Springer et al. (1999:24) refer to the importance of “social skills needed for effective group work, and discussing ways in which each group’s work could be accomplished more effectively”, it is a theme that is treated briefly and left largely undeveloped. It is certainly not a variable that is foregrounded or used to qualify the claims the authors present here, where there appears to be an assumption that individuals will
automatically adopt the necessary social skills, as well as be positively predisposed to entering into working effectively in this way.

In general, therefore, the claims made from the research into group activity referred to in this section appear to rely on various assumptions related to the dynamic elements inherent in social interaction. In particular, the field-experimental approach, with its emphasis on control and standardisation of variables in different contexts, places questionable faith in the belief that these variables affecting social interaction can be controlled sufficiently to allow for unambiguous claims to be made. From my perspective as a researcher of group interaction, this research literature suggests that there needs to be greater acknowledgement and understanding of the social forces that occur between individuals when working in groups, and how these forces impact on the way groups perform.

3.3 Undergraduate perceptions of group work

A substantial proportion of the more recent studies into the use of group work in HE draw their data from students reporting their perceptions of working in this way (e.g. Bonanno et al., 1998; Gatfield, 1999; Bourner et al., 2001; Laybourn et al., 2001; Burdett, 2003; Volet and Mansfield, 2006). In this section, the studies that are referred to were carried out at different stages of undergraduate programmes, and were concerned with student accounts of their group work experiences. A number of these studies refer explicitly to the evaluative purpose of their research, where group work components had been incorporated into their institutional programmes (e.g. Bonanno at al., 1998; Bourner et al., 2001; Lizzio and Wilson, 2005). Others refer to collaboration with employers where the focus was on developing transferable skills applicable to the workplace (e.g. Goldfinch at al., 1999; Laybourn et al., 2001). Elsewhere, researchers focus on more specific elements in the attempt to explore their impact. Examples of these include inquiry into the role of gender and age (Gatfield, 1999), motivation (Waite and Davis, 2006), and the experiences of non-native English speakers in undergraduate group projects (Leki, 2001; Melles, 2004).

A number of these studies report student perceptions of group work in terms of their positive and negative experiences (e.g. Bonanno et al., 1998; Bourner et al., 2001; Volet and Mansfield, 2006). Positive reports include skills development in the areas of research and organizational skills (Bourner et al., 2001), as well as being exposed to different views
and forming networks and friendships (Burdett, 2003). Positive accounts of group work experience are also linked to those individuals who gained work experience prior to becoming students (Gatfield, 1999:372). Negative student perceptions include time commitment and difficulties in working with people from different cultures (Bonanno et al., 1998); arranging meeting times (Bonanno et al., 1998; Burdett, 2003); and dealing with ‘passengers’ or those who are less committed (Bonanno et al., 1998:370; Bourner et al., 2001:30). Neither gender nor age is reported as affecting student satisfaction (Gatfield, 1999:372).

Volet and Mansfield (2006) emphasise an important link between social and well-being goals of students and their motivation and self-regulation in group behaviour. The results from the study refer to how students who perceive their group working experience as having both social and pedagogic functions adapt better to working together with others:

... in social learning situations, goals reflecting the value of social forms of learning lead to more adaptive regulation strategies. In this study, academic, social and well-being goals were complementary to achieve (sic) desirable individual and group outcomes. In contrast, goals narrowly focused on achieving high grades were associated with maladaptive behaviours in group learning environments.

(Volet and Mansfield, 2006:353)

In the following, Boekaerts (2002) highlights these social and pedagogic aspects referred to by Volet and Mansfield in terms of students achieving individual goals, but goes further by indicating how such goals have a regulating function in the group:

… individual goals give meaning and organization, or in other words purpose, to a student’s adaptation processes, where the scripts that are connected to these personal goals have value for them and function both as targets or sub-goals and as a means to regulate their interpersonal and academic behavior in the classroom.

(Boekaerts, 2002:602)

It can therefore be seen that various social aspects of group work are highlighted in a number of studies featured in this section, either in terms of the way in which individuals engage with others in the group, or in terms of individual aims from the group experience which inform their behaviour. Indeed, the latter theme of individual goals mediating behaviour resonates with social identity theories (Garcia-Prieto, 2003) referred to in Chapter Two, where visible (e.g. gender) and underlying (e.g. values, beliefs) diversity were described as influencing group cohesion. This referred to the influence of positive and negatives responses group members have to these kinds of diversity in each other.
In the studies referred to in this section, methods of inquiry that were employed were derived from both quantitative and qualitative paradigms. In some cases, a single method approach was used, such as questionnaires (e.g. Bourner et al., 2001; Burdett, 2003), or focus groups (Melles, 2004). In other cases combinations were used, such as questionnaire and interviews (Bonanno et al., 1998; Volet and Mansfield, 2006), or interview and observational data (Leki, 2001). The following section considers the two most prevalent methods more closely: interviews and questionnaires. The limitations of these approaches were important in shaping the methods I adopt in the present study.

3.3.1 Interviews

Bonanno et al. (1998) and Volet and Mansfield (2006) provide illustrations of three important considerations when using interviews, particularly in relation to how they are conducted. The first area of consideration relates to who conducts the interview and the issue of bias. In their study, Bonanno et al. (1998:369) display an awareness of this by referring to how “15 individual interviews were recorded ... with a neutral facilitator.” Similarly, Volet and Mansfield (2006:345) refer to how the interviews in their study were conducted by a researcher “not involved with the teaching of these units”. Although these authors acknowledge the threat of bias, the notion that one can simply remove the influence of the interviewer on the interviewee’s viewpoints is problematic, as Holstein and Gubrium (1997:114) point out:

> Respondents are not so much repositories of knowledge – treasuries of information awaiting excavation, so to speak – as they are constructors of knowledge in collaboration with interviewers… In other words, understanding how the meaning-making process unfolds in the interview is as critical as apprehending what is substantively asked and conveyed.

In the studies conducted by Bonanno et al. (1998) and Volet and Mansfield (2006), the implication is that ‘neutral’ interviewers somehow eliminate any bias. Yet Holstein and Gubrium’s remarks refer to how the interviewer inevitably influences how the conversation develops, and as a result, the nature of the data that is produced. One is left to conclude, therefore, that it is not a question of eliminating bias, but what kind of influence an interviewer has on the interview.

A second consideration concerns the format of the interviews. In this respect, Volet and Mansfield (2006:345) refer to the use of “Semi-structured, in-depth interviews” involving
‘probes’ relating to various aspects of group work experience. The implication here would appear to be that this format for interviewing makes possible the uncovering of key data (‘in-depth’), but at the same time allows for freedom of manoeuvre (‘semi-structured’). Ultimately, however, the nature of the data that was produced was dependent on the extent to which these ‘probes’ were pre-scripted, and also whether the interviewer allowed the interviewees to develop their responses in order to give full voice to their concerns, points which Bonanno et al. (1998) do not make clear.

A third area of consideration is the way in which an interviewee regards their interview and their performance, and how that determines what they say: This relates to ‘sources of influence’ from the interview context, or where the situation determines what is said (or not said). As Alvesson (2003:169) points out,

> Statements are liable to be determined by the situation, i.e. they are related to the interview context rather than to any other specific ‘experiential reality’ … by the available cultural scripts about how one should normally express oneself on particular topics.

In considering the influence of context in individual interviews it is not inconceivable that respondents may feel ‘exposed’ when interviewed, as well as feeling that there are expectations to respond positively. For example, in the interviews conducted in the studies considered in this section, interview questions may have reminded students of perceived merits of group work presented to them at some previous stage of their course, which they may have felt pressure to reiterate. Alternatively, students may not have felt sufficiently engaged or interested in the interview to present a negative answer, or simply not be equipped in terms of having the understanding of pedagogy or the conceptual tools to put their ideas into words.

An alternative approach to the individual interview is the group or focus group interview. Although there is some contestation over the distinction between focus groups and group interviews (Melles, 2004:221), this distinction is not universally viewed as significant from the perspective of regarding the use of group dynamics for the generation of data (Catterall and Maclaren, 1997). In an example of a semi-structured focus group interview approach into student perceptions of group work, Melles (2004:222) used a set of focus questions which he described as addressing “five key dimensions of their experience” as the basis for the interviews. He also described how they were conducted:
I … intervened at several points in the interviews to clarify interviewees' responses to direct participants to elaborate, and to rephrase statements: thus, interviews were very much a jointly constructed discourse …

Melles (2004:222)

This theme of interviewees jointly constructing discourse is taken up elsewhere; for instance, group interviews are described as providing the potential for the development of discussions where individuals challenge and extend each other’s ideas (Cohen and Manion, 1994:87), as well as develop their own ideas and beliefs with greater “candour and spontaneity” (Carey and Smith, 1994:124).

Although a key advantage of group interview discussion is seen to be its attempt to create the conditions that ‘correspond to the way in which opinions are produced, expressed and exchanged in everyday life’ (Flick, 2002:114), it is an approach which is perceived as having certain drawbacks. As with the individual interview approach, the ‘natural’ status of the data generated in group interviews may also be questioned, “since few 'natural’ conversations focus on a single topic for such a sustained period of time under the direction, active or passive, of a moderator” (Catterall and Maclaren, 1997: online). In addition to this, there is the “potential impact of censoring and conforming … when persons adjust their own behaviour in response to their impressions of other group members, and in relation to their own needs and history” (Carey and Smith, 1994:124). Such factors, it is claimed, may lead to ‘groupthink’, where seemingly homogeneous viewpoints may not be a true reflection of the views of the individuals (Dreachslin, 1999:226). Indeed, this concern is illustrated in the study by Melles (2004:225), who, in the analysis of focus group data, refers to the emergence of group “consensus or (my italics) group think” when students “explicitly acknowledged their agreement with contributions by previous speakers and in their more general approach to responding to questions.”

Such arguments that underpin the notion of ‘group think’ in group interviews therefore bring into question the validity of the data obtained using this approach. However, this perspective of the processes that occur in group interviews may be considered differently. For instance, such interviews can allow individuals to listen and form opinions. This is significant as they may be thinking about certain issues for the first time, and so take advantage of the spaces available to them in group discussion to think about these issues.
Indeed, this may be contrasted with individual interviews where such opportunities for thinking may not be available.

Thus, participants in both individual and group interview settings construct knowledge in collaboration with interviewers or peers. Ultimately, understanding should not be based on a perception of the data as representing the truth, but as versions of the truth as constructed by the participants during the interview process. It is, rather, the nature of this process, such as the structuring of the interview/discussion, and the extent to which individuals are given the opportunity to talk about the issues that they perceive to be relevant to their experience, that can illuminate the data itself. This illumination is aided, firstly, by acknowledging such influences, and secondly, by providing as much detail as possible in research accounts about the way in which interviews are conducted so that the research reader may evaluate the possible influences of the various threats referred to in this section.

### 3.3.2 Questionnaires

In some studies, the use of questionnaires constituted the only form of inquiry (e.g. Bourner et al., 2001; Burdett, 2003). For example, Bourner et al. (2001) incorporated the use of open and closed questions in their study into whether the use of group project work was appropriate for first year students. Of the 18 questions in the survey, five were open-ended, the remainder taking the form of questions using Likert type scales for recording opinion. Responses to open-ended questions “were analysed by iteratively grouping together comments on similar themes and then observing the pattern of themes that emerged” (Bourner et al., 2001:23). These themes were subsequently ranked according to frequency of response, and findings from both open and closed questions were expressed in percentage terms.

Conclusions from the study by Bourner et al. (2001) were generalised from both types of questionnaire and presented in the following way:

... they [the students] were motivated and challenged ... they learnt much and achieved high levels of understanding, and they developed skills which would stand them in good stead in the future.

Bourner et al. (2001:30)

As seen in the research reviewed in section 3.1, the claims that are made here, appear to be presented in somewhat absolute terms: the students ‘were motivated’... they ‘learnt much’...
The absence of any qualifying language gives one the sense that the claims are meant to be regarded as having an unequivocal truth value, reflecting a conception of social reality which views knowledge as ‘hard, objective and tangible’ (Cohen and Manion, 1980:06), and where “what is posited or given in direct experience is what is observed, the observation in question being scientific observation carried out by way of the scientific method” (Crotty, 1998:20). However, as Procter (1993:118) points out, “a person’s judgement is likely to be situation-dependent”, thus identifying the imperfect relationship between attitude and behaviour. In the case of Likert scales, they provide what Procter calls “a behavioural indicator of an attitude”. Given the effect of social context on the status of the data derived in this way, this brings into question any absolute claims to knowledge that are made.

The studies in this section have all been concerned with one particular type of data, namely, data derived from student perceptions of working together gathered via questionnaires, individual interviews and group interviews. The limitations of these have been considered, and these were borne in mind in designing the investigation reported in this thesis. The following section will consider theoretical and empirical work on the nature of the talk that occurs when students work together in groups, as investigated by the use of recordings of group work, and how this work may help us understand the way in which student learning occurs.

### 3.4 The nature of group talk

Although there are numerous examples of empirical research into student perceptions of group work in the HE literature, there are fewer examples of the third category of studies discussed in this chapter: those using discourse analyses of transcriptions of students working together on a group task. In order to gain insight from empirical research into the nature of group processes as they unfold, and that are recorded in verbatim transcripts, one is largely required to search the discourse analysis literature, where much of the research is set outside the HE context. With the focus of the present study in mind, two researchers have been identified as having particular relevance: Mercer (1995) and Tan (2000; 2003). Through their studies both inside (Tan) and outside (Mercer) the HE sector, these researchers were primarily interested in understanding better how group talk facilitates learning. A brief overview of frameworks for analysis of group talk developed by these
two researchers follows (Mercer, 1995; Tan, 2000/2003). This overview will form the basis for discussion in Chapter Four on the approaches to analysis of data in this study.

3.4.1 Mercer: an overview

Developed from extensive data from group interaction among primary children in Britain, Mercer (1995) offers three analytic categories to discuss the way individuals talk and think in group communication: ‘Disputational Talk’, ‘Cumulative Talk’ and ‘Exploratory Talk’ (pp 104-105). Characterised by assertions and challenges, ‘Disputational Talk’ is described as competitive, where information is not shared and where opinion differences prevail and remain unresolved. The second category, ‘Cumulative Talk’, is characterised by repetitions and elaborations. Here, more form and structure is seen in conversation building where participants take turns to add relevant information. The third category, referred to as ‘Exploratory Talk’, is characterised by challenges or requests for clarification, and where responses include justifications and explanations. Reasoning is foregrounded in this third category in the sense that the views of all participants are sought and are considered critically. This may result in features such as explicit statement and evaluation of proposals, followed by decision and then action. It is this category, ‘Exploratory Talk’, which Mercer regards as embodying many of the principles associated with “educated discourse”. These principles include constructive criticism, accountability, clarity and receptiveness to well-argued proposals, qualities which Mercer argues “may help learners develop intellectual habits that will serve them well across a range of different situations” (Mercer, 1995:107).

3.4.2 Tan: an overview

In a study of group interaction patterns among Malaysian students in UK HE, Tan (2000; 2003) was interested in how knowledge was constructed in an academic group work setting, “and how this might help us to understand the link between group work, learning and knowledge construction” (2000:224). Although recognising the significance of Mercer’s work and the analytic categories that were derived, Tan argued that studies such as Mercer’s did not contain a “systematic way of identifying the linguistic mechanism through which the cognitive and ideational meaning of talk is to be interpreted” (2000:228). The problem with this from Tan’s perspective is related to perceived difficulties in replicating the findings due to the abstract nature of the descriptions in Mercer’s categories (Tan, 2000:223).
It was Tan’s interest in extending Mercer’s categories into a systematic means of interpreting ‘cognitive and ideational meaning’ that led to the notion of ‘Idea Framing’ as a way of describing what occurs in group interaction tasks (Tan, 2000). In her study with Malaysian students on a British undergraduate BEd programme, Tan developed a framework that attempted to establish a systematic approach to studying how knowledge was constructed in an academic group work setting. The development of this framework involved drawing on the fields of linguistics (Halliday, 1996), discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1989) and genre-based analysis (e.g. Swales, 1990), fields which Tan felt brought together more closely the relationship between linguistic form and social and ideological meaning contained within language (Tan, 2000:224). Three key terms are referred to in this respect: ‘Knowledge’, ‘idea’ and ‘framing’. These are summarised below (Tan, 2000:225):

**Knowledge**: Tan defines knowledge from the psychological perspective as involving “not only the analysis of propositions or ideas (which represent knowledge) but also the links between them.” The author applies this concept to group interaction in academic settings stating that an understanding of collective and individual construction of knowledge requires the study of the types of ideas constructed as well as how they are linked.

**Idea**: The author draws on two perspectives of this notion from the literature. Firstly, definitions by Anderson (1980) and Hofmann (1993), where the central premise is that an idea is an assertion or content about which it is possible to make true or false judgements. The second perspective, as referred to by Bakhtin (1986) and Lotman (1988), is related to its “dual function of not only conveying information but also generating other ideas.”

**Idea Framing**: Tan presents this concept as being concerned with the relationship between ideas as well as the flow of ideas in a larger context, prospectively and retrospectively.

Two main types of Idea Framing are reported from her analysis of group interaction: Additive Framing and Reactive Framing. Each of these main types contains sub-categories, thus creating a taxonomy, as illustrated below:
Although the sub-categories are made up of exponents of the two kinds of framing, the general distinction between them is described by Tan as follows:

**Additive Framing:** “When two ideas have an additive link, the second idea is an addition to the first idea *without* (my italics) judgement or evaluation or comment on the quality, or truthfulness, or validity of the propositional content of the first idea.” (Tan, 2000:231)

**Reactive Framing:** “When two ideas have a reactive link, the second idea is an addition to the first idea, *with* (my italics) the speaker’s judgement or evaluation on the truthfulness, validity or value of the first idea.” (Tan 2000:235)

In brief, it was Tan’s aim to introduce a systematic approach to the study of talk in group interaction tasks by developing a method to show how ideas are framed and how they are linked together retrospectively and prospectively; that is, how “an idea [is] generated in group work in relation to the previous idea uttered by the same speaker or a different speaker, and what other ideas does it generate in turn” (2000:228). With regard to learning outcomes, this refers to what knowledge and ideas are constructed through talk, and how they are constructed. Tan describes this framework for analysis as “a methodology to systematically analyse patterns in group work, which will enable researchers to make the same ‘interpretation leap’ or ‘category shift’ from discussing forms of language to forms of thought and knowledge” (Tan, 2000:229).
3.5 **Mercer and Tan: relevance for this study**

Important distinctions in terms of the nature of the tasks and the group participants are apparent in the respective studies conducted by these researchers. Firstly, Mercer’s studies were conducted with schoolchildren (aged 9 and 10), and the group work tasks were ‘convergent’ in nature; this refers to the problem-solving or decision-making character of activities where students work to understand each other with a view to establishing mutual comprehension. In contrast, Tan’s study was carried out with university students engaged in ‘divergent’ tasks, associated with debating or opinion exchange. However, Tan (2003:243) points out that these terms, ‘convergent’ and ‘divergent’ “refer to the different kinds of outcome or goal that certain tasks tend to lead to, but not to the different kinds of processes or activities that learners may engage in to arrive at the expected outcome”. This refers to the idea, for example, that tasks may converge (perhaps there is only one ‘right’ answer), but students work divergently (they debate what that right answer is).

It was Tan’s interest in extending Mercer’s categories into a systematic means of interpreting ‘cognitive and ideational meaning’ that led to the notion of ‘Idea Framing’ as a way of describing what occurs in group interaction tasks (Tan, 2000). The author subsequently extended this theme to focus on the ‘cumulative effect of additive framing’, which refers to the notion of ‘new significant’ ideas emerging from adding and repeating similar ideas in group discussion (Tan, 2003). This is explained as follows:

> ... moving a step further towards something new and significant is facilitated by the process of adding and repeating. Without the repetition, addition and reinforcement of insignificant ideas, new significant ideas are unlikely to be triggered.

(Tan, 2003: 259)

Thus, according to Tan, Mercer’s Cumulative Talk category can be seen to have a significant role in terms of learning for HE students involved in divergent tasks, in the form of the cumulative effect of additive framing. For Mercer, on the other hand, convergent tasks with school children associated learning more closely with Exploratory Talk. Ultimately, it is Tan’s interest in trying to “shed light on the need to justify group work as a pedagogic strategy” (2003:229), the fact that the analysis took place with undergraduate students, and the methodological approach used for discourse analysis that flowed from this, that makes her work of particular interest to the present study.
Chapter Four outlines the study design for the present inquiry. This will include a description of the particular way I adopted Tan’s framework for using ‘Idea Frames’ as well as other approaches to discourse analysis in the inquiry process. In addition, Chapter Four outlines the chosen approach in this study to analysing student and tutor perceptions of group work.
Chapter Four

Study Design

4.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to make explicit the rationale for adopting the chosen study design used in this thesis. However, it may be useful to recap briefly what has been achieved so far in Chapters 1 – 3. Chapter One established that the study has an evaluative purpose in providing findings that may subsequently be considered when conducting course revision. Chapter Two provided an overview of current thinking about three aspects of group work given particular attention in the literature: skills development, student learning and group cohesion. This was followed in Chapter Three by a literature review of different approaches to empirical research carried out into cooperative learning in education generally, and group work activity in HE institutions in particular. The chapter concluded with reference to the work of Mercer and Tan, proponents of discourse analysis for analysing group work data in education.

This chapter elaborates on three main elements that have informed the chosen study design for this inquiry: (i) the field of educational evaluation and the context and perspective it provides for the study (section 4.2); (ii) the approach to discourse analysis of transcriptions of student group talk adopted (section 4.5, preceded in section 4.4 by a brief literature review); (iii) the rationale for choosing group interviews and discussion for gathering data from students and tutors respectively (section 4.6). In addition to the elaboration of these elements, section 4.3 focuses on the data sources and analysis with particular reference to the social dimension of the inquiry, while implications for conducting the inquiry as an insider researcher are discussed in 4.7. Finally, a summary of the chapter is provided in section 4.8.

4.2 The inquiry as evaluation

The overall aim of this thesis is referred to in Chapter One as an evaluation of the Communication Skills course unit, as the results of the inquiry are intended to inform programme development. Indeed, this was the stated aim of a number of studies of group
work in HE programmes considered in Chapter Three (e.g. Bonanno at al., 1998; Bourner et al., 2001; Lizzio and Wilson, 2005). Given the nature of this aim, I was prompted to refer to the educational evaluation literature in order to obtain an insight into methodological approaches that are used in this form of inquiry. Overall, this literature has informed my thinking and helped me to frame an approach to the present study; in particular it brings into focus certain features that characterise evaluation, and which I believe are worthy of consideration here.

The literature revealed an extensive range of ‘models’ (e.g. Hansen, 2005) and ‘approaches’ (Stufflebeam, 2001) to educational evaluation, terms which themselves often appear to be used interchangeably in the field (Norris, 1999:110). With the present study in mind, my starting point was the consideration of the twin notions of ‘evaluation’ and ‘research’. Norris (1990:97) identifies the most pervasive view of evaluation as “an extension of research sharing its methods and methodology and demanding similar skills and qualities from its practitioners.” The distinguishing aspect of evaluation as a form of inquiry, however, is referred to as “a study designed and conducted to assist some audience to assess an object’s merit and worth” (Stufflebeam, 2002:11). These terms refer to the following: ‘merit’, to intrinsic (setting specific) qualities of the object of the evaluation; ‘worth’, to the extrinsic (non setting specific) qualities. It is the focus on an ‘evaluand’ (e.g. a program, process, organisation) that leads to an assessment of its ‘merit and/or worth’ (Guba and Lincoln, 2001). By carrying out such an assessment, therefore, shortcoming in the programme may also be revealed, thus leading to reform.

The language of the evaluation literature may be utilised further with reference to the present study. Specific ‘stakeholders’ may be identified as those who qualify as “some audience” (Stufflebeam, 2002:11), that is to say, individuals involved with the course unit who may benefit from an insight into merit and/or worth of the evaluand. In assessing the merit of the evaluand (i.e. group work on the Communication Skills course unit), a number of stakeholders may be seen to benefit. Firstly, course tutors may benefit from having greater insight into group processes and student perspectives of group activity. This may be as a result of specific recommendations that emerge from the study, or the identification of themes for further discussion. This knowledge or understanding may then influence the way tutors perceive, implement or manage the group task with their students. Action may then be taken that is designed to enhance the experience of the participants, for example, in
terms of the precise requirements of the task, realistic expectations of what students can achieve, appropriate scaffolding elements built into the task, and the task environment. Secondly, for others involved in the course such as the course coordinator or course designers, establishing merit may cause provocation for discussion where relevant findings are taken into consideration for future course design and delivery. Thirdly, the students themselves may benefit from a better understanding of how group activity can help their learning, and the types of behaviour and responsibilities that benefit their group working experience. Finally, the research community and HE policy makers may benefit from further contributions to the field of HE pedagogy.

However, it is necessary here to establish the distinction between ‘official’ evaluations and the way evaluation is perceived to operate in this study. With regard to official evaluations, Scriven (1991:139) refers to somewhat judgemental terms typically used when establishing merit and worth, such as ‘assess, grade, inspect, judge, rate, test’, language typically associated with evaluation tasks sanctioned by an authoritative body. The ‘unsanctioned’ characteristic of the present study, however, seeks to uncover an understanding of the evaluand which may then be interpreted in terms of merit and/or worth for the course unit, and which may ultimately be reviewed in the context of assessing implications for future delivery of the unit. Ultimately, therefore, the research questions in the present study function as a starting point for a methodological approach which primarily aims to try and understand better the various processes that are seen to occur. It is the inductive spirit of this which is in contrast with much of the language used to define what an ‘official’ evaluation aims to do.

In brief, the overall aim of the present study as set out in Chapter One and illustrated in the exploratory questions that frame it, is to examine the use of group work as a strategy for teaching and learning in the Communication Skills course unit. It is the group work component of the course unit that is the evaluand in this inquiry. In this sense, this study is perceived as a form of evaluation of the group work element of the course unit, with specific consideration of its merit and worth, and with the objective of feeding new knowledge about the evaluand back into the administration and practice of the course, as well as the HE practitioner and research community.
4.3 *Data sources and analysis: some considerations*

As reported in the introduction to this chapter, sources of data for this inquiry included both students and staff. With regard to the students, data were derived in two ways; firstly, through the recording of group talk during group work activity, and secondly from recordings of reflective accounts of that activity from the students in subsequent group interviews (more on this is Chapter Five). Tutor perspectives of group work were also obtained through recordings of group discussions where they shared views and experiences of managing and observing students participating in this activity. All recordings were transcribed, as both types of transcript were perceived to have the potential for being rich sources of data. However, it is analysis of the verbatim transcriptions of student group talk data that is given primary status in this study, as the discourse analysis of this data provides the most direct evidence for addressing the research questions; if the use of group work is to be justified as a means of achieving the programme aims, then evidence needs to be sought first and foremost from the performance of the activity itself. For this reason, consideration of the two other sources of data (student interviews and tutor group discussions) was viewed primarily as a means of triangulating the group talk data.

Group work, and therefore this study, has a strong social dimension and the two forms of inquiry for student data that are used (discourse analysis and interviews) are forms of social inquiry. Crotty (1998:67) remarks how the philosophical underpinning associated with social inquiry regards data as “culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world.” As for the researcher, Usher and Scott (1996:177) argue that the interpretation of data is a ‘social act’, where “the meaning that is read into the data is dependent on the paradigms and research traditions within which the researcher is located.” Such a location is linked to an underlying philosophical perspective related to ways of knowing the world (the epistemology on which the inquiry is based), which emerges from a particular version of the world (the underlying ontology). Thus, according to Usher (1996:14), a positivist/empiricist epistemology is based on a version of the world which is “orderly, lawful and hence predictable”. This results in an approach to research which assumes that there is a ‘truth’ that can be known, that single explanations can be achieved, that objectivity is achievable and that generalisations can be employed (Usher, 1996:13). However, the ontological assumptions of a positivist/empiricist epistemology are viewed as “highly problematic” in a research context containing a social dimension.
In researching social life, an interpretive epistemology is deemed as more appropriate. This is because it views phenomena as more indeterminate and not conducive to prediction or generalisation; truth is not held as ‘objective’, but is relative and experienced ‘subjectively’ by individuals. Moreover, the research process focuses on “interpretation, meaning and illumination”, makes the assumption “that all human action is meaningful” and that data are interpreted and understood within the context of social practices (Usher, 1996:18).

The features and considerations related to social inquiry outlined in this section sit well with Constructivist Evaluation (Guba and Lincoln, 2001). There are three assumptions that underpin this approach. The first of these, the ontological assumption, refers to relativism and the notion that there is no ‘objective’ truth. The second assumption, the epistemological assumption of constructivism, refers to how any assertions of ‘truth’ or ‘reality’ are dependent on the level of sophistication of the knowledge formed by individuals concerned. The third, concerned with the basic methodological assumption underpinning constructivism, involves the uncovering of constructions of involved individuals or groups (stakeholders), which are analysed and subsequently incorporated into new discoveries (Guba and Lincoln, 2001). It is these assumptions that underpin the philosophical approach to inquiry in this study. The particular methods that are used are described and discussed in more detail later in the chapter. However, it is perhaps instructive firstly to review some of the discourse analysis literature. This will be helpful for providing a basis for the rationale for the particular approaches to discourse analysis used in this study.

4.4 Discourse Analysis: a brief literature review

Hammersley (1997) reports how discourse analysis is “a term that covers a multitude of rather different approaches”, and where examples such as Speech Act Theory and Conversational Analysis are ‘versions’ of discourse analysis, varying as they do in terms of “their focus, in what sorts of claim they make, and in the kinds of technique they employ” (Hammersley, 1997:237). Silverman (2001) describes discourse analysis as operating in close proximity to the concerns of social science, such as gender relations, and also as having a wider coverage in terms of the type of data that constitutes the object of analysis;
apart from studying transcripts of talk, other forms of ‘texts’, such as policy documents, are also considered (Silverman, 2001:178).

Literature in the field of discourse analysis frequently incorporates the adjective ‘Critical’, both in respect of accounts of empirical inquiry (e.g. Bergvall and Remlinger, 1996) and discussion papers (e.g. Fairclough, 1995; Hammersley, 1997; Van Dijk, 1999). For instance, Hammersley (1997:240) asserts that Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) “does not just adopt a critical stance toward research products but also towards the social phenomena it studies”, and how “in the case of critical inquiry, evaluation is an integral part of the analytic process and is seen as leading more or less directly to practical action.” This sense that CDA has a role in ‘practical action’ is made explicit in some of the research that refers to the use of the ‘critical’ aspect of discourse analysis (e.g. Bergvall and Remlinger 1996; Stokoe and Smithson, 2001; Greenwood, 1996; Bergvall, 1996). For example, Bergvall and Remlinger (1996:453) refer to how, in their study, CDA “may play an important role in challenging the passive reproduction of repressive practices ...”.

Another approach to discourse analysis, Conversational Analysis (CA), is particularly highlighted in the literature. With reference to the key features of this form of discourse analysis, Silverman (2001:167) refers to Heritage’s three assumptions that underpin the use of the CA approach: the structural organization of talk; sequential organisation; and the empirical grounding of analysis. Heritage (cited in Silverman, 2001:167) summarises these assumptions as follows:

... analysis is strongly ‘data-driven’ – developed from phenomena which are in various ways evidenced in the data of interaction. Correspondingly, there is a strong bias against a priori speculation about the orientations and motives of speakers and in favour of detailed examination of conversationalists’ actual actions. Thus the empirical conduct of speakers is treated as the central resource out of which analysis may develop.

This centrality of the data itself in the practice of analysis, as opposed to bringing other preconceived notions along to that practice, is brought out elsewhere is discussions that compare CA and CDA. Although these discussions also refer to attentiveness to sequential talk in a social context as a recognised similarity between the two approaches (Silverman, 2001:188; Van Dijk, 1999:459), it is the foregrounding of particular contextual categories, such as gender or power, which is viewed as the distinctive feature of CDA (Schegloff, 1997); CA, on the other hand, is required to demonstrate the relevance of these categories in the data (Van Dijk, 1999:460). In an illuminating illustration of the use of CA and CDA
on the same text, Schegloff (1997:174) argues how using a ‘critical gloss’ in his analysis of talk along gender lines failed to accommodate the “overtly displayed concerns of the participants themselves, the terms in which they relate to one another, the relevancies to which they show themselves to be oriented.” As Stokoe and Smithson (2001:222) concur, “claims that gender is relevant to an interaction can only be made if speakers themselves attend to it.”

However, insights from another perspective can be seen in the form of sociocultural discourse analysis. These insights are referred to by Mercer (2005:139) as follows: “Communicative events are shaped by culture and historical factors, and thinking, learning and development cannot be understood without taking account of the intrinsically social and communicative nature of human life.” From this perspective, therefore, shared and separate past activities inform the construction of knowledge in interaction, which continues to be developed over time. It is the distinguishing feature of sociocultural discourse analysis that these features of culture, history and time are factored into the analysis. In addition, such considerations may include, where relevant, issues of gender or power relations.

Discussion of the forms of discourse analysis adopted in this study follows in the next section.

4.5 Approaches to discourse analysis in the present study

The primary method of data analysis in this study considers verbatim transcriptions of student group talk while performing their group task. Informing the approach to the analysis of these data is research in the field of group dynamics. Douglas (1995) refers to this body of work as both pragmatic and cumulative in nature: pragmatic in the sense that researchers approach the study of groups in an observational and descriptive way by recording what they see happening in groups; cumulative in the sense that recordings are made in different situations, where a group is seen as a ‘unit of investigation’. Group work theory thus relates to “an analysed collection of information about how groups have been seen to behave in the past” (Douglas, 1995:31). In the present study, ‘recording’ took the form of cassette recordings of group conversations while performing their group task. The study is cumulative in the sense that there are four tape recordings of one group of four
students taken over a period of two months (Oct – Dec 2006). Further details of how the data were collected are given in Chapter Five.

As referred to in Chapter Three, the approach to the discourse analysis of the group task recordings in this study was initially influenced by the work of Mercer (1995) and Tan (2000; 2003). This was because of the focus these researchers had on using discourse analysis to investigate learning in group work. Although Mercer’s work was carried out with school children performing convergent tasks, his work is seen to inform and underpin Tan’s (2000; 2003) study of university student groups performing divergent tasks; indeed, it was Mercer’s work that inspired Tan to develop the use of ‘Idea Frames’ for analysis purposes. In terms of practical analysis, learning is identified via the repetition of ideas in conversation that lead towards the emergence of ‘critical instances’ where ‘significant new ideas’ are seen to occur. Thus, learning is seen to result from the ‘cumulative effect of additive framing’ (Tan, 2003). From this basis, Tan claimed that analysing group talk using Idea Frames would provide “a methodology to systematically analyse patterns in group work which will enable researchers to make the same ‘interpretation leap’” (Tan, 2000: 229). It is this claim that first drew my attention to the potential use of Idea Frames as a ‘methodology’ for establishing evidence for learning in group talk data. It is therefore my intention to test and review the utility of the framework for practical analysis purposes in this study.

However, a key limitation of this framework is identified by Tan herself, and relates to the three major functions of language associated with the sociolinguist Halliday (Tan, 2000: 226). The first of these functions is referred to as ‘interactional / interpersonal’, where the role of language is viewed as having a social perspective such as establishing social relations and personal attitudes (social mode); the second function, referred to as ‘ideational’, is concerned with factual ideas and knowledge (knowing and thinking mode); the third function, ‘textual’, refers to language that is relevant operationally – it has a ‘living’ message or texture in a real context (linking mode). Tan (2000:228) acknowledges that the methodology she proposes emphasises only two of these functions: the knowing mode function of language (i.e. “the choice of the ideational or propositional content of interaction, using the ‘idea’ as the unit of analysis”) and the linking mode (“investigating the framing of ideas, or the links between ideas”). Tan is, in fact, careful to point out that it was not her intention to reject other types of meaning conveyed through language:
The people we interact with (age, gender, ethnicity, etc.) and our relationship between these people (e.g. in terms of power status, solidarity status) affect the way we speak. I do not however intend to focus on this aspect of interaction within the limited scope of this paper (Tan, 2000:230).

Unlike Tan, I do not intend to restrict myself to the ideational and textual aspects of the talk, but also to take into consideration other elements from the data that are seen to impact on the performance of the group in relation to their task. This will require approaching the analysis from a wider perspective than is possible with the use of Tan’s framework alone. Specifically, it will require incorporating the interactional or interpersonal role of language, or ‘social mode’ from Halliday’s framework, through the use of other approaches to discourse analysis. For instance, section 4.3 described how the CDA approach to the analysis of group talk is typically seen in research related to gender and power relations between individuals in social settings, while CA only attends to the actions of conversationalists as they are seen to occur in the data.

However, for the group talk in this study, sociocultural discourse analysis will be used as the main perspective from which to consider the data alongside Tan’s framework. This is because the consideration of cultural, historical and temporal influences within the group may allow for a richer understanding of the influence of the social mode of language on how the group operate, compared to CA or CDA alone. Nevertheless, it is also my view such sociocultural considerations should not supplant key principles of CA and CDA referred to in this section, but rather be seen as additional to the overall analysis of the data. Precisely how cultural, historical and temporal influences will be taken into consideration in the group data will be explained in Chapter Six.

4.6 Gathering student and tutor perceptions of group work

In this study, recorded student group interviews and tutor meetings were used to gather student and tutor perceptions of group work. As Watts and Ebbutt (1987:32) point out, groups are particularly useful for allowing the development of discussion and obtaining a wide range of responses, and where individuals can challenge each others’ ideas. One may also add to these remarks that group interview participants may have greater confidence through a sense of ‘safety in numbers’ and so be more forthcoming. On the negative side,
according to Watts and Ebbutt, group interviews do not allow for the use of detailed follow up questions of an individual’s comments. In addition, participants may feel that negative comments could be detrimental to their interests, even though they were assured to the contrary. There is also the spectre of apparent consensus, or ‘groupthink’ (Dreachslin, 1999:226; Melles, 2004:225), where divergent views are not expressed.

The use of unstructured questions was adopted as an approach to questioning the participants in the student group interviews. An approach and rationale for the use of such questions is summarised by Merton and Kendall, (cited in Flick, 2002:75) as follows:

Unstructured questions are asked first, and increased structuring is introduced only later during the interview to prevent the interviewer’s frame of reference being imposed on the interviewee’s viewpoints.

Thus, the use of unstructured questions in group interviews was intended to alleviate my influence as the interviewer through limited interference. However, I felt it was important to maintain the ‘momentum’ of these interviews through careful facilitation of interviewee accounts. In addition, I wanted to be in a position to ask questions on issues as they arose in discussion, as I felt that as an ‘insider’ I was the person best placed to do this. This was because I could assess what data was relevant as the discussion proceeded and respond by asking further questions. Such issues related to my status as an ‘insider researcher’ are developed in the next section.

4.7 Data gathering as an ‘insider researcher’

As outlined in section 4.2, the present study approaches the inquiry process on the basis of an interpretist/constructivist epistemology, one which regards knowledge as “personal, subjective and unique”, and which requires from researchers “an involvement with their subjects” (Cohen and Manion, 1980:06). In this study, my ‘involvement with the subjects’ occurred in both direct and indirect ways. With regard to the recording of group work activity, my personal involvement was indirect in the sense that I was not present when the conversations occurred, although I was known to the participants through my role as their tutor and they were aware of the purpose behind the recordings of their talk (Chapter Five). However, with regard to the student group interviews focusing on their perceptions of working together in groups, my physical presence and participation as a facilitator represented a more direct involvement. This was similarly the case with regard to the tutor
meetings through my contributions to the discussions. A further factor with regard to both types of data that were gathered was the recording of the discussions, and the influence this had on what was said.

Underpinning this involvement, therefore, was my status as an ‘insider researcher’ in terms of my position as a tutor and assessor on the programme of study and my personal and professional interest in its outcome. As an insider researcher, I inevitably influenced the direction and nature of the discussion for both types of data in this study. This influence may have been more apparent in the student and staff group discussions because of what I, as the insider interviewer or contributor felt should be relevant, which may not have corresponded with the concerns and interests of the participants. As Silverman (2001:87) points out “interviewers and interviewees are always actively engaged in constructing meaning” and that it is this ‘mutually constructed’ meaning that is the topic for the researcher. In terms of how group interviews may alleviate the influence of the interviewer, Watts and Ebbutt (1987:32) state the following:

Groups are less amenable to influence, particularly since the aim is to provide opportunities for a free-flowing and interactive exchange of views. As such groups have a much greater potential to usurp the moderator, so that the chemistry of the interaction feeds the shape and direction of the conversation.

Thus the group interview approach used in this study was intended to minimise the role of the ‘insider’, allowing instead, for others to influence the discussion. This approach allows for two of the areas of consideration for interviews discussed in Chapter Three to be addressed: who conducts the interview and the level of influence that results. With regard to the latter, however, factors such as ‘groupthink’ (Dreachslin, 1999:226) and ‘pleasing the tutor’ remain important considerations. Chapter Eight discusses the group interviews conducted in this study.

With regard to the ethical dilemmas of the ‘insider researcher’, Mercer (2007:11) refers to two aspects that are of particular significance. The first of these concerns what colleagues should be told about a study before and after their participation, the second, whether the researcher should use ‘other’ data not used as part of the formal data gathering process. Prominent in the first of Mercer’s aspects is the issue of revealing to colleagues the researcher’s perspective on the research subject of an inquiry. In the present study, the tutors were aware that I was concerned with finding out more about group work processes,
as this was an entirely new component of the course unit. At the time of the recordings of the tutor meetings, my own perspective of the use of group work and its pedagogic value were unclear; indeed, it was this uncertainty that was made known to the tutors through explicit reference to the exploratory nature of the study. As far as what colleagues should be told after the inquiry is concerned, a key aspect of this study is to present the findings to tutors in order to inform possible future development for the course unit. It is therefore through the presentation of these findings as a *basis for discussion* with tutors for possible future development that is proposed here, an approach which may also involve further illumination of the research process for gathering student data. With regard to the second dilemma referred to by Mercer, tutor perspectives will only be drawn from analysis of data derived from the recordings of the two meetings, and not from any previous understandings of their perspectives or comments in other situations. As Griffiths (1985:210) cited in Mercer (2007:13) points out, “‘To release such data would be a betrayal of trust and an abuse of access’”.

For the students participating in this study, a key ethical issue centred on the potential conflict between my role as their course tutor on the one hand, and my role as an insider researcher on the other. From their perspective, this related in particular to a potential conflict of interest in terms of their participation in the inquiry and any influence this may have had on their course assessment. Chapter Five outlines how this concern was addressed in this study.

### 4.8 Summary

This chapter began by identifying the educational evaluation literature as useful for informing an overall perspective for this study. In particular, it considered how the notions of ‘merit’ and/or ‘worth’ of the ‘evaluand’ were useful for understanding the purpose of the study in its context, as well as a means of expressing its outcomes. In addition, the choice of discourse analysis as a research method was explained as determined by the research aims, while the social dimension of the inquiry was highlighted as determining the chosen approaches to data collection and analysis.

Particular attention in this chapter was given to investigating learning in group discourse using Tan’s (2000; 2003) notion of ‘Idea Frames’ and the ‘cumulative effect of additive
framing’ leading to the emergence of ‘critical instances’ and ‘significant new ideas’.

However, the absence of a mechanism in Tan’s framework for identifying the significance of the social aspect of group talk was identified as an area that would be incorporated in the discourse analysis of group talk transcripts in this study. Thus, discourse analysis of group talk data in this study would involve both Tan’s framework and a broader approach to analysing discourse based primarily on sociocultural discourse analysis. This would allow for the identification of salient features that inform an understanding of the group functioning as it appears in the data, but which may not be identified through the use of Tan’s framework alone. In addition to the group task data, transcripts of group interviews with students, as well as tutor discussions on their perceptions of group work activity, would serve to triangulate the group talk data.

Chapter Five will describe how the data gathering for the present study was conducted.
Chapter Five

Data Gathering

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents an account of the data gathering processes for this study. As described in previous chapters, these data are of two main types: the first is verbatim transcriptions of four student group meetings where the students worked on aspects of their group project; the second is transcribed recordings of group discussions in student group interviews and tutor meetings.

The rationales for adopting discourse analysis and group interview approaches to the present study were outlined in Chapter Four. The aim of this chapter is to describe how the data gathering was undertaken. With regard to the students working on their group task, section 5.2 describes background information concerning how they were recruited, and the circumstances of the recordings of the conversations. Accounts of arranging group interviews and tutor discussions are similarly provided.

5.2 Gathering student and tutor data

In the academic year 2006/07, the Communication Skills course unit ran eight tutor-led classes. These classes met for one, two-hour period a week for input related to their group project task, which required the group to write a 2000 word ‘report’ on a science-related topic of their choice. Most tutor input for this task was provided nearer the beginning of the course, moving towards freer independent group project activity as the course progressed. It was my role as tutor for one of these groups that allowed for relative ease of access to the students, and the group of four students who agreed to participate in the study.

My intention to acquire group conversation data from my tutor group was made known to the course coordinator prior to the data gathering. This was welcomed as it provided the opportunity to gain further evaluation data for the unit, which was not covered in the
existing standardised university-wide evaluation form. This form only comprised a brief questionnaire containing general questions related to student satisfaction on a wide range of course aspects.

My tutor group was comprised of 22 students. In the first class meeting, the group project task was explained, including the information that students would be able to use most of the two-hour weekly sessions to work on their projects in their groups. This was followed by a group formation activity when students were asked to self-select their own project groups of four students per group; this approach to group selection was agreed by tutors for all the tutor-led classes following the Communication Skills course unit. The process of self-selection involved a mingling activity where students were encouraged to speak to as many of their peers as possible with a view to forming their groups. It was also suggested that they could adopt their own criteria: e.g. rapport, shared interests, area of study or potential topic for their group work project. Once groups had self-selected, they were encouraged to begin discussing topics for their group task.

The self-selection process and initial planning for the group task continued and was consolidated the following week. At the end of the class I explained that I wanted to carry out a study on one group of students carrying out their group work task. To this end, the following was explained:

- as the group work component of the course was new, the aim of the study was to investigate its role in student learning, and that the results would help to shape the structure of the course in future
- in order to gather appropriate data for this purpose, it would be desirable to record their conversations
- their anonymity would be assured through the use of pseudonyms in any publication of the results of the study
- assurance was given regarding the separation of this study from the course assessment components
- the participating group would be asked to attend a group interview about their group work experience at the end of the course.

I then explained to the class that I would be asking them the following week if any group would be prepared to participate in the study.

When the class were reminded the following week about the study, a group of four students (two male, two female) expressed their willingness to take part. These students
were native speakers aged approximately in their late teens or early twenties. They were then asked if they would be prepared to record their conversations. When they agreed to this, they were provided with a tape recorder and asked to keep the recorder running during their meetings. The group were encouraged to ignore the recorder as far as possible, as my interest in the recordings lay in how they operated as a group during their project task and not on them personally; however, it was stressed that they were free to turn it off at any time if they chose to do so. Their chosen topic for the group task was *The Development of Fighter Aircraft*.

Over the following six week period, the volunteer group recorded themselves in their group meetings on four occasions, although they reported to me informally that this did not represent the total number of times they met to work on their project. The lengths of the recordings varied from approximately 20 minutes to almost 90 minutes, and there was no evidence in subsequent playbacks of these recordings that the tape recorder had been switched off during their conversations.

My decision not to observe the students during their group meetings was for two main reasons. The first is logistical and relates to the fact that they were required to attend the timetabled classes for group project work. This attendance enabled me to provide them with recording equipment as well as deal with any issues. However, it also meant that I was not in a position to observe because of my responsibilities to the whole class. Secondly, as the aim was to record naturally occurring talk, it was my judgement that I should, in any case, be absent from their discussions. This was because I believed that my presence would represent an intrusive element to their conversations. As the act of recording was already going to have some influence on their discussions, I felt this influence would be further exacerbated by an observer.

The group interviews with the students took place three weeks after the fourth recorded group meeting, and after the group had submitted the final draft of their project task. In total there were three group interviews with students: the group from my class who agreed to be recorded and two groups from a colleague’s class. I recruited volunteer groups from my colleague’s class as a result of ease of access to these students when I was not otherwise engaged. In addition, as these students were not known to me, I felt they may feel less reserved about making comments about group work. They were recruited near the
end of their course, and they were given the same assurances of anonymity and confidentiality as the first group.

All the group interviews took place in an office environment and were recorded after permission was granted from the students. As referred to in Chapter Four, open-ended questions about their impressions of working together as groups during the course were asked early in the interview, but the direction of discussion about those experiences evolved during the discussions, which the students entered into with enthusiasm. Consequently, interruptions from myself were kept to a minimum except for elaboration on certain points raised or if a theme was clearly exhausted.

Two tutor meetings about the course were also recorded after permission was sought and granted by my colleagues. The first meeting took place mid-course and the second at the end of the course, at approximately the same time as the student group interviews. Topics discussed during these meetings were wide ranging covering various issues related to course delivery, including the group work component. Both student and tutor recordings for this study were transcribed by myself.

Chapter Six begins the analysis of the student data.
Chapter Six

Data Analysis 1: Transcript 1

6.1 Introduction

Chapter Four listed the types of data collected in this study as (i) verbatim transcriptions of student group talk, (ii) student group interviews and (iii) tutor meeting discussions. Chapter Eight deals with student group interviews and tutor meeting discussions. Chapters six and seven present the analysis of verbatim transcripts of four meetings of a student group discussing their project on the development of fighter aircraft over a 10 week period. The focus of analysis in both chapters six and seven will be on exploring instances of learning. This will include learning in terms of Tan’s notion of ‘critical instances’, as well as learning in terms of the development of the types of transferable skills and abilities (e.g. interpersonal; organisational) listed in Appendix II. Chapter Six is concerned with analysis of Transcript 1, the transcription of the first group meeting; Chapter Seven focuses on the transcripts for meetings 2, 3 and 4. These transcripts are considered in chronological order as it is felt that this best captures for the reader the evolution of the group over the duration of their project.

There are two reasons why Chapter Six deals with only the first meeting and Chapter Seven deals with transcripts 2, 3 and 4. First, some foregrounding is required in Chapter Six about the process of analysis, as well as the development of the student group and about their project. Second, the context for discussion in the first meeting may be distinguished from the other three. This is because the first transcript is early in the project, and the students are pursuing an open ended agenda. In transcripts 2, 3 and 4 on the other hand, the group are better acquainted and are following much more directed tasks provided by the tutor.

The reasons for the chosen approaches to discourse analysis adopted in the present study are outlined in Chapter 4, and these are reiterated briefly in sections 6.3 and 6.4. Section 6.2, however, begins with background information about the group and the group task, the approach to managing the data from this transcript, and the rationale for the selection of specific excerpts that make up the focus of analysis. In 6.3 and 6.4, analysis considers
evidence for learning from the selected excerpts. In section 6.3, learning from Tan’s perspective considers occurrences of ‘critical instances’ in group talk. Section 6.4 focuses on evidence for learning from a sociocultural analysis approach; insights from social exchanges are also included in this section. The chapter concludes in section 6.5 with a summary of issues raised from the analysis, as well as a discussion of the evidence for learning from a sociocultural perspective in terms of participation in knowledge communities (Northedge, 2003).

6.2 About Transcript 1

The first recorded meeting of the group took place on the second occasion the group met to work on their collaborative written assignment on the development of fighter aircraft, as described in Chapter Five. In the two weeks prior to this first recorded meeting, the group had conducted preliminary discussion about their topic and begun gathering related information. In this first recorded meeting, they were to continue working on their task with a view to submitting a draft text (approximately 2000 words) of their assignment the following week. The group consisted of two males and two females, for whom the pseudonyms Janet, Alice, Martin and Donald have been adopted. As an air force cadet, Martin had a keen interest in, and background knowledge of, the topic.

An initial analysis of the data in Transcript 1 was conducted using Tan’s framework. This proved to be a useful means of identifying specific excerpts to be used for illustrative purposes in this chapter. As a result, three excerpts have been selected to demonstrate (i) Tan’s framework in action, and (ii), identifying instances of learning more generally.

In total, the meeting recorded in Transcript 1 lasted approximately 30 minutes. Excerpt 1 is taken from the beginning of the transcript; Excerpt 2 takes place 12 minutes into the meeting, and Excerpt 3 near the end of the meeting. In Excerpt 1, discussion of the task is just beginning and talk is rather exploratory and fragmented. In Excerpt 2, the students start to engage more systematically with the task and examples of ‘knowledge construction’ as defined by Tan begin to emerge. In Excerpt 3, students are fully engaged with the task and there is greater evidence of learning, or the construction of new knowledge in Tan’s terms. Collectively, these three excerpts exemplify (i) how opportunities for learning develop over the course of the meeting as students become more
involved in their task, and (ii) the value of Tan’s framework for exploring learning in student interaction.

In the transcript, the three excerpts are made up of a collection of ‘Turns’, where a Turn (T) refers to the language used by one individual following a previous speaker. Appendix III explains the symbols and conventions used in the transcriptions that appear in this chapter. The choice of these conventions was primarily determined by their suitability for illustrating features of interpersonal communication, including such features as interruptions, emphasis, and the relative fluency of exchanges between individuals.

6.3 Applying Tan’s framework

Chapter Three explained how Tan’s (2000) framework was developed to identify instances of learning in group talk. This is achieved through the identification of Additive Framing and Reactive Framing features of talk, where knowledge construction or learning is associated with ‘critical instances’ that trigger the emergence of new significant ideas (Tan, 2003). An idea which is ‘significant’ is defined as one “which has not been uttered in the discussion and is significantly different from the ideas uttered before it [and which] makes a significant contribution to the task by opening up new directions for and explorations of the subject under discussion” (2003:247).

Tan (2000) refers to how Additive and Reactive frames may be further sub-divided on the basis of precise characteristics of the frames. These sub-divisions were illustrated in Chapter Three and are repeated below for convenience:

- Adding
- Explaining
- Expanding
- Concluding
- Diverging
- Contrasting
- Contradicting
- Counteracting
- Challenging
- Evaluating
However, in applying this framework in detail to Excerpt 1, it became apparent that simplification was desirable. This is explained and illustrated in 6.3.1. Sections 6.3.2 – 6.3.4 then present evidence for learning arising from the analysis of Excerpts 1 – 3 using the revised framework.

6.3.1 Adapting the framework

To follow is an illustration of how Tan’s framework was initially applied to Excerpt 1, highlighting some of the difficulties in using the full framework, and then explaining how the framework was adapted, as a result. As mentioned previously, this first excerpt is taken from the beginning of the first transcript, and comprises 25 Turns (T). Categories of Idea Framing - Additive Frames (AF) and Reactive Frames (RF) - are placed alongside selected Turns in the transcription.

The excerpt begins with the participants considering how far they should go back historically for their project, and concludes with attempts to clarify the details of what is expected from them in their first draft. The excerpt is preceded by a series of brief, fragmented exchanges and comments related to whether anyone had done any research on the topic. This is accompanied by embarrassed laughter, and there is also a brief reference to Janet being a ‘perfect’ student, having arrived at the meeting with material downloaded from the Internet.

**Transcript 1  Excerpt 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Turns</th>
<th>Janet</th>
<th>Martin</th>
<th>Donald</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>01</td>
<td>Well, I’ve kind of got little bits of information in it/</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>02</td>
<td>Yeah if you do the history bit/</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>03</td>
<td>It was, it was figh(.)yeah, fighter aircraft (.).on the, primary means of which the armed forces gain air superiory we need that anymore that is the question? <em>(words enunciated very clearly)</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>04</td>
<td>How far are we going back? Is it World War 2 we’re going back to?</td>
<td></td>
<td>AF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>05</td>
<td>[This is at least since World War</td>
<td></td>
<td>AF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>06</td>
<td>2 air superiory XX a victory</td>
<td></td>
<td>AF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>07</td>
<td>[You don’t want to (.).1945 onwards/</td>
<td></td>
<td>AF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>08</td>
<td>Yeah, I’d say 1945 onwards/</td>
<td></td>
<td>AF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>09</td>
<td>Just the end of the war/</td>
<td></td>
<td>AF</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It can be seen from the transcription that Idea Frames have only been applied to the central section, as the fragmented nature of Turns elsewhere make this effort difficult or inappropriate. However, even where the labelling of idea frame categories has taken place, there were difficulties in identifying accurately the precise type of Additive Frame (AF) in many cases. Indeed, my experience of this effort highlighted for me the interpretive nature of this task: for instance, when considering the distinction between ‘Adding’, ‘Explaining’ and ‘Expanding’ from Tan’s taxonomy. The following three Turns are intended to illustrate the nature of these difficulties:

In T4, Martin considers the period of coverage for the project. This may be regarded as the “addition of a similar ‘new’ idea” (Tan, 2000:231) in the sense that it continues with the topic theme (fighter aircraft) as proposed in T3, but adds the ‘new’ dimension of period of coverage. However, one could interpret that T4 ‘Expands’ on T3 in the sense that it is bringing into focus “more specific information” (Tan, 2000:232), that is, the specific
aspect of time. In T5, Janet is responding to Martin’s question in T4. In this case, one may consider that she is adding a similar ‘new’ idea by suggesting (from her data) that they could go back further (‘This is at least since World War 2…’ [my italics]). Alternatively, one may conceivably view this as ‘Expanding’ in the sense that she refers to the same idea, but the “second idea is an elaboration on a part or the whole of the first idea” (Tan, 2000: 232).

These different interpretations I refer to here are derived from my reading of the data in conjunction with my interpretation of the descriptors for different types of Additive Frames. As a result of this potential ambiguity and for reasons of practical analysis, I shall refrain from reference to the specific type of an Additive Frame when identified, and only refer to the broadly Additive or Reactive nature of Turns: for Additive Frames, “the second idea is an addition to the first idea without judgement or evaluation or comment on the quality, or truthfulness, or validity of the propositional content of the first idea” (Tan, 2000: 231); for Reactive Frames, “the second idea is an addition to the first idea, with the speaker’s judgement or evaluation on the truthfulness, validity or value of the first idea” (Tan, 2000: 235).

6.3.2 Evidence of learning in Excerpt 1

The Idea Frame categorisation of Turns in Excerpt 1 reveals two Reactive Frames and six Additive Frames. These Additive Frames are identified as originating from Janet’s introduction of the topic in T3, which then prompts discussion of the period of coverage for the project from T4, the key theme in this excerpt. Subsequent frames involving mostly Martin and Donald, but also Janet (T5), develop this theme as far as Janet’s Reactive Frame in T11 (Fighter jets?).

With reference to this series of Additive Frames, Tan (2003) refers to how the repetition of Additive Frames can lead to the occurrence of a ‘critical instance’ that triggers the emergence of a ‘significant new idea’, which serves to “open up possibilities for new directions and facilitate development in a new direction” (Tan 2003: 246). However, in this excerpt, these frames do not appear to lead to a clear example of such a ‘critical instance’ in the form of a clearly identifiable ‘significant new idea’. What is seen instead is the Additive Frame series interrupted by Janet’s Reactive Frame in T11, a Turn which only briefly deflects Donald from continuing to build on the ‘period of coverage’ theme he was
instrumental in developing prior to Janet’s interjections. Moreover, Janet’s Reactive Frame in T13 may be regarded as having the potential for initiating a more intensive discussion of the theme as it challenges Donald and Martin’s previous comments about anything pre-World War 2 being irrelevant for the group task. What is seen instead is a breakdown in the development of the theme altogether (T14):

13 Janet I’ll see what I’ve got in my 13 pages of printout (laughter). I’ve got World War 1 here/ RF
14 Donald What a waste of a tree/

Based on the notion that the ‘cumulative effect of additive frames’ is to trigger ‘critical instances’, this excerpt would appear to offer little explicit evidence for learning if one applies Tan’s premise that evidence for learning is linked to the occurrences of ‘critical instances’ generating ‘significant new ideas’. Janet’s Reactive Frames in Ts 11 and 13 would appear to have had the potential for triggering further development of the theme in new directions, but this did not occur. The occurrence of Additive Frames in this case may therefore be regarding as pointing towards the potential construction of new knowledge; in this instance, Janet’s contributions would seem to have provided this potential but it was not exploited by the others.

6.3.3 Evidence of learning in Excerpt 2

The second excerpt occurs approximately at the midpoint of the meeting with the focus of the participants centred on what to include in the content of their draft as well as individual roles for carrying out their task. The excerpt begins with Janet refocusing the others on the task after a series of more socially oriented exchanges.

**Transcript 1 Excerpt 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Turns</th>
<th>Idea Frames</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>92</td>
<td>Janet Aren’t we supposed to be talking about fighter pilots?/ (laughter)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>93</td>
<td>Donald We were supposed to be talking about fighter planes for the past 2 weeks/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>94</td>
<td>Martin [Who’s, who’s writing what?/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>95</td>
<td>Janet Right. can I write about (XX)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>96</td>
<td>Donald [Shall we do the first phase, the first generation/.end of the war/.Spitfire/. stuff like that?/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>97</td>
<td>Janet Yeah can I do THAT?/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>98</td>
<td>Donald Then we just leave a big bit in the 1950s and 60s/cos nothing really</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
happened then/=

99 Martin No (agreement) AF
100 Janet Really?/ RF
101 Alice I can’t find my sheet/ AF
102 Janet [What, what about, what about my AF
103 Donald [We just, we just name a few aeroplanes AF
and say what the differences was/ RF
104 Janet [1953 to 1960/ (apparently referring to notes/printouts – AF
adamant tone of voice)
105 Martin It wasn’t, it wasn’t a lot of interest in technology/ that is basically the AF
same as an old World War 2 fighter with a jet engine in/ AF
106 Alice [Only put in a pretty, only put in a prettier. case/ AF
107 Martin [But AF
it’s got a jet engine in it/, it’s not got the missiles it’s all it hasn’t got/, so AF
t’s exactly the same as that/ it’s just that it’ll go a bit quicker/(XX) AF
carrying bombs and stuff/
108 Janet Cos they didn’t, they didn’t carry bombs at first did they? (Question tag AF
checking for agreement)
109 Martin No./ so/ AF
110 Janet Cos a BOMBER carried the bombs(.) apparently/ AF
111 Martin But NOW they’ve got strike aircraft (XX) AF
112 Janet So can I say that it was. it was AF
113 Martin [Right, so we’ll have a bit on aircraft= AF
114 Donald Which generation are we talking about?/= AF
115 Janet First genera(.) well, not first generation/ RF
116 Martin We’ve got to start from the majority of it being = AF
117 Donald modern. as modern as possible/ AF
118 Martin Like. this is what the current world situation is AF
119 Donald [Well we could do just like AF
120 Martin [Is it AF
justified?/
121 Donald 1945 to(.). a brief 1945 to 1980/a brief 1980 to 1990/ AF
122 Martin Yeah/ AF
123 Donald And then you’ve got, then you’ve got your.= AF
124 Martin current world situation (XX) AF(Conc)
125 Janet Can I do 45 to 80/?/ AF
126 Donald Yeah, sure/ AF
127 Janet Cos I’m better on the whole history side of things/ AF
128 Donald [Just make it as brief … AF
129 Alice [And I’m good at history AF
as well/
130 Donald [You don’t AF
have to put any detail/ you just have to name what they did. why they did AF
it. that’s basically it/
131 Janet And then. and then I can I’ll help with the whole justifying thing/ , so if I AF
go on the history bit/ (not phrased as a question)
Martin: [Well we both need to do/

Alice: And do you think like we should all get together and do points like for and against/ and we’ll all compile them together like separate/and then try and fit in somewhere?/

Martin: The obvious way of thinking about it what. we need somebody having a look at the political side of it and somebody else looking at what direction the (XX) is going/= AF

Donald: I prefer sort of political things/= AF

Alice: I don’t. no. I’m not political/ AF

Donald: [You two would have more knowledge about the actual technical AF

thing/]

Alice: Yeah OK/= AF

Donald: I could do politics OK/ AF

Janet: I could help you out after I’ve done this/ AF

Donald: [I’ve done modern history. 4 years at school/ AF

Janet: I’m very much into what is right and what is wrong(.) I’ll be able to come up with arguments/ AF

Analysis of this excerpt incorporating the identification of Idea Frames reveals three Reactive Frames and a considerable number of Additive Frames. In her analysis of student data using this framework, Tan (2003: 257/258) highlights in particular how ‘concluding’ Additive Frames (‘conc’) function as triggering ‘critical instances’. Such frames are defined as “an addition of a generalised idea to a part of the whole of the preceding specific ideas(s)” Tan, 2000:233). In applying this criterion to Excerpt 2, I interpreted three instances of concluding frames. These will provide the focus for the following discussion of this excerpt in this section.

Firstly, T113 sees Martin concluding a series of Additive Frames concerned with identifying the characteristics of different kinds of Fighter Aircraft. In effect, this conclusion takes the form of Martin terminating the flow of the discussion by articulating the following phrase: “Right, so we’ll have a bit on aircraft”. In fact, this phrase interrupts Janet’s Turn in T112, where she appears to begin a concluding remark through the use of the connective marker ‘so’. This appears as follows:

Janet: So can I say that it was. it was

Martin: [Right, so we’ll have a bit on aircraft=

Janet’s Turn makes a personal reference in the form of a request regarding her role in the group task. This contrasts with Martin’s ‘conclusion’ (T113), where a more collective
consideration is given to what the previous utterances mean in terms of the action the
group needs to take (‘we’ll’). This Turn initiates a new direction in the sense that the
direction of the discussion changes at the point of Martin’s Turn (T113) from the
characteristics of fighter aircraft to what will be included in the overall structure of the
draft. In this case, therefore, this ‘new direction’ takes the form of a change of themes from
substantive to organisational; it does not directly develop a new understanding of the
theme itself, but rather relates the topic to task issues, where ‘current’ knowledge of the
topic is considered in terms of how to structure it in a text.

A second ‘conclusion’ is identified in T124, once again involving Martin. Although
lacking a specific linguistic marker (e.g. ‘so’), this Turn is identified as ‘concluding’ due to
the apparent resolution of the theme developed in the Cumulative Additive Frames that
build towards it. The ‘new direction’ that emerges from T125 is in the form of individuals
discussing what to write about and who writes it, and is initiated by Janet who once again
makes a request for her group role:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Turn</th>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>utterance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>123</td>
<td>Donald</td>
<td>And then you’ve got. then you’ve got your.=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>124</td>
<td>Martin</td>
<td>current world situation (XX)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>125</td>
<td>Janet</td>
<td>Can I do 45 to 80.?/</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The series of Additive Frames following this request leads towards the third ‘concluding’
frame (T134), where Martin refers to a collective strategy for the group to move forward
with their task. This ‘conclusion’ is drawn from the previous personal references to task
roles, and represents a generalised idea for what the group ‘need’ to do; it is seen to trigger
further discussion on individual roles, with emphasis on the political aspect of the topic:

134 Martin The obvious way of thinking about it what. we need somebody having a look
at the political side of it and somebody else looking at what direction the (XX)
is going/= AF (Conc)

Overall, it would appear that the Additive Frames and the Concluding Turns as identified
in Excerpt 2 do not reflect the kind of knowledge creation referred to by Tan when using
this framework. For example, Janet’s request in T125 represents a change of topic due to
the resolution of the previous theme. However, this change of direction is arguably
triggered by Janet’s desire to select a group role for herself, as opposed to the ‘cumulative
effect’ of the theme discussed in the preceding Additive Frames. Similarly, Martin’s concluding Turn in T113 appears driven by a desire to organise the group and move the task forward rather than as a direct consequence of the Additive Frames prior to it. The distinction between these examples and the type of ‘new significant ideas’ referred to by Tan is that they relate to organisational issues as opposed to developing their knowledge or understanding of the topic of their project: fighter aircraft.

6.3.4 Evidence of Learning in Excerpt 3

This excerpt from the first transcript has been chosen due to the extended discussion of the topic and the apparent progress that is made in the group task. In terms of its content, Turns develop into a more intensive discussion on the strategic role of modern military aircraft.

**Transcript 1 Excerpt 3**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Turns</th>
<th>Idea Frames</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>172</td>
<td>Alice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>173</td>
<td>Janet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>174</td>
<td>Donald [But if you’ve good air (. ) the air. air battle now takes out (. ) doesn’t mean (XX) for troops/ like. look at Iraq/ whenever they went into Iraq. what they did they bombed the place for a month before any troops went in/ air strikes EVERY night/ supposedly to take out all the Iraqs.take out all their systems.their power stations whatever. so that we don’t have to send all our troops in. for the warfare/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>175</td>
<td>Janet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>176</td>
<td>Donald [That’s. that’s what they do for every war now/ they did it in the.Bosnia in’95/air strikes every night/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>177</td>
<td>Janet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>178</td>
<td>Martin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>179</td>
<td>Donald [That’s. that’s what they do for every war now/ they take out power stations and stuff/=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>180</td>
<td>Martin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>181</td>
<td>Donald</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>182</td>
<td>Martin [THAT. which is ancient. runs on steam gauges. could do the same job in the Iraq war as a tornado does/all it does is just drop bombs/they don’t fight each other anymore/ there’s no point in advanced computer systems/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>183</td>
<td>Janet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>184</td>
<td>Donald [Well. that’s. this is the argument/ we weigh up the pros and cons of this in the</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
conclusion/do they need these things?/can they be more precise?/can they make sure nobody gets killed?/if they’ve all these advances like stealth, do they need stealth which costs(XX)

185 Janet [Stealth?/ Stealth?/]

186 Martin Stealth planes cost a fortune=/

187 Donald You can’t pick them up on radar/ they cost. 700 million dollars is it one of them?

188 Martin [The aircraft price for a B2 was 100 million dollars a piece. per airframe/ and even the Americans couldn’t afford it/

189 Donald [They are those funny triangular shapes/]

190 Alice Yeah they’re black/

191 Janet Oh, are they the ones that they’re like actually horrible to look at?/

192 Donald [They carry nuclear bombs though/]

193 Alice They look like space aircraft/

194 Martin [There’s the old ones which are that shape, and then you’ve got the new ones which look like this/]

195 Donald But they’re (XX) designed to carry nuclear?/

196 Martin Those ones are cheap in comparison with that one there which is like 6 billion dollars per airframe which even the Americans consider so expensive/

197 Donald Do they still use them?/

198 Martin Yeah they still use them/ it’s only about (XX)

199 Alice We could say like why are we spending so much money on like making them like you say faster. more high tech when (XX)

200 Martin [When something THAT old (refers to picture?) can do the same job in wars now?]

201 Alice And then. we shouldn’t be spending …

202 Janet [we don’t. we don’t need them. They’re just spending it on

203 Donald [This. this is the argument/ we don’t have to

204 Martin [You see the thing is. the way it works is there’s like yeah. you spend a lot of money developing fighter technology then that eventually feeds back into commercial aviation (XX)

205 Donald [Yeah why. why do we need new cars every time/? the car we have at the minute is fine/

206 Martin Yeah/

207 Donald Gets us from A to B/

208 Janet Just competition. you know=/

209 Martin Advanced radar systems in fighter planes eventually mean that air travel for the everyday person becomes safer. doesn’t it?/ it’s that sort of thing/

210 Donald That’s the sort of stuff we can say. this is gold dust/

211 Martin EXACTLY/

212 Janet So maybe we should write this down?/

213 Alice So what shall you and me do cos I don’t want to go on to the same line as you/ do you know what I mean?/ (.) um, but we both do similar things/ (.) so I don’t want to. invade/
This excerpt is seen to have some of the most focused and extended exchanges between the participants on various aspects of the group task, and from an analysis perspective, this has had the effect of making the task of applying idea frames to Turns less ambiguous. What is more, concluding frames providing critical instances appear to have greater clarity in this excerpt in terms of triggering the development of ‘significant new ideas’, or learning in the Tan sense.

The excerpt begins with Janet and Alice’s shared perception of the West’s involvement in Iraq (Ts 172/173), which refers to the theme that advancement in military aircraft technology does not necessarily occur for good military reasons:

172 Alice We’re just doing it for(.) we’re just doing it for glory really.you know/
173 Janet Oh, we’ve got the best so and so/(.) we’ve got this/ AF

Donald subsequently diverges towards a more specific military theme that develops into a brief series of Additive Frame Turns culminating in the ‘concluding’ Turn identified in T177, which is articulated by Janet. This ‘concluding’ Turn is signified linguistically using ‘so’, and in content provides a focused expression of Donald’s argument, as Janet sees it, regarding the relationship between air and ground superiority:

177 Janet Gain.so not only are they gaining air superiority they’re gaining GROUND superiority/= AF (Conc)

From the perspective of analysing this discussion in terms of knowledge development, this Turn appears to have the effect of not only consolidating the previous theme, but also providing the platform from which the next theme can emerge and develop. Consider Martin’s response to this Turn:

178 Martin If. if you control the air in a battlefield you generally win the war/ but, as we’ve AF seen with Iraq, because there’s now no longer just an all out war they’re fighting insurgency. planes don’t do anything/ you can’t fight (XX)

In the first part of this Turn Martin effectively reformulates Janet’s ‘concluding’ remark, which is then followed by the claim that planes are unnecessary in a modern war context. This ‘new idea’ is the first representation of the next theme, which relates to the notion that sophisticated fighter aircraft are essentially unnecessary in modern warfare.
Martin’s theme of the redundancy of sophisticated modern aircraft is then developed for five Additive Frame Turns, with Janet once again expressing a concluding remark in T183:

183 Janet So basically it’s just a waste of money and they’re only advancing because they can?/ AF (Conc)

This conclusion by Janet articulates her assessment or perspective of the points brought out by Donald and Martin. It also serves to vindicate the points expressed by herself and Alice in Ts 172/173, which were made prior to the ‘redundancy’ discussion. Although it is unclear as to whether Janet and Alice were familiar with the details of the argument behind these assertions, they have the effect of bringing into the discussion, through Donald and Martin, explicit references to the relationship between ground and air superiority on the one hand and the redundancy of sophisticated aircraft on the other.

There is, therefore, evidence from Janet’s concluding Turns (Ts 177/183) that she understands how the arguments work, as she articulates the implications of what the others are saying, but it remains unclear as to whether she learned new information from them. Nevertheless, Janet's reiteration in T183 of the claims she and Alice had made earlier may in itself be seen as illustration of an effective negotiating or discussion management skill, in the sense that she relates a discussion point back to a previous item in the discussion in order to strengthen her argument.

Janet’s conclusion in T183 above also serves to prompt Donald into expressing how her assessment of military advancement can be considered with respect to their group task, which he articulates through a series of questions the group could address in that task (T184):

183 Janet So basically it’s just a waste of money and they’re only advancing because they can?/ AF (Conc)
184 Donald [Well. that’s. this is the argument/we weigh up the pros and cons of this in the conclusion/do they need these things?/ can they be more precise?/can they make sure nobody gets killed?/ if they’ve all these advances like stealth.do they need stealth which costs(XX) AF
185 Janet [Stealth?/ Stealth?/ RF
One of Donald’s questions refers to the need for ‘Stealth’ technology in military aircraft, prompting Janet to question its meaning in T185. This Reactive Frame Turn proves to be highly significant as it generates a series of Additive Frames from the others that provide information and explanation about the nature of Stealth, a discussion which gradually evolves into whether its development is justified. This theme of its justification is initiated by Alice in T199 and supported by Martin in T200 to construct a joint ‘conclusion’:

199 Alice We could say like, why are we spending so much money on like making them like you say faster. more high tech when (XX) We could say like, why are we spending so much money on like making them like you say faster. more high tech when (XX) AF (Conc)

200 Martin [when something THAT old (refers to picture?) can do the same job in wars now? (Conc)] [when something THAT old (refers to picture?) can do the same job in wars now? (Conc)] AF (Conc)

This theme of questioning the justification of developing Stealth on both military and financial grounds is then developed briefly by Alice and Janet (Ts 201/202), while the significance of this for the project is consolidated by Donald in T203. This is identified as a ‘critical instance’ because Donald relates the theme of this discussion to representing the argument for their task, which indicates the ‘new direction’:

203 Donald [This this is the argument/we don’t have to (Conc)] [This this is the argument/we don’t have to (Conc)] AF (Conc)

204 Martin [You see the thing is. the way it works is there’s like(.) yeah, you spend a lot of money developing fighter technology then that eventually feeds back into commercial aviation (XX) (Conc)] [You see the thing is. the way it works is there’s like(.) yeah, you spend a lot of money developing fighter technology then that eventually feeds back into commercial aviation (XX) (Conc)] AF (Conc)

However, I have also identified Martin’s Turn in T204 as a ‘critical instance’ as it signifies an alternative ‘new direction’ in the discussion when he refers to the relationship between fighter aircraft technology and commercial aviation. This theme is unrelated to the development of the previous ‘cost’ theme, and is briefly left unacknowledged until Martin reiterates the same idea in T209. At that point, its significance or relevance registers with the others as a key argument for their group task, and a new direction emerges in the form of discussion around organisational issues and individual roles related to the theme (Ts 212/213):

209 Martin Advanced radar systems in fighter planes eventually mean that air travel for the everyday person becomes safer. doesn’t it?/ it’s that sort of thing/ (Conc) Advanced radar systems in fighter planes eventually mean that air travel for the everyday person becomes safer. doesn’t it?/ it’s that sort of thing/ AF (Conc)

210 Donald That’s the sort of stuff we can say. this is gold dust/ That’s the sort of stuff we can say. this is gold dust/ (Conc)

211 Martin EXACTLY/ EXACTLY/ (Conc)

212 Janet So maybe we should write this down?/ So maybe we should write this down?/ (Conc)
213 Alice So what shall you and me do cos I don’t want to go on to the same line as you/do you know what I mean?/ (. ) um but we both do similar things/ (. ) so I don’t want to invade/

It can therefore be seen from the analysis of Excerpt 3 that more focused and extended discussion of themes related to substantive elements of the topic helped contribute to the emergence and development of ideas. From an analysis perspective, this more focused discussion also allowed for Idea Frames to be applied more readily to the Turns than in excerpts 1 and 2 as a means of tracing this development, and revealed a number of ‘critical instances’ leading to ‘new directions’ in the conversation. What is more, these new directions could be seen to signpost the various stages in the group construction of knowledge, ranging from the link between ground and air superiority in the early stages of the excerpt, through to the development and critique of Stealth technology, and towards the use of military technology for civilian purposes. Indeed, it is in terms of the coming together of these elements to form a central theme for the group project that represents the primary nature of knowledge construction in the excerpt. Evidence of individuals encountering new knowledge of the topic itself was also apparent, such as Janet’s unfamiliarity with the concept of Stealth, and Donald’s lack of certainty regarding the capability of such aircraft (T195).

Overall, therefore, Excerpt 3 provides the best evidence of learning as identified in terms of critical instances using Tan’s framework for analysis. The next section will consider evidence for learning in the same excerpts using a different approach to discourse analysis.

6.4 Sociocultural discourse analysis of Transcript 1

In this chapter, the use of Tan’s framework has opened a debate over its usefulness and how it might be adapted and used in analysis. However, in addition to its use with the recorded data in this study, Chapter 4 also argued for the use of a broader discourse analysis approach where consideration is given to identifying themes as they emerge from the data (Van Dijk, 1999: 460; Schegloff, 1997: 174; Stokoe and Smithson, 2001: 222). With this in mind, this section will consider the data from a sociocultural perspective. The insights such a perspective can offer are outlined in Chapter 4, where talk is described as being understood on the basis of the mediating effects of cultural, historical and temporal factors. This refers to the premise that shared and separate past activities inform the
construction of knowledge in interaction, but also that this knowledge is developed constantly by “immediate shared experiences and corresponding conversational content” (Mercer, 2005: 140).

Data in Transcript 1 will therefore be considered in the context of such cultural and historical factors. Culture will be considered in two ways: firstly, in terms of how the individuals were of a similar age and of white British heritage; and secondly, in terms of how any features of ‘group culture’ are seen to evolve, such as what is seen to be established normal behaviour in the group. Similarly, ‘historical’ factors will be considered as relating to both to pre-group and in-group history. Pre-group histories may be seen in terms of personal histories, including gender, or personal experience such as Martin’s background as an RAF cadet, which gives him a privileged position in terms of knowledge of the topic. In-group history will refer to events occurring in the group over time, and which may be viewed as influencing current events as they unfold.

The same excerpts used in the Tan analysis in the previous section will now be viewed through a sociocultural ‘lens’. The analysis will be followed in 6.5 by discussion and further analysis based on a perspective of learning derived by Northedge (2003), a perspective which itself was drawn from sociocultural theories of learning.

6.4.1 Applying sociocultural analysis to Excerpt 1

For the purposes of discussion, Excerpt 1 is repeated here for convenience.

Transcript 1 Excerpt 1

| Turns(T) | 01 Janet | Well, I’ve kind of got little bits of information in it/ |
| 02 Martin | Yeah if you do the history bit/ |
| 03 Janet | It was. it was figh(.).yeah, fighter aircraft (.). on the. primary means of which the armed forces gain air su.periority/do we need that anymore that is the question? (words enunciated very clearly) |
| 04 Martin | How far are we going back? Is it World War 2 we’re going back to? |
| 05 Janet | [This is at least since World War 2 air su.periority XX a victory |
| 06 Donald | [You don’t want to (.).1945 onwards/ |
| 07 Martin | Yeah, I’d say 1945 onwards/ |
| 08 Donald | Just the end of the war/ |
Everyone just wanted to be better than everyone else/

And you can leave a big gap. like. 1970s and 80s when we started getting fighter jets/yeah/

Fighter jets?/

When good fighter jets/ and then like you’ve got modern technology/

I’ll see what I’ve got in my 13 pages of printout (laughter). I’ve got World War 1 here/

What a waste of a tree (spoken in a terse manner)/

Um (.) some pictures/

What’s that?/

[You can leave all that crap out (spoken abruptly) (. ) just say(.) that’s what. 3rd generation/]

Yeah cos we’ve got to have a (.) got to have a draft for next week.end of next week. haven’t we?/ how many words is it again?/

To begin with, Janet takes on an organizational role by specifying a topic for discussion in T3; Alice, too, is seen to provide an organisational contribution in T18. With regard to Janet, she is assertive in the presentation of her ideas and in the questioning of the ideas of others (Ts 11/13). However, these features appear to have little significant influence on controlling the proceedings in this excerpt. Instead it is Martin, whose relatively minor contributions appear to determine the precise topic for discussion, which is enthusiastically taken up by Donald.

From a sociocultural perspective, an important theme that emerges from this sequence relates to identity constructions. According to Jackson and Warin (2000), gender is an aspect of identity that is particularly salient in times of transition in a school career. At such transition points, these authors refer to “increasing levels of competition, status-seeking and issuing put-downs” (Jackson and Warin, 2000:387) as characteristic behaviour of the way ‘boys’ respond when confronted by a new environment, behaviour which is viewed as part of the more general aim of establishing or asserting themselves “within the male hierarchy” (p.387). In the data considered here, however, Donald’s behaviour suggests that such behaviour may not be restricted to other males. Apart from not engaging constructively with Alice and Janet in discussion of the period of coverage theme introduced by Martin, he is seen to interrupt Janet (T6), ignore Alice’s contribution (T10)
and provide scant response to Janet’s challenge in T12. In addition to this, he is overtly scathing of Janet’s efforts at information gathering (Ts14 and 17).

These discordant issues referred to above point to a less than fully collaborative approach to communication in the group; indeed, Donald’s disparaging remarks towards Janet’s efforts in Ts 14 and 17 suggest a degree of tension, a feature also suggested by his tone of voice on the recording. Although tension has been described as something that potentially “motivates movement toward the accomplishment of the desired common goals” (Johnson and Johnson, 1992:175), it would appear in this instance not only to suppress the development of a discussion topic, but also not be conducive towards building other more cohesive elements of group communication. In this respect, features typically exhibited in a cohesive group, such as helping others to clarify their thinking and building a sense of group belonging (Tennant, 1997:108) appear mostly absent in this excerpt. For instance, Janet uses her printouts as a resource from which she can make her own contributions through challenging the ideas presented by Donald and Martin, who in turn do not appear to be interested in what the texts have to say.

In an overall sense, however, an explanation for the absence of features of group cohesion may be explained in terms of the group still being in the early stages of establishing group norms. There is also a strong sense that Donald and Martin are in control of proceedings, a situation that may in part relate to the traditional male association with the topic being discussed, but also to the gender-related theme referred to previously (Jackson and Warin, 2000). Given these circumstances and the level of dismissiveness shown towards her, Janet is seen to show great restraint in this excerpt.

6.4.2 Applying sociocultural analysis to Excerpt 2

In Excerpt 1, particular themes were referred to in terms of how individual participants interacted with each other. One of these was the extent to which Janet was seen to struggle for recognition regarding her ideas for the project. This theme is seen to continue in Excerpt 2, where Janet’s contributions are ignored on three occasions. These occasions are seen to correspond with her efforts to play a part in the group effort:

*Transcript 1 Excerpt 2.1*

95 Janet Right. can I write about (XX)
Donald [Shall we do the first phase the first generation end of the war Spitfire stuff like that?]

Janet Yeah can I do THAT?

Donald Then we just leave a big bit in the 1950s and 60s cos nothing really happened then=

Martin No (agreement)

Janet Really?

In Janet’s first attempt to establish a role for herself (T95), her request is interrupted by Donald’s suggestion for how the project task can proceed (T96). Janet’s enthusiastic response (T97) is a further request regarding her role, but is once again ignored while Donald and Martin discuss a possible outline for their task topic. Indeed, when Janet finally engages with the theme Donald and Martin are pursuing (T100), as opposed to pursuing a role for herself, she continues to be ignored.

Janet’s persistence in her exchanges with Donald and Martin is seen to continue in Excerpt 2.2:

**Transcript 1 Excerpt 2.2**

Janet Really?

Alice I can’t find my sheet

Janet [What what about what about my

Donald [We just we just name a few aeroplanes and say what the differences was/

Janet [1953 to 1960 (apparently referring to notes/printouts adamant tone of voice)]

Martin It wasn’t it wasn’t a lot of interest in technology that is basically the same as an old World War 2 fighter with a jet engine in/

Alice [Only put in a pretty only put in a prettier case/]

Martin [But it’s got a jet engine in it it’s not got the missiles it’s all it hasn’t got then it’s exactly the same as that it’s just that it’ll go a bit quicker (XX) carrying bombs and stuff/]

Janet Cos they didn’t they didn’t carry bombs at first did they? (Question tag checking for agreement)

Martin No (XX)

Janet Cos a BOMBER carried the bombs apparently sarcastic tone of voice/]

Martin But NOW they’ve got strike aircraft (XX)

Janet So can I say that it was it was

Martin [Right so we’ll have a bit on aircraft=]

After repeated challenges (Ts100/102/104), Janet is eventually successful at getting her contributions acknowledged when Martin addresses her point in T105; one is also aware of her exasperation through her use of ‘apparently’ in T110 and the somewhat sarcastic tone
of voice on the recording. However, any progress on her part is tempered when she is once again interrupted and ignored while reiterating a request regarding her role (T112). It is at this point that Martin displays assertive behaviour by putting forward a planning strategy (emphatic ‘Right’ - T113), and a series of exchanges between Martin and Donald soon develops:

**Transcript 1 Excerpt 2.3**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Turn</th>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>113</td>
<td>Martin</td>
<td>[Right, so we’ll have a bit on aircraft=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>114</td>
<td>Donald</td>
<td>Which generation are we talking about?=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>115</td>
<td>Janet</td>
<td>First genera(,) well. not first generation/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>116</td>
<td>Martin</td>
<td>We’ve got to start from the majority of it being =</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>117</td>
<td>Donald</td>
<td>modern. as modern as possible/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>118</td>
<td>Martin</td>
<td>Like. this is what the current world situation is</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>119</td>
<td>Donald</td>
<td>[Well we could do just like</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>120</td>
<td>Martin</td>
<td>[Is it justified?/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>121</td>
<td>Donald</td>
<td>1945 to(,)a brief 1945 to 1980/a brief 1980 to 1990/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>122</td>
<td>Martin</td>
<td>Yeah/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>123</td>
<td>Donald</td>
<td>And then you’ve got.then you’ve got your.=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>124</td>
<td>Martin</td>
<td>current world situation (XX)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>125</td>
<td>Janet</td>
<td>Can I do 45 to 80?/</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In section 6.3.3 of this chapter, Turns 113 – 123 were referred to using Tan’s framework as a series of additive frames culminating in a resolution of the theme in T124. This ‘conclusion’ was described as establishing a potentially key theme for the project. Although one may also consider Donald and Martin as working together in a collaborative and productive manner to achieve this outcome, it can be seen that much of this excerpt is characterised by interruption. On this point, Bilous and Krauss (1988:190) describe how “in some situations interruptions may indeed be the result of a desire to dominate the conversation and control the other participants, in others, interruptions may simply indicate that the participants are well attuned to each other.” It appears as though both purposes are being served in this excerpt. It is interesting here how the exchanges between Donald and Martin merge at times into a single voice where they appear to complete each others’ sentences (e.g. Ts 116/117;123/124). Whereas they may be seen to be attuned to each other in these Turns, this may have been seen by the others as discouraging their contribution as a result of making interruption more difficult. This contrasts with Excerpts 2.1 and 2.2, where there is a more overt impression that Martin and Donald were trying to push through
their shared agenda on the group task, at the expense of Janet and Alice. An additional feature of Excerpt 2.3 is an absence of status-seeking between Donald and Martin in the way described by Jackson and Waring (2000:387). What is seen instead is a form of male allegiance, which reinforces dominance and status over Janet and Alice.

In Excerpt 2.3, the exchanges build towards establishing a possible framework for the content of the project. Nevertheless, Janet’s determination to achieve her aims over her contribution to the group task (T125) is seen to determine the direction of the subsequent Turns; in Turn 125, her particular expression of interest determines the theme of the Turns between Ts127-134, which are made up of individuals referring to which aspects of the topic they would like to work on:

**Transcript 1 Excerpt 2.4**

125 Janet Can I do 45 to 80?/
126 Donald Yeah.sure/
127 Janet Cos I’m better on the whole history side of things/
128 Donald [Just make it as brief …
129 Alice [And I’m good at history as well/
130 Donald [You don’t have to put any detail/ you just have to name what they did.why they did it.that’s basically it/
131 Janet And then and then I can I’ll help with the whole justifying thing/ so if I go on the history bit (not phrased as a question)
132 Martin [Well we both need to do/
133 Alice And do you think like we should all get together and do points like for and against/ and we’ll all compile them together like separate/ and then try and fit in somewhere?/
134 Martin The obvious way of thinking about it what. we need somebody having a look at the political side of it and somebody else looking at what direction the (XX) is going=/

In this excerpt, Janet and Alice are seen to emphasise a more collective, collaborative tone to the group proceedings. Janet, firstly, displays an inclusive tone to her contributions when she presents herself as willing to help others by making explicit how she can contribute to the group effort (T131). Similarly, Alice’s contribution towards adopting a collective approach involves highlighting a strategy for working together (T133), a theme that complements her earlier organisational remark in Excerpt 1(T18). However, in contrast to the collaborative tone of the contributions from Janet and Alice in this excerpt, Donald takes on a rather more authoritarian stance through his use of instructional
language in Ts 128/130. Indeed, there is also a sense of granting permission in response to Janet’s ‘request’ in T126.

As outlined in Chapter two, a key justification for adopting group work in HE relates to skills development and the practice of certain skill types, including *transferable skills* such as negotiation and assertiveness (e.g. Bridges, 1994; Gibbs et al., 1994). With regard to assertiveness, one may interpret various contributions from individuals as exhibiting such behaviour in Excerpts 2.1 – 2.4. For instance, Donald has been referred to as making contributions that are instructional in nature, even directorial. In the case of Martin and Janet, their displays of assertiveness appear in different ways and for apparently different reasons. Janet’s assertiveness takes the form of her refusal to be silenced in her attempts to take on responsibility for the aspect of the topic she is interested in. Martin’s assertiveness, on the other hand, is associated more with group leadership behaviour as exemplified in his attempts to organise a planning strategy (e.g.T134).

However, the extent to which one may interpret ‘assertiveness’ behaviour in the above as being productive in terms of skills development appears unclear, as the data do not point towards any distinctive features that one would not expect to see in everyday conversational exchanges. Indeed, similar criticism may apply to evidence of another ‘skill’ type exhibited in the next excerpt, where individuals try to achieve their personal aims in the group. Previously, requests for areas of responsibility took the form of simple statements of preference (e.g. T125); later, however, some development of this approach is seen when negotiating positions are supported with rationales based on background or character. Such rationales include prior experience of a topic (e.g. from school – T141) to having innate sensibilities (Janet’s expression of moral perspective – T142):

**Transcript 1 Excerpt 2.5**

134 Martin  The obvious way of thinking about it what, we need somebody having a look at the political side of it and somebody else looking at what direction the (XX) is going/=.
135 Donald  I prefer sort of political things/=.
136 Alice    I don’t. no. I’m not political/.
137 Donald  [You two would have more knowledge about the actual technical thing/.
138 Alice    Yeah OK/=.
139 Donald  I could do politics OK/.

83
As with the previous example of assertiveness, there is an overall sense that these ‘negotiating skills’ are unremarkable, and typical of everyday contexts. In this excerpt, the ‘negotiation’ even included Donald adopting a somewhat manipulative approach through his use of flattery, when he directs Alice and Janet away from the ‘politics’ theme he would like for himself (T137). The picture that appears to be emerging from the data, therefore, is one of uncertainty in terms skills development, in that there is little that may be interpreted as productive or convincing in this regard. This begins to bring into question more generally the notion of group work facilitating ‘skills development’.

A further point for consideration from the excerpts in this section suggests that, for Janet in particular, there is a tension between being recognised and establishing status in the group on the one hand, and displaying more ‘traditionally feminine’ (Bergvall, 1996) behaviour on the other. With reference to studies of student discourse in classes and small group discussions at a technology university, Bergvall (1996:174) refers to “evidence that women are caught in the tension between conflicting gender-role demands.” In elaborating this theme, Bergvall refers to how women are observed to use speech patterns or linguistic behaviour described as typically masculine (competitive, assertive, status seeking) as opposed to those considered traditionally feminine (cooperative, affiliative, instrumental). There is some evidence from the excerpts in this section that Janet has tried a range of methods to gain a voice in the group that have included behaviour from both gender descriptions (e.g. Excerpts 2.4; 2.5). Donald and Martin, on the other hand, appear to have restricted themselves to typically masculine behaviour, as referred to by Bergvall.

6.4.3 Applying sociocultural analysis to Excerpt 3

With regard to Excerpt 3, the use of Additive Frames in the analysis provided in section 6.3.4 referred to the group sustaining greater focus on their topic, resulting in more extended discussion and the generation of new ideas. A key ability on the part of the group which allowed for this was critical engagement, where individuals evaluated the contributions of others. Evidence for such engagement, for instance, could be seen in Janet’s comments in Ts 177 and 183:
Transcript 1 Excerpt 3.1
177 Janet Gain. so not only are they gaining air superiority they’re gaining GROUND superiority/= 

Transcript 1 Excerpt 3.2
183 Janet So basically it’s just a waste of money and they’re only advancing because they can?/

Similarly, Alice’s ‘conclusion’ in T199 appears to question the cost of developing Stealth aircraft on the basis of evidence brought up earlier in the discussion, which referred to the discrepancy between such an aircraft’s capabilities and its perceived role in combat:

Transcript 1 Excerpt 3.3
199 Alice We could say like. why are we spending so much money on like making them like you say faster. more high tech when (XX)

Indeed, Turns used here in these examples of ‘critical engagement’ were also referred to as ‘critical instances’ in the discussion on learning in this excerpt in section 6.3.4. Ultimately, these features are seen to form part of the generally improved level of group engagement with the task over the period of the meeting.

What is of particular note in these examples are the contributions from both Alice and Janet, participants who up to this point in the meeting had made few contributions that affected the development of substantive issues related to the task: Alice’s contributions had been infrequent generally, while Janet had experienced a number of difficulties gaining a platform. Reasons for this may have been because in general, individuals in the group were primarily concerned with their own agendas in terms of their group roles, or as Greenwood (1996: 88) observes, they were not prepared to share “the conversational goals of the other members of the group, or alternatively, the other members of the group are unwilling to change their goal to accommodate”. In addition to this, there is the suggestion that Donald and Martin’s behaviour reflected their attempts to “establish themselves” (Jackson and Warin, 2000:387) in their new environment.

In Excerpt 3, however, both Alice and Janet appear to have the confidence to engage with more substantive elements of the topic, and significantly, succeed in getting Donald and Martin to listen to them. An important reason for this may be because of a greater feeling of confidence in each other that may have built up over the duration of the meeting. An
important contributory factor for this development may in turn have been related to discussion of personal and social topics, which regularly punctuated the meeting, and which served to significantly enhance familiarity and trust. Brief examples of such ‘social’ exchanges follow in the next section.

6.4.4 Social exchanges

In excerpts 4.1 – 4.3 that follow, conversation between participants takes place in two pairs as opposed to one group, and on social topics rather than themes related to the group task. They serve to illustrate the nature of conversation that occurred in contexts other than the more whole-group or purely task-based discussion.

In excerpt 4.1, which occurred early in the meeting (T25), Janet is seen to ask what may be regarded as a legitimate question about plans the others may have for the weekend, given the need for the group to meet up to meet a deadline for a draft text:

Transcript 1 Excerpt 4.1

25 Janet So what’s everyone doing this weekend? is everybody around? (Various comments [unclear] punctuated with laughter about different plans for the weekend)

However, there is an implicit social aspect to the question which is taken up enthusiastically by the others. Following a brief period of unclear and seemingly unstructured contributions from various members, whole-group discussion breaks up into two male/female pairs. The effect of this, first and foremost, appears to be that Janet and Alice cannot be ignored in the ways that have been reported for much of excerpts 1 and 2 from the first transcript. Secondly, a distinctly different tone is observed in the exchanges:

Transcript 1 Excerpt 4.2

26 Donald (unclear initial remark regarding his plans for the weekend) I’ve been looking forward to that for 6 months (laughter from Donald)
27 Janet I don’t care you have to wait until we do this/
28 Donald [I’ve just got a new TV to play it on as well/ (suppressed laughter)
29 Janet You bought a new TV for ‘Pro (Evolution) soccer’? /
30 Donald See you even know the full title/
31 Janet I AM a bit of a sad character/

Following her initial enquiry about the weekend, Donald uses the opportunity to focus on a personally related topic and introduce a humorous element to the conversation. Through
light-hearted exchanges clearly evident in the recording, Janet takes on an authoritative position, reminding Donald of his obligations to the project task (T27), and expressing little sympathy towards his preferred plans for the weekend. In these exchanges, it would seem that Janet wishes to make her position clear regarding obligations, albeit light-heartedly. Continuing the humorous theme, she admits in terms of character weakness to knowing the same video game Donald refers to (T31).

The brief sequence here between Janet and Donald contrasts somewhat with the more confrontational exchanges seen in Excerpt 1. Indeed, the very juxtaposition of Excerpt 4.1 with Excerpt 1 may be seen as serving to defuse emerging differences between them. The way this was achieved may be interpreted through their preparedness to reveal supposed vulnerabilities, as well as using humour as a medium in order to begin to build their relationship.

Unlike the more personally oriented theme of the exchanges between Janet and Donald, Martin and Alice embark on a discussion about the logistics of the group meeting up:

**Transcript 1 Excerpt 4.3**

32 Alice We’ve got next week as well/cos we haven’t got Maths we could probably meet up in some of them times/
33 Martin That's a good point yeah/we haven't got maths have we?/(Question tag checking for confirmation)
34 Alice Where would we go like the library or something?/
35 Martin Well.the upstairs bit we do IT anyway/
36 Alice What the the computer cluster?/
37 Martin ‘Barnes Wallace’/the bouncing bomb building/

Martin pays due consideration to Alice’s input (T33) where their exchanges focus on issues related to task progression. Overall, exchanges are measured and equal in terms of weight of contribution.

These excerpts illustrating ‘social’ exchanges show how the nature of talk between the pairs of individuals differs in comparison to the three main excerpts considered in this chapter. Features such as interruption are seen to be absent while Alice and Janet show considerably more confidence in their communication. Whether these features may have been aided by the pair arrangement is uncertain, but it is clear that Martin and Donald appear to engage with Alice and Janet on more ‘equal’ terms, whether through humour or
in terms of group organisation. In particular, there are similar levels of contribution, and Janet and Alice appear to be listened to more attentively.

Whole group conversation on ‘social’ topics also reveals the presence of humour in the exchanges. In addition, as with the paired conversations, contributions are seen in more equal measure from all participants. The following illustration is on a topic referred to as the ‘Buddy Scheme’, which was a departmental initiative that paired incoming students with existing students as part of an induction process to the Foundation Year programme of study. In the excerpt, the group compare experiences of using the scheme. While engaging in this topic, ‘parallel’ conversations between pairs of students emerge related to their different buddy scheme experiences. This format then changes once again in Excerpt 4.4 when the pairs come together to continue as a group:

**Transcript 1 Excerpt 4.4**

65 Donald  Who was your buddy?
66 Janet   I’m not saying anything because
67 Alice   [I know who he is/=  
68 Donald  We could find out/ the list is still up there/  
69 Alice   I know who he is/I don’t know his name but  
                      if I see a picture/  
70 Martin  Point out on the Buddy system to us/ 
71 Janet   You’ll take the piss out of him/  
72 Alice   I can tell you/cos I was in the same room as you and I remember seeing  
                      him/

This excerpt illustrates the ease with which the participants move from one interaction pattern to another (pairs – group) as well as the relatively relaxed nature of the exchanges, which are conducted with humour. This is particularly true for Alice, who is seen to enter much more prominently into the group talk. Exchanges appear enjoyable for the students and include behaviour such as teasing each other, particularly towards Janet.

Both the paired and group conversations can be seen to perform particular roles for the functioning of the group. Firstly, the shift in tone in the paired conversations compared to whole-group discussion of the task suggests that for Janet and Alice, the opportunity is provided for them to establish their ‘voice’ in the group, albeit away from the topic of the task; interestingly, this ‘voice’ is also apparent in the whole-group excerpt, where humour also dominates the exchanges. For Alice and Janet, therefore, these occasions appear to have functioned as opportunities to develop confidence and/or status in the eyes of the others. It certainly seems to be the case that Martin and Donald are more prepared to listen
to them in this type of conversation. This may be because they feel there is less at risk in terms of status in this context, where maintaining ‘typically masculine’ features (competitive, assertive, status seeking) referred to by Bergvall (1996) are less of a concern. In a task-related context, however, the salience of gender in particular may be seen to have had an overt impact on the way Donald and Martin engaged with Janet and Alice. It is possible that this may be particularly true at this relatively early stage in these students’ transition to HE. On this issue, Warin and Dempster (2007:888) point out the following:

During transitional phases when a person moves into an unfamiliar sociocultural context there is likely to be a dependence on the more entrenched aspects of self-concept, those that have been tried and tested over time.

The caveat that I would apply here, however, is that it seems more likely that the sociocultural context in this case is primarily the group, and the degree of familiarity between new members. This would seem to be of more relevance to explaining their behavior than interpreting it solely from a rather more general institutional perspective.

6.5 Discussion

This chapter has considered three excerpts from Transcript 1 using two distinct approaches to analysis. This first approach, using Tan’s (2000) framework, tried to establish instances of learning in the form of ‘critical instances’. In the second, a sociocultural analysis approach was adopted in order to provide a different perspective for unearthing evidence for types of learning claimed to be associated with group engagement (e.g. Tennant, 1997; Jaques, 1991; Gibbs et al., 1994).

It was seen from using Tan’s framework that Excerpt 3 exhibited the clearest and most frequent examples of ‘critical instances’. These instances reflected occasions when the group engaged with new themes that initiated discussion in new directions. This framework, therefore, was useful for illuminating occasions when such instances appeared in group discussion. However, such occasions in this transcript were rare overall, a finding which concurs with Tan’s own studies where occurrences of ‘new significant ideas’ were similarly described as infrequent (Tan, 2003: 258/259). Furthermore, use of the framework alone provided little insight into the circumstances that promote such conditions for learning. I return, however, to discussion of its contribution more generally to the study, as well as my own development, in Chapter 9.
Analysis of the transcript from a sociocultural approach to analysis revealed distinct types of behaviour, including occasions where ‘skills’ such as ‘assertiveness’ and ‘negotiation’ were exhibited. However, these examples seemed little more than conventional functional exchanges between individuals typical of general conversation, and it is unclear how far through their group discussion these students were developing their abilities in these areas. Indeed, there is considerable debate around how, or even whether, it is possible to develop skills in the HE classroom that can be transferred to the workplace. This point is taken up in Chapter Nine.

A sociocultural approach to analysis allowed for different themes to emerge from the data. Key amongst these were gender and power issues that were seen to influence how the group operated. However, in order to understand their influence on learning, an alternative perspective to Tan’s notion of critical instances is required, one which draws on sociocultural theories of learning. Such a perspective is provided by Northedge (2003) in his description of three levels of participation in knowledge communities. Although, these ‘communities’ are referred to in terms of wider academic communities, such as that found at an institutional level, I intend to apply his notion of three levels of participation in my discussion of the data where ‘community’ will refer to the group community considered in this study. This has required some modification of Northedge’s description in order to better reflect the group context. Nevertheless, I believe such a framework provides a useful tool for describing the participatory behaviours of the individuals in the study group, and gives some insight into the sociocultural forces that do, and do not, contribute to learning. These levels will now be described, both in terms of my understanding of Northedge’s account as well as my own modifications and additions for the group community.

Northedge describes how participants can occupy different positions on each of the three levels. The first level is concerned with central versus peripheral, referred to by Northedge as different ‘positions’ participants take up within a knowledge community in terms of the extent to which they participate in that community. For the group community, I define a central position to mean taking a central role in all kinds of group participation; in this respect, it is an expression of the participant’s level of engagement with the group. Such engagement may include social, organisational or academic participation, and is expressed mostly in terms of the frequency of this participation, whether or not this participation ultimately influences progress in the task.
The next level is characterised as *generative* versus *vicarious*; for Northedge, *generative* participants are those who contribute directly to the flow of discussion, while *vicarious* refers to those who participate by listening or reading. In the present study, I refer to *generative* in terms of group members who successfully make contributions specifically aimed at furthering progress with the group task. Such contributions may include generating ideas, but may also include other behaviour that is intended to support (or generate) progress in the task, such as organisational behaviour.

The third level of participation, *convergent* versus *variant* understanding, is described by Northedge as relating to the extent to which participants in discourse share meaning or the same level of understanding of a topic. For the group in this study, *convergent* refers to participant understanding of ideas in discussion that are relevant to the topic of study. Such ideas are also accepted by the group and progress in understanding the academic content in the task is apparent as a result.

Two observations can be made with regard to Northedge’s notion of ‘position’. The first of these is whether this notion is a static concept. In talking about participation in knowledge communities, Northedge indicates that such movement from one position to another can occur, albeit slowly: “It requires a substantial investment of time and effort to acquire the capacity to participate generatively and with convergent understanding in ... a knowledge community” (Northedge, 2003:21). However, acquiring this ‘capacity’, necessarily involves a view of learning which is “a process (my italics) of becoming increasingly competent as … a participant within the relevant knowledge communities” (Northedge, 2003:22). This leads to the second observation. This relates to how becoming “increasingly competent” through participation in “relevant knowledge communities” may be interpreted as non context-specific, a perspective that resonates with earlier references in this section to the debate surrounding competence in certain skills and their transferability. In order to avoid this ambiguity, reference to types of ‘competence’ in the following discussion will refer exclusively to competence within the group community in this study, and will be expressed in terms of effective individual contributions to helping the group in their task. The data from excerpts 1 – 3 considered in this chapter will now be used in this analysis to illustrate the adaptation of Northedge’s framework, and the ‘positions’ the participants occupied within the group community.
To begin with, Alice’s participation in earlier sequences may be described as peripheral due to her relatively minor contributions. However, her contributions throughout were seen to be generative in organisational terms, such as in her attempts to establish group strategy in addressing the task, and later in more substantive issues such as when she initiated critical instances in Excerpt 3. Martin, on the other hand, was seen to be central in that his contributions were frequent, and generative in terms of initiating and developing themes in the discussion, an observation that is seemingly consistent with his position as subject ‘expert’. Donald may also be seen to occupy broadly similar positions to Martin in that he frequently generated development of the topic through his contributions.

As with Martin and Donald, Janet was central in terms of the frequency of her contributions. However, in terms of her generative contributions, these were observed as having occurred in two ways. Firstly, she was generative on substantive issues, from the position of being a ‘non-expert’. This was seen when she initiated discussion on aspects of the task, such as raising topics for discussion in Excerpt 1 from her printouts, as well as challenging assertions and articulating conclusions to ideas developed by Donald and Martin in Excerpts 2 and 3. Secondly, Janet was generative in terms of aspects of organisation and management of group proceedings. This was seen in her attempts to establish group role topics for individuals, arrange group meetings, and maintain group momentum for the task overall with her offer to help others in their tasks. Neither Martin nor Donald was seen to be generative in this respect.

Yet Northedge’s characterisation of learning as a process of becoming increasingly competent by developing shared ways of talking and establishing a ‘flow of meaning’ is not language that describes many of the earlier exchanges in this meeting. This was illustrated particularly clearly with Janet’s contributions in Excerpts 1 and 2. In these excerpts, she was frequently blocked in her attempts to be more central in terms of making contributions, and generative in terms to contributing to a flow of meaning; several instances were highlighted in the data of contributions from her that were ignored, or when she was silenced through interruption. Meanwhile, an indication of how this behaviour towards her might have affected the way she perceived her own status within the group was revealed on the occasions when she asked permission to take on specific roles. In
addition, her desire to be taken seriously may have underpinned her enthusiasm to display her knowledge when possible, and draw attention to her own efforts in Excerpt 1.

Nevertheless, given these circumstances, Janet managed to maintain a central and generative position through her refusal to be silenced and her apparent determination to maintain an active role in the proceedings. These characteristics appeared to make her both generative and central to the development of group discussion, resulting in her taking a significant role in the group in terms of identifying a way forward for their task. This was instrumental for the ‘convergent understanding’ in Excerpt 3, where the group arrived at the notion of transferring military aviation technology to civil aviation as a theme to develop for their project.

The account here of Janet and Alice having important generative influences in Excerpt 3 reinforces the notion that the ‘positions’ of these individuals were not static in the group community, but were seen to move over time. This was evidenced in the form of their generative influences in substantive aspects of the discussion topic in Excerpt 3 compared to earlier excerpts. In this respect and through these means, both Janet and Alice may be described as having become increasingly competent in their participation in this ‘knowledge community’, a feature referred to by Northedge as learning from a sociocultural perspective. Similarly, Martin and Donald became more competent in terms of altering their behaviour sufficiently to enable Janet and Alice to influence the progress of the group task.

Overall, the acquisition of ‘competence’ on the part of Janet and Alice described here became apparent because they adopted a range of strategies to break through the barriers they encountered. Central in this respect was Janet’s persistence in getting her voice ‘heard’. Other strategies indicated in the data begin to resonate with a study carried out by Bergvall (1996:188), who refers to how a female participant “downplays her activities” and “brackets all her efforts with self-effacing remarks”: for instance, many of the suggestions from Alice in particular are tentatively framed and almost apologetic compared to Martin and Donald, while Janet refers to how she is “a bit of a sad character” (T31 – Excerpt 4.2), albeit jokingly. Also in agreement with Bergvall’s study, these are features the male students are not seen to exhibit. However, with regard to Janet, her behaviour was seen to adapt according to the situation, corresponding again with another
of Bergvall’s assertions that “women display speech behaviours that transcend easy boundaries: they are assertive, forceful, facilitative, apologetic and hesitant by turn” (Bergvall, 1996:192).

A further important reason for this increase in competence in Northedge’s terms may lie in the role of ‘social’ conversation earlier in the meeting. As illustrated in Excerpts 4.1 – 4.4, Janet and Alice’s contributions were as central as those from Martin and Donald, highlighting their preparedness to contribute to group discussion; indeed, Janet was particularly prominent in initiating social chat. Through getting to know one another as people, the group were able to move beyond some of the barriers that restricted more productive communication earlier, and act in a more meaningful and productive way. This greater degree of familiarity and confidence that developed between the individuals may therefore be seen to have contributed towards the situation that emerged in Excerpt 3 where Donald and Martin had begun to change their attitudes towards contributions from Janet and Alice, and where there was a greater sharing of the conversational goals (Greenwood, 1996). The implications of the influence of these social features are returned to in Chapter Nine.

Chapter Seven considers three subsequent meetings of this group, where group work centres more on tutor-led tasks.
Chapter Seven

Data Analysis 2: Transcripts 2 - 4

7.1 Introduction

Chapter Six was concerned with the analysis of student talk during their first recorded group meeting. It focused on selected excerpts that illustrated instances where learning was seen to occur. It considered learning in groups from two perspectives: firstly, Tan’s (2000; 2003) notion of critical instances and the development of ‘new significant ideas’, and secondly, from the perspective of sociocultural theories of learning. Chapter Seven considers the evidence for group learning from transcripts two, three and four, which were derived from recordings of the three subsequent meetings of the same group at different stages of their project on the development of fighter aircraft.

Underpinning group work in these three meetings is the greater role of tutor-led activities compared to the first meeting. In the first meeting considered in Chapter Six, the group openly explored themes and approaches for their project assignment, creating an essentially loose structure to the talk that emerged. However, in meetings two and three, the group were asked to engage with formal tasks, externally imposed on the class by the tutor, where groups of students wrote comments on one another’s drafts using performance criteria for academic writing. In Meeting 4, the group were involved in redrafting their assignment with the aid of comments on their first draft from a peer group. This meant that much of the group task discussion in these meetings was driven by the formal task, and included extensive reference to the performance criteria. The distinction between these three meetings and the first group meeting has therefore generated a different approach to the analysis. While interest in ‘how groups work’ remains a focus of this chapter, the task underpinning the meeting will be foregrounded, and form the basis of subsequent discussion of issues about how groups work.

Section 7.2 provides more detail of the learning activities the group were involved in during meetings 2 – 4. Sections 7.3 – 7.5 are concerned with analysis of data from the
individual meetings. The chapter concludes in section 7.6 with summary remarks and discussion of key issues arising from the data.

7.2 Sequence of learning

This section maps out the sequence of tasks the group undertook in meetings two, three and four. These were based on ‘peer assessment’, referred to by Van den Berg et al. (2006: 342) as a “type of collaborative learning”, where “students assess each other’s work using relevant criteria, and give feedback, not only for the benefits of the receiver but also for the purpose of their own development.” Central to this exercise was reference to performance criteria for the assessment of academic writing, criteria which the group were informed would also be used by a tutor to assess their assignment on completion. The tasks undertaken by the group in the meetings are summarized as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meeting</th>
<th>Task being undertaken by recorded group</th>
<th>Transcript</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Writing comments on a draft assignment about the A380 airliner prepared by another group.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Reviewing the group’s own draft assignment <em>(The development of fighter aircraft)</em> using feedback from the other group.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Editing their own draft assignment on screen, again drawing on feedback prepared by the other group.</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Meeting 2, the group task involved writing feedback (300 words) on a peer group’s draft assignment on the development of a commercial airliner, the ‘A380’, prepared by another group of students. This feedback was to be read subsequently by these writers as well as their tutor. While reviewing the peer group’s draft during Meeting 2, students were asked to use the performance criteria as a means of focusing attention on the following key features of academic writing: Structure, Referencing, Content, Coherence and Cohesion, Accuracy and Range of Language. The performance criteria for each of these features were made up of descriptors articulating relative performance organised on a scale of 1 – 9, and the students were further asked to provide numerical scores for these features as part of their feedback. In addition to the criteria, a separate handout dealing with argumentation in writing was made available at the beginning of the meeting (see section 7.3.2).

In Meeting 3, the group task was to consider a review of their own draft on the development of fighter aircraft, which was a written by a peer group using the same
performance criteria. The group had been asked to read this review beforehand in order to be ready to discuss it at the meeting. Finally, in Meeting 4, the group worked on redrafting their assignment text at a computer, where reference was made to the feedback on their draft from the peer group, as well as the performance criteria.

As transcripts 2 – 4 relate to tutor-directed tasks intended to develop academic writing skills, consideration of how the group were performing these tasks provided the starting point for analysis. Furthermore, as analysis proceeded through the transcripts, a ‘narrowing down’ process emerged. This process begins in this chapter with a broad consideration of the data and themes from the second group meeting. However, in the transcripts from the third and fourth meetings, it was possible to take a more focused approach to analysis as a result of the group continuing to build on themes which had emerged in the second meeting.

A sociocultural approach to discourse analysis and Northedge’s levels of participation are applied in the analysis process in this chapter. In addition, the ideas used in Chapter Six from Tan’s framework for analysis are also incorporated as appropriate.

7.3 Analysis of Transcript 2: Peer Review

In the second meeting, as in the other meetings, group conversation in general is characterised by periods of engagement with the task interspersed with periodic discussion of non-task related themes on a range of topics. In this meeting, the group task was to produce a three hundred word review of the peer group’s draft on the development of the A380 airliner. Excerpts selected for analysis in this main section represent some of the most focused examples of group discussion of the peer group draft. Of particular prominence in these examples was the group’s consideration of ‘central argument’, ‘coherence and structure’ and ‘plagiarism’, themes that were taken from the performance criteria. The next section focuses on an initial discussion which illustrates how these themes emerged.
7.3.1 The initial discussion and emerging themes

The ‘initial discussion’ of this meeting was made up of an approximately 40 minute period characterized by talk on a variety of personal themes, with some initial observations of the peer group draft; direct reference to details contained in the performance criteria was not seen to take place during this period.

In Chapter Six the focus of analysis of the transcription of speech focused on how they were communicating in their group work. As a result the chosen transcription conventions were adopted to try and reflect this focus. In this chapter, as mentioned in the previous sections, the focus is primarily on what is said, with the starting point for analysis being the tasks themselves. I have decided, therefore, that a number of the more detailed features of the conventions adopted in Chapter Six are unnecessary for this change in focus. Those that have been retained are intended to provide “as much information relevant to the analysis ... as is practically possible” (Mercer, 2005:147).

The following excerpt introduces two themes that emerged during this period of mainly ‘social chat’: the first of these is ‘central argument’, which is referred to overtly by the group; the second, ‘plagiarism’, is indicated in the discussion but not named as such. The excerpt begins with Martin referring to earlier comments from Brian, presumably a friend who had also looked at the draft, and who appeared to have some knowledge of the A380 aircraft:

Transcript 2 Excerpt 1

26 Janet: What’s Brian been saying?
27 Martin: He was looking at it. Yeah, it was obviously genuine, but even he thinks, well, why would he write it like that?
28 Donald: Right, the thing is, does the report used to contain a central argument? Or is it just ... [Yeah, what is the central argument?]
29 Martin: There’s no argument.
30 Donald: There’s no argument presented.
31 Janet: There isn’t an argument, it’s just facts.
32 Alice: Yeah, it’s just like a ..
33 Janet: [Well um, there’s one bit (Donald: They’ve missed the whole point) here which is the construction bit? I’m not being nasty against them and stuff, but what is an ‘EADS’ and ‘BAE’?
34 Martin: ‘EADS’ is European Aircraft Design ....
35 Janet: [But where does it say that?
36 Martin: And ‘BAE’ is British Aerospace Engineering.
37 Janet: But where does it say that, cos I haven’t found it?
38 Alice: But normally the people that’d read this ...
Martin: [I think they had the idea that it was wide knowledge, yeah …]

Janet: [Yeah (somewhat exasperated), but what if I wanted to learn about Airbus, you know? Greg works for Airbus, but what if I wanted to …]

Martin: [It’s aimed at saddos like me who know what he’s talking about.]

Although there is no overt reference to the practice, the theme of plagiarism is first indicated by Martin, via Brian, with reference to the writing style (T27: ‘… why would he write like that?’). At this point, attention turns quite abruptly to the absence of an argument in the draft, indicated by Donald in T28, followed by a series of Additive Frames that repeat this assertion up to T35. In T36, Janet refers to the use of two abbreviations and how the text does not at any point explain what they mean. Janet continues this theme in Ts 38 and 40 when she refers to the use of abbreviations occurring without prior reference in the text to the full expression. Although this provides further evidence of plagiarism, there continues to be no direct reference to it.

This excerpt suggests that the spectre of plagiarism introduced by Martin appears uncomfortable and so is not taken forward in discussion. This conclusion is based on the sense that the group wish to avoid the main issue that has been raised, a goal which is easier to achieve by talking about ‘central argument’ from the performance criteria; in other words, the dominance of the rubric in the conversation seems to provide a convenient diversion for the group away from the topic of plagiarism. Such a conclusion brings into question the effect of introducing the performance criteria at this stage of the task. There is, of course, uncertainty as to what would have happened if they had not had the criteria to work with. Nevertheless, the question emerges as to whether it is always a good idea to provide such criteria before students have had a chance to review a written text on their own terms.

Another theme brought out at this initial period includes restricted use of source material:

**Transcript 2 Excerpt 2**

51 Alice: It does just look like they’ve … boom, got it all off the internet, or wherever.

56 Janet: I like how, it’s like they got everything off ‘Wikipedia’.

Two points emerge from these Turns. Firstly, the practice of plagiarism is once again not referred to explicitly, and secondly, the notion that everything is taken from one source.
Indeed, the inappropriateness of Wikipedia as a credible source is referred to when the group reflect on their own text (Ts 63 – 65):

**Transcript 2 Excerpt 3**

63 Alice: Well, I’ve used … and it’s a like, navy like, book that has (XX)
64 Martin: There you go, that’ll do, that’ll do. That’s the thing. I used the same thing but off the Internet for the RAF. It’s a genuine government publication, so it’s …
65 Janet: [I got a genuine report ... on ... like the history of what you call it … fighter jets, off the Internet.

This indicates that the students are making a distinction between credible and non-credible sources from the Internet, while the repeated use of ‘genuine’ suggests that they are keen to associate themselves with ‘credible’ sources. This behaviour provides some indication of the students reflecting on their own practice.

This initial discussion, interspersed with more extended periods of social conversation, can therefore be seen to touch on a number of themes related to the practice of academic writing. These themes were overtly recognised in the case of argumentation and appropriate sources; the potential theme of plagiarism, however, is indicated but not made explicit. Another of these themes, argumentation, is subsequently given attention by the group in the next section, which is signalled as such by direct reference to the performance criteria. This change is initiated through organisational contributions from Alice and Janet:

**Transcript 2 Excerpt 4**

116 Alice: Come on now. Switch on, switch on.
117 Janet: Do you realise that we’ve been here 40 minutes?

### 7.3.2 Argumentation

In the ‘initial discussion’ considered in the previous section, the group referred to the lack of an argument in the peer group draft in terms of the content merely presenting ‘facts’. In the following excerpt, which begins with a further organisational contribution from Alice, the theme of ‘argumentation’ is returned to alongside reference to the performance criteria (referred to in the transcription with double quotation marks):

**Transcript 2 Excerpt 5**

143 Alice: Shall we like put bullet points down first and then we can, like …
144 Martin: [Yeah.

(Pause)

145 Martin: Put “Addresses the issues (XX) and shows, and shows a well-argued consideration of the topic”, but there isn’t an argument.
146 Donald: There’s no argument, that’s a big thing.
147  Alice:  Shall we put ‘no argument’?
148  Janet:  I don’t want to be harsh, and, and …
149  Martin:  [Well, there isn’t an argument
150  Janet:  I tell you what ...
151  Alice:  [We’ll say it in a nice way, but I’ll just put it...
152  Janet:  I’ll tell you what. I find it so easy to find negative things about things rather than positive
153  Martin:  I reckon I can say it in a nice way, ‘There ain’t no argument, dog!’
154  Alice:  So we could, that could be just a pointer to them like, just a suggestion.
155  Donald:  No, that’s a main thing. It feels … a central point of the report
156  Alice:  A suggestion, yeah, we could put that as a suggestion, then it doesn’t look harsh.
157  Janet:  At least we haven’t got …
158  Alice:  [Or we suggest that you use …
159  Janet:  [Are there actually any rhetorical questions in this?
160  Donald:  There isn’t a (XX) of an argument presented.

In this excerpt, Martin uses the criteria as a means of illustrating that the draft lacks an argument (T145), a point which both he and Donald repeat to reinforce the significance of the assertion (Ts 146/149/153). However, there is apparent concern from Janet and Alice over hurting the feelings of the peer group (Ts 148/151), a feature which is reflected in other studies carried out on peer assessment exercises (e.g. Falchikov, 1995; Cheng and Warren, 1997; Lindblom-Ylanne et al., 2006). Ultimately, Alice appears to take a middle position by both recognising Janet’s concerns as well as the perceived reality of the assertions put forward by Donald and Martin. This reaction is pragmatic and represents a way forward for their task (Ts 154/156).

There is a brief pause at this point before discussion of the peer group draft continues:

Transcript 2 Excerpt 6
161  Alice:  Er, what else can we say, it’s very factual.
162  Donald:  Well that’s … that sort of thing, you
163  Alice:  Does it have to be factual?
164  Martin:  I mean, to look at it, it’d be number 3, I reckon, cos it says: “The report addresses the issues but in a fairly superficial way. The information given is adequate but relies on description of the topic”. It’s what it does.
165  Alice:  Yeah, that’s...
166  Donald:  [If I was giving it an overall mark out of 5, I’d give it 2.5, 3 maybe. It doesn’t, it fails to get to the central point of what’s supposed to be done.
167  Janet:  Where is it? Oh, is this it?
168  Donald:  It’s easy
169  Martin:  Well there isn’t an argument
170  Donald:  It’s an easy read and it’s, you know, it’s, it’s, it’s simplified so that you can understand it without going over, you know, it’s not.
171  Janet:  Well, there isn’t any evidence of plagiarism, is there?
172  Martin:  Well no.
173  Alice:  Well we don’t know cos we haven’t, like …
174  Martin:  [Number, number 3 is the one you’d have to give it because number 4 suggests that there’s an underlying argument throughout that is not linked to the
text specifically, whereas number 3 says that there’s not really an argument but the factual
information’s quite good.
175 Janet: Yeah, it’s going to have to be 3 then.
176 Alice: So we’ll put ‘good factual information’ cos they’ve got a lot of facts in there …
177 Janet: Which factual information?
178 Alice: We’ve got to give them something.

Following Alice’s effort to refocus the group on the task (T161), there follows a series of
contributions regarding what marks should be awarded (T164/166/174), a process which
features close reference to the criteria. This occurs in a series of Additive Frames that build
a case towards a ‘conclusion’ which takes the form of a combined decision voiced by Janet
(T175) and Alice (T176). It is reached by reading out or referring to selected descriptors in
the performance criteria and then choosing the best descriptor that reflects what they see in
the text.

As mentioned previously, initial discussion in this transcript on the topic of argumentation
pointed towards the peer group draft text as simply providing ‘factual’ information. Later,
when referring to the performance criteria, this term is once again seen to emerge, but this
time alongside reference to the ‘superficial’ nature of the text, that it ‘relies on description’,
and ‘fails to get to the central point’. These assertions appear to go some way towards
discussing the nature of an ‘argument’, but remain vague and unspecific.

A theme touched on again in this excerpt is plagiarism. Janet’s assertion that there is no
evidence of plagiarism (T171) is seemingly accepted by Martin at this point, though
questioned by Alice (T173). In fact there has been considerable evidence of plagiarism, as
illustrated by what has already said about the draft in their own personal judgements. This
leads one to consider the way in which the word ‘evidence’ is used here. One possibility
may be that, as far as Janet is concerned, plagiarism has not been proved categorically.
Whatever the reason, it remains the case that continuing allusions to the theme still fail to
prompt the group into making explicit reference to plagiarism occurring.

However, it could be said that the theme of plagiarism continues to dominate. In the next
section, it is approached from a somewhat different direction: this time, it is via the
performance criteria of ‘coherence’ and ‘structure’.
7.3.3 Coherence and structure

The following excerpt shows the group using the performance criteria to consider the coherence and structure of the A380 draft:

Transcript 2 Excerpt 7

195 Janet: O.K. What’s the next one? What’s cohesion?
196 Alice: Would you say…?
197 Janet: [Oh, right. Coherence and structure.
198 Donald: Structure is … all right.
199 Janet: “Main section adequate, introduction and conclusion may not be fully developed.”
200 Alice: I don’t know if I like the way they’ve put a title. I think they should have linked it, d’you know, like …
201 Donald: [Yeah, they’ve just done … different sections …
202 Alice: … [they’ve just bunged a title on it … and it doesn’t flow, does it?
203 Janet: 3 at the most.
204 Donald: Structure yes, but coherence.
205 Alice: Would you say it doesn’t flow? Doesn’t flow, does it?
206 Donald: No coherence …
207 Alice: [I don’t think it flows. Do you think it flows?
208 Martin: What?
209 Alice: Do you think it flows?
210 Janet: I just … I feel so mean!
211 Alice: They’ve just put a title in and gone on to that.
212 Donald: It’s just bit by bit. This could be like, you know …
213 Martin: [It flows.
214 Donald: It could be in any order, it could be in any order, this.
215 Alice: In a report, would you have sub-headings and stuff.
216 Janet: I don’t know. I’m thinking 3 or 2.
217 Donald: It doesn’t flow well. It’s a 2.
218 Alice: I’ll just write … So are we having a 2?
219 Janet: We’ve got to be reasonably positive about this.
220 Donald: No we’re not. We can be as harsh as we like.
221 Martin: Destructor!!!
222 Donald: I know that’s not in your character.
223 Alice: You can be Sharon Osbourne.

Much is made of ‘flow’ in writing in this excerpt. It is a notion which is repeated by Alice (200/202), while there are various references to the disjointed nature of the text from Donald (Ts201/212/214). These Turns function as Additive Frames leading towards a final agreed score. A further feature of this excerpt identified along gender lines, is how discussion leading to a possible low score once again prompts Janet to express concern over how negative criticism may affect the peer group (T210), a concern which is countered by Donald and Martin’s less conciliatory attitude (Ts 220/221).

A brief ‘nice’ verses ‘nasty’ discussion on the TV programme Pop Idol ensues from Alice’s comment in T223, reflecting the stances of different group members towards the
peer group draft. After several minutes, Alice’s organisational role once again serves to
refocus the group on the task:

Transcript 2 Excerpt 8

224 Alice: So what are we going to give them for (XX)
225 Janet: [I don’t know, I’m thinking 2.5.
226 Donald: Can we give half marks?
227 Martin: Yeah.
228 Alice: He said if you … you know …
229 Donald: [I think 2.
230 Martin: You can’t give it 2, that’s not enough.
231 Alice: “Main section adequate though the introduction …”
232 Janet: [I can’t, I can’t, I can’t give them...
233 Alice: I think a 3.
234 Janet: A thing that says everything is a plagiarism ... I can’t do it. But, it doesn’t have a
235 conclusion, which is …
236 Martin: [It’s not … do you honestly think … would you write like this? O.K. We’ve not
got the excuse of … they’re all native speakers cos they’re all in this class. So, it’s …
237 Alice: [Are we going to give
t them a 2.5 or a 3 then?
238 Martin: I don’t know, it just doesn’t sound like it’s written in a report, it just sounds like ...
239 Janet: [What you mean, the, what do you mean?
240 Donald: It’s a copy.
241 Martin: It sounds like it’s been copied and pasted out of ‘Wikipedia’
242 Janet: ‘The A380, LED’s are employed in the cabin cockpit ...
243 Martin: [Well even that, it’s just the whole thing.
244 Janet: ‘... and fuselage areas.’
245 Martin: ‘They also use electrostatic actuators’, open brackets ‘EHA’ close brackets. It’s never used
again, there’s no point abbreviating it.
246 Janet: ‘The cabin lighting features programmable multi-spectral … capable of creating cabin
ambience … simulating daylight.’
247 Donald: I can do that whole presentation.
248 Alice: It’s just all facts though, isn’t it, they haven’t really put their own effort into it. Do you
know what I mean? They just found the facts and stuck it together.
249 Janet: ‘And serves superior brightness compared to traditional incandescent light bulbs.’
250 Martin: I think it’s been copied and pasted out in places, but they’ve not even deleted the bits that
aren’t relevant. Like, I know that 350 (XX) is 35 megapascals.
251 Donald: Yeah, well that’s just shocking.
252 Martin: ‘… and, electro hydrostatic actuators EHA.’ But they never mention EHA again so there’s
no point condensing it unless it’s going to be mentioned later on. It makes it seem like it has been
taken out of something that mentions EHA later on, but isn’t used.
253 Alice: So, are we going to give them a 2.5?
254Donald: 2
255 Martin: 1
256 Alice: We can’t give them a 2 cos it’s like …
257 Janet: [We’re going to get a zero for referencing.
258 Alice: Would you say that is like plagiarism or not?
259 Martin: I’d say it is, I’d definitely say it is yes.
260 Alice: Shall we give them a 2 then, just a 2?
261 Janet: I’m tempted to go and log on to Wikipedia.

Janet’s expression of concern at awarding a low mark in T234 is a key moment in this
discussion. This comment, triggered by the criteria descriptor, incorporates the word
‘plagiarism’. This term was previously used in T163, but the theme was not developed.
This time, however, it appears to spur Donald into a definitive assertion about what they are reading:

**Transcript 2 Excerpt 9**

239 Donald: It’s a copy.

The new direction the discussion takes from this point involves the identification of evidence to support this idea, including quotations taken from the text. For example, evidence in connection with style is alluded to in T235 with “do you honestly think … would you write like this?”, while references to how the text ‘sounds’ appear in Ts 237/240 are used to suggest that the style of language is not the author’s. Further evidence which strengthens the view that the text had been ‘copied and pasted’ (T240) included mention of irrelevant information (T249) as well as errors in the use of abbreviation (Ts 244/251). It is interesting how these examples of evidence begin to flow from the group once the idea of plagiarism is finally acknowledged overtly, which would seem to support previous unspoken recognition of its presence in the text. Indeed, there is almost a sense of relief that it has finally been named and acknowledged directly. This trend continues in the following excerpt, where the group begin to lend support to Donald’s assertion:

**Transcript 2 Excerpt 10**

269 Donald: Clearly it’s not their words, it’s Internet sources.
270 Alice: Well, do you reckon this is their word: ‘Airbus started the conceptual development of very large …
271 Janet: [I don’t think I would use the word ‘consortium’.
272 Donald: It just reads like any Wikipedia document. They’re all the same style and the same words in the right places, for any topic.
273 Janet: I mean I use Wikipedia as one of my sources and …
274 Alice: [It’s got a good introduction, I must say. The introduction’s pretty all right.
275 Janet: I do like the introduction. But I’ve, I’ve, looked at the things, underlined important bits and written it all in my own words.
276 Alice: That’s the thing isn’t it, which is why it’s rubbish. It’s just like a book on the Airbus, just like a factual report and it’s not (words fade out).

In this excerpt we can see more direct reference to aspects of style. Here the word ‘consortium’ is viewed suspiciously by Janet, while Donald detects a Wikipedia ‘style’ where you have ‘the same words in the right places, for any topic’ (T272). Alice compares the style to that of ‘a book’ and a ‘factual report’, which earlier was the term used to describe the lack of argument in the text. This language suggests that she is referring to the
idea that the account they are reviewing is a ‘cold’ or ‘impersonal’ text which has no sense
of authorship as such.

A further theme in this transcript is how the identification of features of the peer group
draft text initiates comparison with their own practice. In the following example, Martin
and Janet describe how their apparently similar approaches to note taking allow them to
avoid plagiarism:

**Transcript 2 Excerpt 11**

374 Martin: No the thing is, like, I don’t know if the rest of you agree with this but I wrote mine on the
basis of it’s... I wrote most of it myself and used references by the odd statistic here and there, and
the rest was my opinion on the subject, except not written with the word ‘I’.
375 Janet: Well, yeah.
376 Martin: More just, ‘It is’ and that sort of stuff
377 Janet: I basically got the facts and then...
378 Martin: [rewrote it.
379 Janet: That’s the only way you can write.
380 Martin: Write down a list of facts, and then just type up.
381 Janet: What I did was all I did was I highlighted certain bits.
382 Martin: The bits that you wanted, yeah and then typed, filled it out...
383 Janet: [And then ignored everything else.
384 Martin: Yeah, filled it out.
385 Janet: Yeah.
384 Martin: That’s what referencing is, isn’t it?
385 Janet: Yeah, that is referencing, not copying and pasting.

In these exchanges, the term referencing is used to mean note-taking and the incorporation
of source information into a text. The way this is meant to avoid plagiarism is, however,
unclear. Later, another feature, ambivalence, is seen to emerge when the peer group begin
to be referred to in almost sympathetic terms; although there is an acceptance of plagiarism
by the peer group, there is the sense that it was not highly coordinated between them, and
that this somehow mitigates the offence:

**Transcript 2 Excerpt 12**

594 Janet: I can’t believe they thought they could get away with that.
595 Martin: One of them did. I don’t think the others noticed.
596 Janet: I don’t think they noticed.

Indeed, as discussion of this topic develops over the course of the meeting, a revealing
underlying perception of plagiarism, amongst these students, is referred to by Martin and
Donald when they express the assumption that everybody plagiarizes at some point. The
relevant question for them seems to be about how one can avoid detection:
Transcript 2 Excerpt 13

840  Donald: We all have at some point.
841  Martin: Oh yeah, we all have.
842  Donald: It's just some people are good at it and get away with it.
843  Martin: As long as you know how to cover it up.

Excerpts 11, 12 and 13 therefore appear to reflect Scanlon’s (2003:163) assertion that there is a certain “ambivalence and confusion among students regarding plagiarism.”

7.3.4 Concluding remarks

Section 7.3 has considered discussion of the group’s Peer Review of the A380 text, a task which involved the use of guidance and performance criteria provided for the students by the tutor. Aspects of academic writing given particular attention by the group were argumentation, coherence, structure, and plagiarism. Group engagement with the task revealed repeated reference to the criteria when reviewing the text. Conclusions about the relative merits of the text were made in terms of scores associated with the performance criteria.

Plagiarism was a particularly prevalent theme during the meeting, although it was not referred to by name early in the transcript. The reason for this may potentially be viewed in different ways. For instance, final acknowledgement may be seen in terms of Additive Framing: the repetition of different kinds of evidence over the course of the meeting ultimately leading to a ‘critical instance’ voiced by Donald (237 Donald: It’s a copy.). However, an alternative explanation is one where the group already see and understand the evidence for plagiarism repeatedly from an early stage, but avoid referring to it by name.

One reason for this may reside in the group seeing themselves in this behaviour, as suggested by Donald and Martin in Ts 840-843 in the previous section. This resulted initially in a refusal to speak of it, with the eventual decision to do so only reached when it became, in a sense, too obvious not to be mentioned, or too embarrassing to ignore.

In this section, I have also referred to other issues that may account for the lack of attention to plagiarism, including student ‘ambivalence’ towards the issue (Scanlon, 2003). In addition, the data suggest that the imposition of performance criteria may have played a significant role, particularly early on in the meeting, in diverting the group’s attention away from what tutors, at least, would regard as the ‘big issue’. Overall, the indications from the comments from Donald and Martin about avoiding detection, the group’s general
lack of urgency in addressing the subject, and the act of plagiarism itself from the peer group, suggest on one level that “plagiarism is a far less meaningful concept for students than it is for academic staff, and ranks relatively low in the student system of values” (Ashworth et al., 1997:201).

However, plagiarism can only be as ‘meaningful’ to students as it is for academic staff if students have the same understanding of what it is and how seriously it is regarded. Although there are indications in the excerpts that students did recognise the seriousness of plagiarism (e.g. Excerpt 12), other remarks suggest that the group found the notion complicated. This implies that they lacked a full understanding of the concept (Excerpt 11) with such confusion leading to ambivalence. In addition, the fact that plagiarism was discussed in relation to the actions of their peers raises issues of loyalty and obligation towards them, as well as empathy (Excerpt 13). These are the features that may explain student attitude towards plagiarism in the data, as opposed to suggesting that plagiarism ranks low in their values. Moreover, with regard to group activity and plagiarism, the data do not appear to support the suggestion that working with others in a group necessarily has a “‘deterrent’ effect on cheaters” (Born, 2003:223). This is also a view that assumes that students in groups work collectively, in the company of each other, and where “It would be difficult for someone in a group to cheat while members are watching” (p223). Finally, there is no indication from the data at this stage as to whether a deterrent effect is seen on those who detect the plagiarism.

Overall, however, the emphasis in group discussion is on providing scores for the peer group’s draft, a feature which must be viewed as unsurprising given that this was a significant part of the tutor-imposed task for the meeting (the 300 word review text was submitted after this meeting). In agreement with a study reported by Falchikov (1995: 177), there was discomfort over ‘marking down’ peers from Janet and Alice, who explicitly expressed concern over offending the peer group or hurting their feelings. This relates to the notion of “loss of face” (Cheng and Warren, 1997), referred to as “‘the exercise of poor judgement, criticism of others’ (Bruner and Wang, 1998, p31) and is seen as a potential threat to both the assessor and the person being assessed, respectively” (Cheng and Warren, 1997: 238). Alice and Janet’s concerns would certainly point towards the ‘person being assessed’ ‘losing face’ in this case. However, with regard to the notion of ‘poor judgement’ leading to ‘loss of face’ for the assessor, there is no apparent evidence
from the data that the group were sensitive to any shortcomings they may have had in this respect, or how their assessment reflected badly on them. Indeed, there was apparent enthusiasm and confidence in the process of establishing marks.

One explanation for the general absence of uncertainty in the use of the performance criteria for establishing marks may be linked to notion of ‘conflicting gender role demands’ (Bergvall, 1996: 174) referred to in Chapter Six, where women were described as taking on typically masculine behaviour. Thus far in the data, both Martin and Donald have consistently been seen to exhibit directness and confidence in their contributions to the group. It is conceivable therefore, that it was important for Janet and Alice to maintain a similar approach in their contributions towards giving marks, even though these contributions were tempered with reference to not ‘hurting people’s feelings’. This would mean not showing ‘weaknesses’ through uncertainty, a trait consistent with the ‘masculine’ stereotype referred to by Bergvall (1996).

However, the issue of limited student ability in interpreting criteria provided to them by tutors receives some attention in the literature (Boud, 1989:25; Ormand et al., 1996:245; Rust et al., 2003:162; Struyven et al., 2005:334). Direct evidence from the data considered in this chapter that alludes to this is limited, a notable exception being Janet’s question in T195: “What’s cohesion?” Overall, engagement with the performance criteria was limited to repetition of descriptor elements, and statements declaring whether elements of the draft did or did not match these criteria.

The themes referred to in the excerpts considered in this section are taken forward into the analysis and discussion of the next recorded meeting, which is considered in the following section.

### 7.4 Analysis of Transcript 3: reaction to feedback

This recording was taken two weeks after the second recording. The group’s task was to consider the feedback from the peer group of their draft text on the development of fighter aircraft. After initial social exchanges at the beginning of the meeting, discussion of this feedback began with expressions of relief at the overall score they were given:
Transcript 3 Excerpt 1

01 Janet: It’s not bad, 60
02 Alice: Referencing 1, yeah, well we knew we didn’t put any references in.
03 Janet: Exactly. That’s partly my fault.
04 Martin: We didn’t do as bad as Airbus A380
05 Janet: Then again I don’t think that’s possible.
06 Martin: No, I think we’re being quite generous giving them 2s. It should have been 1s throughout.

This excerpt displays an apparent acceptance of the criticism from the peer group on the absence of references. However, Martin’s use of language in T04 has a competitive tone when he compares the two drafts; this is extended in his re-evaluation of the “generous” marks he felt they awarded the peer group draft (T06). The excerpt also shows Janet reassuring the others that their efforts were of an acceptable standard, while directing criticism from the feedback towards herself. After a brief discussion comparing the styles of the two reviews, Martin returns to the comments the peer group made about their draft:

Transcript 3 Excerpt 2

38 Martin: No this isn’t that bad. This is quite nice in comparison to what the other group …
39 Janet: [Yeah, “the structure fails in paragraphing”, that’s because I tried to piece it together as quickly as possible, really.
40 Donald: That’s very easy.
41 Alice: Yeah, they have given us some good advice.
42 Janet: “Insertion of questions in the middle of text, third page, third paragraph; sometimes text doesn’t flow.”
43 Martin: It’s funny. If theirs was written as badly as their peer review is, Jesus! How many times is there like, errors in here.
44 Alice: They keep relating to that third page third paragraph.
45 Janet: Third page, third paragraph? What is that?
46 Alice: That one would be mine (nervous laughter).
47 Janet: It’s more than likely mine, so don’t worry about it. I tried to piece everything together.
   Third page, third paragraph. (Pause)
48 Donald: Read it out.
49 Alice: What do you class is it … the 1, 2, 3, yeah, that’s mine (laughter)
50 Janet: “Isn’t linked logically to the second.” That’s my doing. Sorry. “You stress the importance and then you ask if this is relevant.” It makes sense in my head.
51 Martin: There you go. Don’t knock yourself out reading it.
52 Janet: (Excitedly) Oh, I want to go read it again. (Shuffling of papers)

In establishing a link between peer assessment and self-assessment, Liu and Carless (2006: 281) claim that “peer feedback can enable students to better self-assess themselves as some skills are common to both ….” There does seem to be some evidence of this in this excerpt; self-assessment is seen when students reflect on what they have or have not done (Ts 39/47/50), and as a reaction to the comments provided by the peer group (Ts 39/42/50), although this is all done by the young women in the group. Elsewhere in the excerpt, Martin (T43) returns to the plagiarism theme developed in the second group meeting. He clearly indicates that the review is full of errors and this leads him to reflect on what the
quality of the report would have been like if it had been written by the same person. From this, one can begin to speculate on the cause of or explanation for the plagiarism. For instance, given the quality of the review text, it is conceivable that the peer review group simply lacked the ability and/or confidence to write their draft. Alternatively, there may have been problems establishing a group consensus which resulted in one member taking the initiative by downloading and using material from the Internet. Indeed, such a scenario suggests that some tasks may in fact make plagiarism more likely, a concern that has implications for course design and assessment. Of course, it may have been that the group lacked the motivation to engage with the task, for whatever reasons. However, even if this is the case, one would want to ask what the implications of this are for university lecturers in terms of teaching and learning strategies. It could be argued that to blame the group for lacking motivation is to both patronise the group and to renege on the professional responsibilities of the tutors involved.

A key feature of the two excerpts so far considered in this section is the way in which Janet and Alice are forthcoming in taking responsibility for criticisms of their draft. In relation to this theme, data referred to in Chapter Six showed similarities with a study carried out by Bergvall (1996) of four engineering students, where a female participant “downplays her activities” and “brackets all her efforts with self-effacing remarks” (p.188), features which, the author points out, the male students are not seen to exhibit. Such similarities between Bergvall’s study and the data from Meeting 2 appear to have become more evident. Certainly in these excerpts, Janet and Alice are seen to offer apologies (Ts 03/50) or admit responsibility for mistakes (Ts 39/46), behaviour not seen from Martin and Donald. Other features Bergvall refers to includes ‘facilitative work’ which involves “overtly encouraging and supporting the rest of the group members” (p. 188). Again, Janet is seen to be active in this respect, although both Donald (T40) and Martin (T51) are moved to offer consoling remarks, representing a marked shift in behaviour.

In the following excerpt, the group express their feelings about the remarks the peer group made about their draft:

Transcript 3 Excerpt 3

94 Alice: It’s constructive criticism
95 Martin: It’s not really constructive at all, is it?
96 Janet: There isn’t any actual nice … I think, the nicest bit is reasonable. Informative. But technically, have they said anything nice about ours?
Donald: Well, they haven’t said anything nasty about it, just constructive.
Janet: “Chronological structure and accurate historical data”, that’s pretty good! “Greater emphasis to explain the actual political status that’s leading to the aircraft development.” We can do that! Actually they’ve been really nice.
Martin: You have to tell which part’s mine now because I’ve got like little references in the corners, and so like they said there’s obviously evidence of referencing, but nobody’s put it in. (mild amusement)
Alice: No, cos we’ll all have different referencing, so we’ll need to …
Martin: [coordinate it.]

In this excerpt, feedback from the peer group is referred to as ‘nice’ and not ‘nasty’, language which echoes the ‘Pop Idol’ theme in the previous meeting. It is also language which illustrates much of what is seen in the discussion of feedback in this meeting, and which exemplifies an emotional response towards comments made about their work from their peers. Once again, this relates to the notion of “loss of face” (Cheng and Warren, 1997) in the sense that it highlights the desire of the students to feel comfortable with the feedback. Indeed, its prominence as a feature, both here and in Transcript 2, draws attention to the importance of how feedback is presented, serving also as a reminder to the tutor of student sensitivity to this issue.

Vickerman (2009:223) claims that the positive aspects of formative peer assessment include “monitoring progress as you learn and adopting strategies if they are not working effectively.” The data suggest that the group had the desire to refer to some of the points that were made in the review for their redraft. This is seen in remarks from Janet, Alice and Martin (Ts 98/100/101), where they express their intent to address shortcomings identified by the peer group.

Much of the remainder of the talk in this group meeting was concerned with various off-task themes related to other course members, but also the logistics of how they would next meet in order to redraft their text. The next section considers some of the events of this fourth meeting, including the way in which the group considered and applied the feedback from the peer group to the redraft of their text on the development of fighter aircraft.

### 7.5 Analysis of Transcript 4: the redrafting process

The final recorded meeting took place in a room with a computer, with Martin making the changes to their draft text on screen during the meeting. In considering the data from this meeting, a useful comparison can be made with a study carried out by Jansson (2006) on
student talk in collaborative writing sessions at university. In this study, the author refers to a student group making sense of teachers’ comments through peer scaffolding: “The student-writers are in this fashion constructing for each other a collective scaffold and creating a mutual understanding of the writing norm, where the voicing of the tutors serves as a mediating tool” (Jansson, 2006:679). It is this notion of the use of feedback as a ‘mediating tool’ that is, I believe, a useful way to consider how the group engage with the peer feedback, as opposed to tutor feedback, during this meeting to redraft their text. The two excerpts that have been selected for this section illustrate the way this was seen to occur:

Transcript 4 Excerpt 1
75 Janet: Right you need to change ... apparently, according to ????, ‘Fighter jets’ needs to be changed to ‘Fighter aircraft’.
76 Donald: Why. Cos they’re not all jet-powered?
77 Janet: Exactly.
78 Martin: After the end of the second world war, all fighter aeroplanes were fighter jet, they don’t make (XX) any more now.
79 Janet: (reading quietly) “combat in the form of aerial attack. However, it was not until the Second World War that ... that fighter jets were predominantly used to gain air superiority …
80 Martin: [That should be “after the Second World War.”]
81 Alice: It says “there should be greater emphasis to explain the actual political status that’s leading aircraft development.” (Pause) I thought we’d quite a lot.
82 Janet: “That fighter jets were predominantly used to gain air superiority which was crucial in the ...
83 Martin: [I think we change, I think we change that to “during the second world war the fighter aircraft were predominantly used to gain air superiority” because fighter jets weren’t used until the very end of the war and even then they were useless.
84 Janet: But can’t we just pretend that they weren’t
85 Martin: No. Because it’s not really difficult to figure out … just type in to Wikipedia “fighter aircraft” and it says that they weren’t used in the Second World War.

Jansson (2006:682) describes how in her study, the group created “a learning environment by engaging in mutual and collective scaffolding … when they challenge each other with initiatives for text revisions.” In this excerpt, ‘challenge’ arises from attention being drawn to more detailed elements of their draft text via the review text. This is first seen in a recommendation from the review text referring to the use of the term ‘Fighter Jet’ (T75). This recommendation is not treated uncritically by Martin (Alice is also seen to question the validity of a review comment in T81), while Janet’s persistence on this topic leads Martin to make explanations for his position more explicit (T83). In this excerpt, therefore, ‘challenge’ is seen primarily towards the ‘mediating’ tool itself, i.e. the review text. This may be a reflection of the student origin of the text, and hence the ‘authority’ of the
feedback. In fact, there is little evidence generally of students challenging each other in the way Jansson describes. A further point that can be made about this extract relates to Martin’s comment in T85 where he shows sensitivity to accuracy. This suggests that there is, in his case at least, a possible “deterrent effect” (Born, 2003:223) as a result of encountering shortcomings in the work of the peer group in terms of plagiarism.

Another feature of this excerpt is how Janet and Alice adopt both ‘central’ and/or ‘generative’ (Northedge, 2006) positions. Indeed, compared to earlier meetings, there is a far greater sense of their confidence in terms of contributing to the group task process. One explanation for this is improved familiarity with each other within the group as a result of discussion on social topics over the meetings; as with earlier meetings, social conversation is also a strong feature of this meeting. However, a second reason may relate to greater experience of the topic combined with the scaffolding effect of the review text. This latter aspect in particular may also have served to provide a clearer perspective for task advancement, a feature which would have played to the organizational concerns of both Janet and Alice, as exhibited in earlier meetings.

The process continues below, with various references to the review text (in quotation marks). The excerpt begins with Martin asking for guidance on how to proceed with the redraft:

Transcript 4 Excerpt 2

87 Martin: So what do they want us to change in this part?
88 Janet: Right, which bit? We need to change the (XX) Vulcan as well.
89 Martin: Yes, to English Electric Lightning
90 Alice: When you change my bit …
91 Janet: “It was not until during the second world war”? or have we changed that to …
92 Martin: [Well I’ve just changed … that fighter aircraft were used because it wasn’t necessarily jets.
93 Janet: “Until during”, I think that makes sense. “However, it was not until during the …
94 Alice: [Yeah, cos the bit I’ve done, it doesn’t really …
95 Martin: [Yeah, I’d say that all right.
96 Alice: I think all of this is O.K., it’s when it gets to my bit, it doesn’t … flow.
97 Donald: Those paragraphs still, sort of, too short are they, I think.
98 Janet: “which was crucial in the allied victory.”
99 Alice: It says, yeah, something about paragraphs
100 Janet: “Originally, fighter aircrafts were purposely built in order to shoot down …”
101 Alice: “Structure fails, and paragraphing”
102 Janet: “and are armed with a wing mounted cannon … and made … allowing it to be manoeuvrable.”
103 Alice: We definitely need changes the bit where I did …
104 Janet: [We definitely need to change … “and were armed and (XXX) and made of light metal.” Does that make …? Shouldn’t it be something …
Both Alice and Janet are now seen to have increasingly central and generative (Northedge, 2006) positions in this excerpt. In terms of the scaffolding process and “creating a mutual understanding of the writing norm” (Jansson, 2006: 679), reference is made to structural features, including length of paragraph (T97), and experimentation with ideas and forms of expression, as seen in Janet’s repetition of words to get a sense of their appropriateness (e.g. T93).

However, a significant feature in this excerpt is how both Alice and Janet admit to problems in the draft related to their contributions (Ts 94/96/103/108). This feature is a reminder of Bergvall’s (1996:188) reference to female participants in groups who “downplay” their activities and frame their efforts with “self-effacing remarks”, first referred to in Chapter Six. Although these remarks are essentially apologetic, there is encouragement of each others’ efforts, which appears to function as a way of facilitating the progress of the discussion and the task, and also, one would assume, boosting confidence levels.

Overall, it is seen in the data from Meeting 4 that the act of making the changes to the draft engenders more thorough exploration of points of detail, including experimenting with different forms of expression and justifying content. This behaviour therefore indicates a deeper level of engagement with aspects of the writing process compared to the two previous meetings.

7.6 Summary and discussion

This chapter has considered transcripts from group meetings two, three and four. In Meeting 2, the focus for discussion was determined by a tutor-imposed task: a peer assessment exercise which required the preparation of a brief written review of a peer group draft assignment. This activity was also seen to have had an important influence on
the way the group conducted the two subsequent meetings. Evidence for learning from this tutor-driven task, and also how its imposition was seen to affect the way the group functioned, will be reviewed in this section. In addition, comparisons between group talk in this context will be made with the ‘looser’ structure to the group talk in the first meeting discussed in Chapter Six.

Group engagement with writing performance criteria was a central aspect of the given task. The aim of its use in Meeting 2 was to assist the group in providing feedback to the peer group. However, it also had a central role in considering feedback from the peer group in Meeting 3, as well as in performing the redrafting process in Meeting 4. Each of these stages involved engagement with feedback for writing. On this theme, Sadler (1989) argued that three conditions are required if students are to benefit from feedback on their academic tasks. These conditions are summarised as follows:

1. Students need to know what constitutes good performance in terms of an understanding of the standard they are aiming for;
2. Students need to be able to compare their current performance with ‘good’ (or standard) performance in terms of how they relate to each other;
3. Students need to know how to improve their current performance so that it more resembles the ‘good’ performance.

As part of the process for establishing evidence for learning, these conditions will now be considered in relation to group meetings 2 – 4.

To begin with, Sadler’s first condition is represented in the performance criteria for academic writing provided to the group, where relative descriptors articulate features of ‘good’ and not so ‘good’ performance. The second condition, relating current performance to ‘good’ performance, is seen in the group’s preparation of feedback for the peer group in Meeting 2, and also to the reaction to feedback from the peer group in Meeting 3. The third condition implies taking action (Sadler, 1989: 121) to narrow the gap between these two types of performance. This ‘action’ is illustrated in Meeting 4, where the group are engaged in the task of redrafting their text on the development of fighter aircraft. These conditions are elaborated and discussed below in relation to the data.
With regard to Sadler’s first condition, the data reveals how group engagement with the writing performance criteria appeared to be primarily driven by the task requirement of establishing marks for the different categories of performance. This approach involved drawing attention to descriptors that were seen to reflect what the peer group’s draft text did not do; this was particularly seen with reference to the lack of ‘flow’ and ‘argument’ in the peer group’s draft text in Meeting 2. The process of determining marks also appeared to encourage the repetition of descriptors from the criteria, while there was no focus on actual content of the draft. According to Boud and Falchikov’s (2006:403), a focus on assessment can inhibit student learning behaviour because “grading leads students to focus on marks rather than the learning they purport to represent.” In terms of Sadler’s first condition, evidence for the group’s understanding of what constitutes good performance is uncertain, as discussion focused on what marks to award and not the criteria.

Sadler’s second condition refers to students being able to compare current performance with good performance. In Meeting 3, and supporting other studies in terms of the benefits of peer assessment (Liu and Carless, 2006; Vickerman, 2009), the group were seen to use the review from the peer group to make a number of references to examples where their draft fell short of ‘good’ features of academic writing. These features included the absence of referencing, structural problems at the paragraph level, as well as possible missing elements such as a political theme. In addition to voicing this recognition, the group also referred to addressing the points in a later draft.

Regarding Sadler’s third condition, the group took ‘action’ in Meeting 4 by redrafting their assignment in the light of peer group feedback, where this feedback functioned as a “mediating tool” (Jansson, 2006:679). Reference was made in the analysis to evidence where the group challenged the feedback, as opposed to each other as in Jansson’s study where feedback was derived from the tutor. A possible reason for this was that the feedback would not necessarily have been considered an ‘expert scaffold’ by the student group, perhaps leaving them uncertain of its merits.

The notion of a ‘mediating tool’ from Jansson’s study also provides a useful way of thinking about other aspects of the data presented in this chapter. Firstly, the imposition of the tutor-led task essentially mediated group engagement in terms of directing focus onto the scoring of the draft. Engagement with this task was in turn mediated significantly by
the notion of ‘loss of face’ (Cheng and Warren, 1997), when a number of comments from Alice and Janet expressed how they felt about the ‘fairness’ of the marks they were given by the peer group. Indeed, this concern may be seen to have been readily fuelled by the already well established culture of emphasis on examination and test scores from their educational backgrounds.

A second significant mediating factor relates to aspects of gender issues that were presented as influencing group engagement with the task. Chapter Six referred to Bergvall’s (1996: 192) assertion that “women display speech behaviours that transcend easy boundaries: they are assertive, forceful, facilitative, apologetic and hesitant by turns.” While referring to Transcript 1, this account broadly describes the speech behaviours exhibited by Alice and Janet in particular over the 4 meetings. However, in meetings 2 - 4, many of these features played increasingly influential roles as these individuals became more central and generative to group proceedings. Key in this respect was maintaining the stability of the group as well as promoting progress in the task through various kinds of facilitative behaviour. It was also suggested that increasing amounts of time spent in the meetings discussing non-task-related, or social, topics helped to create a more inclusive and positive environment.

Thus, in an overall sense, group engagement with the tutor-led task and the performance criteria raised important issues regarding student appreciation of features and conventions of academic writing style at this early stage of their university careers. In this study, the nature of the task with regard to its scoring aspect resulted in the group’s preoccupation with establishing scores for the peer group draft. This situation seems to have deflected the group from engaging more meaningfully with features referred to in the performance criteria. However, in another respect, the claim that peer assessment can inhibit group cooperation (Boud et al., 1999:421) is not explicitly borne out in this study. Although a number of instances of individual discomfort when discussing marks to give their peers were referred to in the data, there was no direct evidence of this affecting cooperation between members or carrying out the task, or their willingness to carry out the task in the first instance. In fact, it seems that the imposed tasks had the effect of helping the group to ‘form’ and begin to cooperate, not least because the individuals concerned were ‘joined’ through their mutual desire to complete the tasks.
The conclusion here of the effects of the tutor-imposed task on the group may therefore be contrasted somewhat with the findings from the data in Chapter Six. In Chapter Six, it was seen in the third extract in particular that the less constrained environment appeared to be more conducive to giving the group the freedom to generate new knowledge or insights, or ‘significant new ideas’, in Tan’s terms. This realisation can therefore be seen to have implications for how to approach the kind of tutor-led task introduced in the second meeting. The message that emerges is that the students may be better left alone initially to develop their own understandings of what they see in a peer group’s text. The implications of these issues and what they mean in terms of task types (e.g. open-tasks; closed tasks), and when they are carried out by students, are returned to in Chapter Nine.

In summary, the data in this chapter appears to show both positive and negative effects of the imposition of a tutor-led task and engagement with performance criteria. Firstly, group discussion in meetings 2 and 3 appeared to be limited by the task, largely due to emphasis being given to the performance criteria combined with the assessment element. In a positive sense, however, an enhanced sense of purpose was established by the task which appeared to galvanise the group, and which may have helped Janet and Alice in particular move towards more central and generative positions (Northedge, 2003) in terms of their contributions to the overall task. With regard to learning, redrafting the draft text in Transcript four illustrated group engagement with good practice associated with the writing process; in particular, through collectively reformulating and testing ideas about content and style of the text.

In the next chapter, perceptions of group work from both students and staff involved in this study will be considered.
Chapter Eight

Data Analysis 3: student and tutor perceptions

8.1 Introduction

In this final analysis chapter, the process of working in groups will be considered from a different perspective: I look at what students and tutors say about working in groups when interviewed or in discussions about working methods during course meetings. In the chapter, I draw on the following:

(i) three recordings of group interviews, one recording with each of three separate groups of students working on their own writing projects;
(ii) two recordings of meetings with tutors (including myself) who taught on the Communication Skills course module.

In these interviews and meetings, the thoughts of students and tutors about the process, the potential and the challenges of working in groups are discussed. Their comments provide further insights into how groups work, but this time from a different angle. By adding these thoughts to insights from previous chapters, I hope to develop my own thinking and understanding about group work, and about how I might use this new understanding in my professional field. Understanding from all the analysis chapters (Six to Eight) will, then, be brought together in the final chapter.

The sections below attempt to synthesise data related to group work from both student group interviews and tutor meetings, and are organised into general themes that I have identified as emerging from the data. These themes are as follows:

• Group member selection
• Student perspectives on the group task
• For tutors, what does ‘working well’ in a group mean?
• Implications for learning in groups.

These themes will be considered in sections 8.3 - 8.6 after brief comments on the tutor and student data.
8.2 Tutor meeting and student interview data

As explained in Chapter Five, the tutor meetings were not set up for the purpose of data collection but were scheduled as part of the administration of the Communication Skills programme. The first tutor meeting for the programme took place mid-way through the course, the second in the week after the course had finished (Dec 06). A wide range of topics related to the course were discussed; in this chapter, only talk related to group work activity is considered.

The three student group interviews also took place during the week following the completion of the course. Chapter Four refers to the rationale for the use of group interviews in this study, which involved a semi-structured approach using open-ended questions. Students were asked to reflect on their experiences of working together in their groups, including what they felt to be the positive and negative aspects.

The three groups of students interviewed were as follows: firstly, two groups from a colleague’s class (Group 1 and Group 2), and secondly, the student group featured in Chapters 6 and 7 of this thesis (here called Group 3). Student and tutor names have been changed for the purpose of anonymity (Group 3 are referred to using the same pseudonyms as in Chapters 6 and 7; tutors are also given pseudonyms, except for myself):

Group 1: Keith, Sam, Jeremy, Daniel
Group 2: Jack, Ben, Andrew
Group 3: Martin, Donald, Janet (Alice was absent from this interview)

Tutors: Derek, Mary, Sarah, Thomas, Patrick, Roger

Of course, there are limitations in terms of what can be learned from asking people directly what they think about a process, such as working in groups. Some of the limitations, then, of the interview data that I acknowledge are:

1. The dynamic circumstances of group work create complex and varied events, making recall difficult for students.
2. The amorphous nature of group work makes it difficult for students to identify what they are taking from the experience.
3. The students may lack the language to talk about their experience.
4. More time may be needed before students perceive any value they may have gained from the experience: in this study, there was only one week between the ending of the course and the interviews.

Despite these limitations, I believe it is still worthwhile to look closely at these data as they give some insights into what the students were thinking about group work at the time, as well as to events that happened outside the tape recorded sessions. In addition to the student data, the data from the tutors helps to reveal the challenges they perceive in getting students to work together, as well as some of the limits of their understandings of the complexities of the process.

The next section considers the first of the themes derived from the tutor and student data: group member selection.

8.3  Group member selection

The initial experience of forming groups at the beginning of the course was referred to by both tutors and students. With regard to the tutor accounts, it emerged that the approach they adopted in order to establish student groups was not entirely uniform. One tutor put the students into groups and instructed them to decide their project topic from there; the remaining tutors adopted a self-selection approach by getting the students to mingle and participate in a discussion activity based around possible areas of interest for project work.

The following accounts illustrate how the student groups who were interviewed approached the self-selection process. These accounts provide some insight into what the students felt was important for them when it came to considering other group members they were expected to work with.

8.3.1  Student accounts of group member selection

Student accounts of how they formed groups through the self-selection process varied slightly. Students in Group 1 report that they adopted a strategy which was consistent with the tutor’s suggested approach, i.e. that students should mingle and talk to different people so as to get to know them and their interests:

Jeremy: We were talking about the, like, the future course we’ll be doing next year.
Keith: We kind of made a bee-line for each other didn’t we? When we realised we were going on to the same School, and then in the lesson, we were like going round to each other, weren’t we?

Sam: Yeah, asking about … something …

Keith: Yeah, what topic we were interested in …

In the following two extracts, a different approach is described. These accounts suggest not only a degree of ambivalence to the task of making a selection amongst virtual strangers, but also the importance of intuition:

Jack: It was just turning the chairs round, wasn’t it?
Ben: Yeah, we were already kind of sitting together.
Jack: We just kind of turned our chairs round and said hello to each other and carried on. It wasn’t … we didn’t know anyone, so …
Andrew: More about proximity than anything else.
Jack: I don’t think I knew anyone on the course, at all … just … we seemed to get along …

Martin: We just couldn’t be bothered to go round …
Donald: We were sat in …
Janet: We just turned round …
Donald: That’s the worst thing, when you’re with a pile of new people, you don’t know anything about, and you’re asked to form a group to do a project. You sort of don’t want to end up with somebody you don’t feel you could work with. So we all sort of, took one look at each other and thought, ‘O.K., I think we can …’
Janet: Just about … (general laughter)

In the accounts from Group 2 and Group 3, group selection is linked to the proximity of others, while fate is seen to play a big part in success. This is reiterated in the following, although there is an awareness of how conflicts emerged in other groups:

Jack: I didn’t really think about it, I suppose …
Andrew: I didn’t really worry about it too much …
Ben: Cos in other groups they had disputes, like, who wanted to be in charge, and so… it just kind of fell to that way.
Jack: Naturally more than anything. Cos, people were open to that sort of thing
Thomas: It’s just the way the kind of personalities …
Ben: (unclear beginning) … really good group, in the end. We worked very well together.

123
Thus, it is most commonly the case that chance and proximity to others is the way the
groups were formed, although assessment of personality and instinct seems to play a part.
Only Group 1 seems to have taken a different approach to choosing other group members.

In the following, reference is made to another group as lacking a social element, seen as
vital to making a group function:

Jack: We were all, like, the same sort: we all liked the same sort of things; we all
talked to each other in lectures and all this sort … so …
Ben: You looked at some of the other groups and they clearly weren’t
communicating, so … they were just direct, to the point.
Jack: Like I say in the le … you could see one person in a group who would be
there… they wouldn’t mix with each other, wouldn’t get to know each
other. I mean, we all sit with each other, we communicate, we share notes.

(Group 2)

Group 2 therefore see themselves as different from the group that ‘weren’t
communicating’, while their own sense of togetherness is a feature they use to help define
themselves as a group. What is more, as Jack points out, it is a feature that is necessary if a
group want to function effectively pedagogically (‘we share notes’). However, a ‘chicken
and egg’ scenario would appear to characterise such claims: do Jack and Ben describe the
importance of both social and pedagogic elements because their group was ‘successful’, or
were these elements perceived to be necessary prior to their group experience? Volet and
Mansfield (2006) also report in their study that students who perceived their group
experience as having both social and pedagogic functions adapted better to working
together with others. As these accounts were also given ‘after the event’, it seems the same
questions may be applied.

8.3.2 Tutor accounts of group member selection

The relative merits of self-selection were raised in the second tutor meeting. Whereas there
is agreement with the student accounts regarding the part played by ‘chemistry’ in group
selection, the other student themes of proximity to other students and academic subject
interest are not highlighted. Instead, social categories including gender, class and national
identity are referred to:

Mary: I mean some of the groups in the class. You know, mixtures of native
speakers and non-native speakers that you wouldn’t have anticipated. And
you wouldn’t have put, you wouldn’t have taken one boy and put him with
three girls, you just wouldn’t do that. But that’s the way they formed a
group and it actually worked very well.

(Tutor Meeting 2)

However, Patrick observes how in his class groups formed according to ‘types’ they
associated themselves with:

Patrick: When we put our groups together or they put their groups together, I notice,
shall I say … all the scallies are in one group. The English guys, the ones
who seem to be a little immature, the larking about sort of guys, the back of
the class boys, they decided they wanted to work together. I’m sure it was
on the grounds of personality, and, I think other things were, you know, I
think a number of people decided purely on the basis of being from Saudi
Arabia, really. So, there are lots of factors involved there.

(Tutor Meeting 2)

A possible interpretation from Patrick’s remarks here is that the confidence of individuals,
particularly at this early stage of the course, plays an important part in explaining why
individuals self-select fellow group members according to social categories they are
comfortable with.

It seems the three student groups who described their experiences appeared happy with
self-selection, although this may be explained by their apparent satisfaction with their
groups. Other groups not part of this study may not agree, however. For instance, it is
conceivable that some students would consider daunting the responsibility of finding group
members amongst relative strangers in a new environment. This may be particularly true of
students who do not feel confident in their new sociocultural environment. The tutor taking
responsibility by allocating students to groups may therefore be preferred by such
individuals.

Thus, the student group data in this section suggests that social compatibility amongst
group members was high on their agenda, while a perceived link between this aspect and
pedagogic success was also established by the students. Social compatibility is also
acknowledged in the tutor data. Indeed, one of the ‘lots of factors involved’ referred to by
Patrick includes nationality types forming groups. As referred to in Chapter One, a large
number of non-native speakers made up the student cohort for the Communication Skills
course unit, and one of the wider aims of the course was to integrate these students into the
course community as far as possible by including them in groups with native speakers.
However, students were only encouraged to integrate in this respect during group formation, and such integration was not strictly enforced.

Thus tensions may be seen to emerge between the tutors’ wider aim of integrating students and the social compatibility many students aspire to when forming groups. For instance, in relation to assessment, students may perceive that they would be able to work better with more socially compatible group members, and as a result get better grades. In Chapters Six and Seven, numerous issues and difficulties were seen to affect the way Group 3 operated in their quest to achieve their aim of gaining a good mark. As this group were culturally and linguistically homogenous, it could therefore be argued that forming mixed groups linguistically and culturally would add another layer of difficulty to those already referred to in those chapters, difficulties which may also be perceived to be detrimental to their assessment outcomes.

### 8.4 Student perspectives on the group task

The way in which Group 1 approached their group task is given below. This description was closely echoed by all the student groups who were interviewed:

Keith: We all kind of went away and did your own little bits of research to begin with, didn’t we? We all wrote our own bits of … on weapons.
Jeremy: Then we joined it all together.
Keith: Yeah we … joined it all together.

(Group 1)

However, such an approach was seen to produce challenges, both in terms of how the students integrated their contributions and also in terms of developing strategies for ensuring that they completed the group task. The role of assessment was also seen to play an important role in shaping the students’ approach. These points are considered below:

#### 8.4.1 The challenges of collaborative writing

Chapter Two refers to a range of arguments that support group learning, as put forward by its proponents. These arguments highlight the collective behaviour of individuals, such as ‘shared support’ and “equal input into planning” (Tennant 1997: 362). However, it became evident from the groups who were interviewed that they chose to work separately from each other for much of the writing process, only coming together at a later stage. In
the following account, the Group 2 refer to a loss of coherence when separately written parts of a single text are brought together. This is perhaps inevitable, given the way the task was approached. The solution to this problem was to have one person performing the editing role:

Ben: We had our own writing style. So when we put all four chunks and kind of information together it didn’t really flow … because one person read it through and edited it themselves it all came into one.

Jack: If it hadn’t been edited, it would have been terrible, I think. It wouldn’t have flowed at all.

(Group 2)

Group 3 report similar sentiments. In particular, they report that working on improving or creating a uniform style to improve ‘flow’ is difficult and time consuming. Considerable time and effort was clearly devoted to the editing task – a task which one could argue had little, if anything, to do with group work or group learning:

Martin: When you write in a group like that, I don’t think it would flow as well, as if you wrote it yourself … unless you were to heavily edit: all the other people around one person’s style. Then, it would flow, but it would take up very heavy editing to do it.

Janet: When I stuck our report together I tried to do that. But in the end it was taking me hours to try and …

Martin: Yeah

Janet: So I just, like, cut it, and put it in places and stuff, which is possibly why it didn’t fit together.

Martin: Even when we put it together in the end, we had to … there was one part where Janet deleted a whole paragraph and moved it and put it in the middle of somebody else’s paragraph, and had to write bits to go around it. So, yeah … it’s quite difficult to do.

(Group 3)

As seen in the following extract, Group 3 have an ambivalence about group work; it also suggests this ‘editing and pasting’ work is seen as time-consuming and frustrating. Of course, in some ways, the task would have been more efficiently achieved if each person had worked alone, although this would be to miss the point of working in a group. However, for as long as the task is approached by each person working separately one would have to ask: where is the ‘group work’ going on?
Derek: Do you think it was … I mean from your perspective would you rather do something like this or would you prefer to … you know, work more on your own?

Martin: I prefer working on my own.

Janet: I prefer working in a group.

Donald: It depends what the task is I suppose.

Martin: Yeah. Something like a report is easier to do by yourself because trying to join different people’s writing styles and things becomes much more difficult than say if I’d just written it myself. I’d probably be able to do it quicker, and have had the inclination just to sit down and do it in one go, as opposed to taking longer to do it, yeah.

Janet: You don’t have to mess around and stick it all together and then …

Martin: It’d be much quicker if you did it by yourself, yeah.

Janet: Getting it down and sticking all the references in … the referencing’s horrendous.

(Group 3)

This extract also begs the question, do students have a sense of why they are asked to work in groups?

Group 2 describe some positive aspects of working in a group. They refer to how group consultation served as a useful tool for developing individual writing. This was enhanced by having a sense of responsibility towards others in the group and a sense of group loyalty:

Jack: Yeah, I mean … I was … my topic, you know, to explain to one or two people what this is. I thought if they don’t understand it then, other people won’t understand it. So if I expand on it … if I write a bit more, if I explain it. And then if they understand it, then most people will understand it, so … make more sense.

Andrew: Helps with motivation as well, cos you’ve got kind of three other people waiting on something you are working on, kind of … makes you actually get down to doing it.

Ben: You don’t want to disappoint them, do you?

(Group 2)

Jack’s account resonates with Sadler’s (1989) second and third conditions for effective feedback, discussed in Chapter Seven: the second condition refers to the ability to compare current performance with ‘good’ (or standard) performance; the third to knowing how to improve current performance. In Jack’s case, condition two is seen in the feedback to his writing from his peers in the group, while condition three is seen in the action he takes to improve his text so that it becomes more understandable. This process is also described,
once again, as being aided by a sense of responsibility towards others in the group in terms of making your own writing understandable to others. His views are summed up neatly with the following:

Jack: You get to see what people think and how they write. If they don’t understand this, then you understand other people won’t understand this, so you have to write it differently. It’s like, (unclear word) communication within the report. It helps, to understand what other people are seeing within their work.

In the following section, further strategies the groups adopted in order to complete the group writing assignment task are explored.

8.4.2 Getting the job done

A key theme referred to by two of the student groups interviewed was the need for a group leader to facilitate the completion of the group task. In the following excerpt, the establishment of a leader is viewed as a ‘natural’ process, which is good for decision making and getting things done:

Jeremy: One person has to take on the role.
All: Yeah.
Derek You think that’s necessary?
Jeremy: Like kingdoms … there was one king (general laughter). And there was no delay in like … decisions or stuff like that.
Keith: It kind of just happened naturally anyway, didn’t it?
Jeremy: Yeah … that happens naturally. Whether you plan to do it or you don’t, it happens.

(Group 1)

Similarly in Group 2, the idea of the ‘natural leader’ is apparent. This seemed mutually beneficial as Jack wanted to take on the role and the others were happy to allow it. They even seemed to find the idea of being 'bossed' around amusing, as again the notion of social responsibility comes through:

Derek: From what you’re saying it sounds like somebody actually took on that role. That was you (referring to Jack)?
Ben: He was closest to the building, so it was easiest for him to drop off essays (light laughter).
Andrew: It worked for us as well cos it meant he kept us in check... (unclear remarks from others about Jack's role as ‘enforcer’).
Jack: I like everything done on time, so I usually set boundaries, like this will be done in this time.

Ben: Like, we felt guilty if we didn’t get it to him in time.

Jack: Yeah, I had a go at them if they didn’t (unclear phrase)

(Group 2)

This arrangement seems to have suited everyone in the group. However, in the next excerpt it becomes apparent where Jack’s motive for a leadership role stems from:

Jack: I prefer to work individually, so this is my way of being individual within the group, is that I know everything that’s going on. They give me the work and then I proof it and all that and fit it in. And then essentially, it’s done, to my standard (laughter from others). I know it sounds really bad, but it’s just what I prefer to do.

Group 2, then, present a particular version of cooperation in terms of the strategy they adopt for achieving a common goal (Springer, 1999). Once again, however, one would have to point to the fact that there is little evidence here of the group working together. Instead, one person has clearly taken the lead. Jack is obviously happy with this arrangement because he can ensure the standard of the work. At the same time, this means that the rest of the group merely follow his direction. In the literature this would be regarded as ‘free riding’, implying the rest of the group do not want to participate or contribute. However, given what this group say, one would have to acknowledge that they do not seem to have much choice in the matter. It is also interesting to consider the notion of ‘group cohesiveness’ in relation to these data. It could be argued that the group were, indeed, cohesive in the sense that mutual expectations amongst group members were clearly established between Jack and the others; they had found an approach that successfully achieved their aims and they all appeared to be happy with that approach. One would want to ask, again, however, whether cohesion is really the priority given that ‘cohesion’ can sometimes mean one person does most of the work.

Unlike Groups 1 and 2, Group 3 (the group on which I have focused in this thesis) made no overt mention of a leader who was responsible for coordinating events and ‘getting the job done’, and, indeed, the data from the group meetings support this. Data from the fourth recorded meeting (reported in Chapter Seven) showed them undertaking part of the editing stage of their assignment collectively. Overall, this meeting was characterised by
sequences where an individual would type while the others indulged in social conversation. This would be followed by brief group discussion with the ‘editor’ (typist) at relevant points, followed by a return to individual typing and others chatting. Indeed, in his account of this process, Martin is almost bemused at how in organisational terms, they achieved their task:

Martin: We got all our work done, but we weren’t necessarily on subject. It was strange … we kept doing a little bit and then talking about something else.

As with Group 2, then, the actual writing of the text was taken on by an individual in Group 3, even though the other group members were in the room at the same time. The difference in Martin’s account is that this way of working was not planned, but simply happened that way. Thus for both groups, the data point towards the conclusion that fully collaborative writing, where group members are constantly engaged with each other in the writing process, was not how the task was performed. I believe this to be partly driven by the fact that the groups were anxious to achieve a good grade and they saw this as more likely if they adopted a strategy which included one person taking responsibility for the overall content and presentation of the work. However, it also begs the question, what does it mean to write collaboratively – is it possible – and how might it be facilitated?

With regard to assessment, one approach to reducing its influence may be to bring the group writing component earlier into the programme in order to build in sufficient time for this activity, and away from the pressure of deadlines. Other problems over the difficulties in carrying out this kind of writing collectively remain, however, and the data suggest that the course team need to think more carefully about how the task is approached, and if the element of group working is to take precedence, rather than the achievement of the task.

The tutors’ perspectives on how the groups functioned are provided in the next section.

8.5 For tutors, what does working well mean?

An aspect of group work given much attention in tutor meeting 1 was the extent to which individual students contributed to the group effort. In this meeting, Thomas observes a range of characteristics in the way the groups in his classes worked, including the taking up
of leadership roles by individuals. However, he indicates his suspicion that some students take advantage of the opportunity to ‘loaf’:

Thomas: Some of them have been excellent.
Mary: Yeah.
Thomas: But you can see the natural leaders kind of rising to the top. I don’t know what you feel about it but I have certain groups where I think, you know, you feel some groups work well as a group and some groups you think, you know, there’s somebody working bloody hard in the middle here who’s pulling it all together. There are other people kind of floating around, and then there are people, you know, for example people who turned up for the first time last week [week 5 of the course], so I lumped them together.

(Tutor meeting 1)

These comments raise interesting questions about how tutors view the features of a successful, functioning group. Firstly, the notion of ‘natural leaders kind of rising to the top’ suggests a view of group functioning where it is desirable for a group to have a leader. Later, however, the remark that “there’s somebody working bloody hard in the middle here who’s pulling it all together” suggests that having a leader who does all the work is undesirable.

In the following, Patrick refers to the difficulties faced by students when there is a perceived lack of effort from their peers in the group:

Patrick: Anyway, I think there are quite a few people who are probably, probably, not, sort of, pulling their weight in this. I didn’t think the coordination was good in all the groups. Some groups seemed to be very well organised, some groups not … for example, one girl turned up, the rest of her group wasn’t there yesterday; she was unlucky … she was in the only group that didn’t turn up. She didn’t know where they were and couldn’t get hold of them.
Thomas: No, I had the same thing.
Patrick: I suspect that’s a problem for some of them.

(Tutor meeting 1)

Thus, for these tutors, there is the suspicion that getting students to work in this way provides an excuse for some to do less work. However, there is no indication from the tutors at this stage as to what they may be able to do to improve the situation; group success or otherwise is presented here as largely a matter of luck, a view that may be reinforced by uncertainty as to what students are actually doing in their groups. This theme is seen to continue in the following:
Thomas: And again, if they’re all saying we’re all individually working on our bits, again, that’s fairly evasive isn’t it, really?

Sarah: Yeah, that’s it.

Mary: I think I would take issue that you saying they’re being evasive because mine … perhaps I’m being too trusting by nature but they say yes we’ve got it sorted and you just have to, you know, look them in the eye …

Thomas: Well I agree with that … yes, well I agree with it to a certain extent Mary. I mean when I see groups working in the classroom, and they come in, and in each class, both of my classes, I’ve got maybe 3 or possibly 4 groups who come in, sit down together and get on with it. You get the feeling that they’re working together. You wander round, you ask them, and then there’s some sense that there’s real activity going on. Then you get others who are just kind of … (fades out)

(Tutor meeting 1)

The use of the word ‘evasive’ in this excerpt is interesting: the implication is that group work is used by some students as a ‘cover’ for not doing any work. Ironically, however, this description (“we’re all individually working on our bits”) is quite an accurate description of what goes on in many groups. It seems that a lot of ‘group work’ is done individually, with the collaborative element, i.e. group members actually sitting together and talking about their task, representing a relatively small proportion of overall time spent on the task. The impression from the tutor data, however, is that there is the need for reassurance that participation is occurring by witnessing collective activity during class time. This, therefore, raises the issue of tutor awareness of how groups work.

Although there is some enthusiasm for the benefits of group work in the following, this is quickly taken over by the prevailing theme of what are felt to be fundamental problems which cannot be overcome. These relate to students arriving on the course late and the perception that the nature of individuals cannot be changed, which means that taking measures to address certain problems can only have limited success:

Mary: The working in groups, I mean, if we re-jig it, whatever we decide about what we have about what they have to do in groups, if that changes, I think the principle of working in groups, I think it made a huge difference in what’s already been said in getting them talking to each other. And also in one of my … there was a … I had a lovely class on a Thursday and the feeling in the class was just superb. And I think it’s partly because they formed groups and they were quite closely bonded in these groups. It was lovely to see them, and that sort of helped to develop a class cohesion. I know that didn’t happen in a lot of classes, but I think when it works, it works extremely well.
Sarah: Yeah, when it works it does. When you had a few people who were a bit slack and they couldn’t get in touch with each other, and then it sort of fell apart.

Derek: Do you think there’s a strategy out there to address that in some way?

Sarah: No, cos you’re always going to get some who are not going to work as hard as the others, aren’t you?

Derek: Well, what I think I mean by that is, is there any way in which all of us can look out for the danger signs early on so that we can address it at a point which actually makes a difference?

Mary: I think the early on, the early on … that’s when they’re not turning up.

Sarah: That’s it, because of the absences; it’s really hard to make it gel then.

Thomas: That group that we had all the trouble with. That group didn’t form until week 4, 5 or 6, I can’t remember. I mean cos I said look you haven’t turned up before, you have to work together. They were a problem group.

Roger: Yeah, but if you look at the kind of … why are they turning up late? Why are they not in the swing of things early on? Cos of the kind of people they are.

Thomas: Precisely.

Roger: You’ve got problems whichever way you look at it, haven’t you?

Thomas: Precisely.

(Tutor Meeting 2)

This data echoes, in some ways, data quoted previously about the ‘scallies’ and others working together.

Discussion of the benefits to students of successful group engagement referred to by Mary changes quickly to the problems tutors perceive in some of their groups. These problems are talked about somewhat fatalistically: students are not turning up; groups are not being formed quickly; they are not getting in touch with each other; and some students do not appear to work as hard as others. Such circumstances can be seen to have an erosive effect on tutor perception of group work. Indeed, these experiences may have occurred repeatedly over a number of years, and may be perceived by the tutors to be largely outside their control. This view may partly explain why the tutor discussion does not develop reasons for non attendance or possible solutions, but instead moves on to reinforce an underlying theme with regard to the adoption of group work: the lack of effort or application on the part of some students, because of “the kind of people they are.”

In the next excerpt, views regarding student ability to produce a collaborative text are revealed:

Patrick: I think the idea of sharing the writing of a section so that they, as it were, lose their individual voice and fuse it all together, seems to be too much for
them. That’s why I asked about this. Trying to get them to write 300 words where they all input, is certainly hard.

Thomas: But it’s only 300 words, Patrick.
Patrick: It isn’t much, yeah, but I can still imagine.
Mary: It’s not much.
Patrick: And I fear, that probably, they’ll just leave it to the best writer, they’ll find out who the best writer is …
Thomas: Yes, but if they’ve gone away and they’ve thought about it, they will have some thoughts on what they’ve read.
Patrick: Yes, yes.
Thomas: So they’ll sit down, somebody will take some notes, they’ll be doing it in class, won’t they? You’ll be there with them, they can share their thoughts, somebody can write down some notes. If one person does the writing, so be it. More fool them. If they sit round a computer and they dictate sentences to each other, I mean it can take much longer, but they’ll come up with a slightly more unified product, or not.
Patrick: But they have a chance to input at the kind of correction stage, don’t they? They say ‘I agree’, ‘I don’t agree’ …
Mary: O.K.
Thomas: Yeah, but surely it’s a muddling through process.
Patrick: Oh yeah, I think so yeah. I’m not saying they shouldn’t do it, I’m just saying … I’m trying to imagine … (words trail off)
PAUSE
Patrick: O.K.

(Tutor meeting 1)

In this extract, Patrick’s perception of the group writing task for the peer review as being “too much” for his groups is reflected closely in the student data. As described in Chapter Seven, one possible explanation for plagiarism that was evident in the Airbus account was a lack of confidence in their own writing ability. His words also resonate with other student data that refer to the challenge of trying to edit together different sections of text which have been written individually. Patrick’s observations therefore serve to emphasise the point that these students were asked to perform a task which was, indeed, very difficult, especially when taking into consideration their relative inexperience. However, Patrick’s account of the difficulties student face in their group task is very different to the one other tutors want to give: for them, there is the assumption that it should be achievable because it is short, because they should have gone away and thought about it and because they would be foolish not to do it together. The data here once again raises the question of tutor perceptions and understandings of the difficulties of group work, and group writing in particular.
Patrick also touches on the importance of experience of group work as having a bearing on behaviour as group participants:

Patrick: It really is a difficult area but I suspect that some of these people haven’t done this type of thing where you work as a team. But, although you’d expect … I don’t know about the other students but you’d expect the British students to have covered (?) a bit of this at school, wouldn’t you?

(Tutor meeting 1)

These thoughts on the role of experience reveal further assumptions about group work. The first is that if students have worked in groups before, then that experience will allow them to be better at working in groups thereafter. The second assumption relies on the first, namely, that it is possible to learn how to work in groups. However, these assumptions fail to consider the unique social context of each new group situation and how the correspondingly unique dynamic forces in each new situation determine the relative success of the group. In other words, any ‘skills’ that are acquired in terms of learning how to operate in a given group environment are unique to that environment. It may be that having positive group learning experiences in one group situation can boost confidence about working in this way. However, this surely cannot be regarded as something akin to guaranteeing success next time, as a new context with different individuals will provide different challenges to be addressed. Indeed, one is reminded in this regard of the transferable skills debate discussed earlier in this thesis, where skills “are by definition inseparable from the contexts in which they are developed and displayed..” (Wolfe, 1991: 194).

8.6 Summary

This chapter was concerned with investigating group work from a different perspective: student and tutor perceptions. These perceptions were gathered from recorded group interviews with students and tutor staff meetings. The chapter began by referring to the limitations of using group interviews with the student groups. These included difficulties in recalling events, their abilities to talk about events, and insufficient time to discern any value they may have gained from the experience.

In the three group interviews, student accounts highlight the importance given to working in a group with people you get on with. This theme reinforces the extent to which the
students value the social aspect of the group experience, particularly so early on in their new educational environment. However, there was a degree of ambivalence in their accounts of the group formation process; self-selection was regarded favourably in this regard, although this finding was not surprising given their stated satisfaction with their groups.

The group interviews raised a number of issues in relation to the group writing task, in particular the difficulties of constructing a single group text. Some benefits of group work and writing were referred to in terms of peer understanding of text. However, comments were mainly related to the level of difficulty encountered when collating contributions from different individuals into a single text, a difficulty which highlights the relationship between group collaboration and the requirement of the assessed task. In one regard, this point raises questions over the appropriateness of group work for constructing a joint text. In particular, reservations were explained over employing a collective approach to an activity that was generally perceived as one which could best be carried out on an individual basis. This view was reinforced by their primary concern for the assessment aspect of the assignment, where a way of working was adopted that was deemed the most effective for addressing the task; if this meant that a single person was best equipped to carry out specific stages of text construction, then this was the best way forward for everybody. Such strategies, evidenced in the student reports of more ‘fragmented’ ways of working, appear to run counter to the notion of the ‘dynamic whole’ of a group referred to by Johnson and Johnson (1992:175).

From the tutors’ perspective, while there was some recognition of the value of the social contact for the students coming together, the vast majority of their comments related to issues concerned with ways in which problem groups failed to function. For most tutors, such problems related to levels of individual commitment from the students. Further, there appeared to be the assumption that students would either have already had experience of working in groups, or in any case be able to work together effectively. Similar assumptions seem also to have been made by most tutors about the groups’ abilities to produce a single text collectively written.

This chapter has also flagged up the relevance of some of these points for professional practice. These will be developed further in Chapter Nine.
Chapter 9

Conclusions

9.1 Introduction

Chapter One referred to this study as exploratory, with the broad aim of investigating group learning on a Communication Skills course unit of a Foundation Year programme at the University of Manchester. The main focus of the study was on analysing talk from one group of four students over several weeks with a view to understanding better what actually happens in groups interactionally, whether learning occurs, and if so, what sort of learning. Unit aims were taken into consideration for this task, alongside consideration of benchmark statements at institutional and national levels. Methods of inquiry included discourse analysis of verbatim transcriptions of student talk while engaged in their group task, as well as data from student group interviews and staff discussions.

The study was concerned with developing understanding in the following areas:

1. What new understandings do I have about research methodology in the area of group learning?
2. What evidence of learning can be seen in the transcriptions of student group work in the Communication Skills course unit?
3. What implications for professional practice arise from the study findings?
4. What new directions for further research are suggested?

This final chapter will both summarise and comment on the overall findings related to these areas. It begins in 9.2 with my reflections on researching group work, including the contributions this study has made to this type of research. This will be followed in 9.3 by a consideration of the research process and my status as an insider researcher. In 9.4, I present conclusions on the value of group work for learning as a result of carrying out the study, as well as implications for professional practice as a HE tutor. The chapter concludes in 9.5 with suggestions for future research.
9.2 *Researching group work*

This section begins with a consideration of the two approaches to discourse analysis adopted in this study. This will be followed by a more general discussion of the methodological approach that was taken and what I feel I have learned from the research process.

With regard to using discourse analysis for researching learning in group work, the study revealed that the combination of using Idea Frames and sociocultural approaches to discourse analysis allowed for the identification of evidence for learning from a wider perspective than using a single approach. However, with regard to Tan’s (2000) framework and the use of Idea Frames as a tool for data analysis, there were perceived limitations related to ambiguities in the interpretive task of applying sub-categories of Additive Frames (e.g. explaining; expanding) to the data (Chapter Six). The methodological approach taken in this study as a consequence was to ignore these sub-categories, as they did not affect the primary task of identifying Additive Frames and their cumulative effect in building towards ‘critical instances’. In this way, I believe that the framework became a workable tool for identifying such instances in group talk transcripts, although further limitations were apparent. Overall, the following conclusions have been drawn from its use:

1. The framework proved useful for ‘getting into’ the data in the initial stages of analysing the transcripts. This was in terms of pointing towards sequences of talk where knowledge construction, in Tan’s terms, was perceived to be occurring. In this respect, it was also seen as a useful tool for potentially identifying excerpts for closer analysis.

2. ‘Significant new ideas’ were identified with regard to organisational issues as well as substantive issues related to the task. This finding was useful in the sense that it drew attention to how the group were behaving organisationally, with implications for learning.

3. ‘Significant new ideas’ (learning) did not necessarily emerge immediately from cumulative Additive Frames, or Reactive Frames. On occasions, they were seen to lay dormant, temporarily, before being taken forward in ‘new directions’ at a later stage. On other occasions, the cumulative effect of Additive Frames or the use of Reactive Frames
did not produce new directions at all. As a result, these occasions pointed towards other forces, such as interpersonal or organisational issues, that may have helped to explain why these learning events were not happening.

4. Even with the removal of sub-categories of Additive and Reactive Frames in the analysis process, identification of Additive Frames and ‘significant new ideas’ could not always be carried out with confidence due to the interpretive nature of the analysis. In particular, the application of the framework to the data became increasingly problematic when participants were less engaged with a topic. At such times, judgements need to be made in the practice of analysis as to whether to persist with its use.

5. Tan’s framework became less useful as a tool for analysis in the tutor-led tasks recorded in transcripts 2 and 3, which were analysed in Chapter Seven. The nature of the task the students were asked to perform in these meetings, i.e. establishing scores for aspects of peer group writing using performance criteria, resulted in talk which was frequently restricted to suggesting the scores to be given to the peer group draft. Achieving agreement on these scores represented the ‘conclusions’ in Tan’s terms. This contrasted with ‘conclusions’ generating ‘significant new ideas’ and new directions in conversation as seen in Transcript 1, which was a discussion that was oriented towards generating ideas for their project. This finding had implications for the type of group talk the framework was more appropriate for analysing, as well as raising questions about the kind of task that facilitated talk which generated instances of learning in Tan’s terms.

Overall, the key limitation in the use of Tan’s framework was that it gave little insight into understanding the social processes that underpinned knowledge construction. However, as stated in point 3 above, a significant outcome from the use of the framework relates to the non-emergence of significant new ideas. By then taking a sociocultural perspective to the analysis of the data, it became possible to understand potential issues related to the social or interpersonal environment that might have influenced learning. This was achieved by focusing on the interplay between the cultural, historical and temporal elements that were seen to work dynamically in the group discourse. Important in this respect in this study was the cultural homogeneity of the group participants, and historical elements in terms of what each individual brought to the group situation derived from their backgrounds (e.g. relative knowledge of the task topic), in addition to the cumulative effect of group behaviour over
the period of the meetings. These features were seen to have important effects on establishing the group identity, the development of social norms, and the roles and behaviours of individuals. The temporal aspect of this analysis also allowed for the development of a story about the group to be told over the duration of the four meetings. This basis for consideration of the data allowed for the emergence from the data of important features influencing group behaviour, particularly gender and power relations. By adopting this approach to analysis, the effects of these themes on the group could be traced and this became progressively useful for understanding.

The process of line by line analysis adopted with the transcripts of group talk also allowed for the identification of features or themes with relevance to other aspects of teaching and learning, and which can provide different perspectives on these themes that may challenge common assumptions and theoretical claims. In this thesis, the apparent ambivalence students had towards plagiarism in Excerpts 11, 12 and 13 in Chapter Seven strongly suggests that this is a complicated and difficult area for students. This understanding should therefore be considered to be at least as important as assumptions authors and tutors may hold about students not facing up to their responsibilities in this regard. Similarly, line by line analysis has provided a different perspective on ‘social loafing’ or ‘free riding’ (Chapter Two). Rather than a phenomenon that is inevitably associated with laziness or cheating, the data point towards a situation where individuals may be restricted in their contributions through the behaviour of others in the group. Once again, the methodology allows for alternative ways of thinking about such an issue, and leads to alternative conclusions than to one which simply blames students for such behaviour.

Thus, a key contribution of this thesis with regard to researching learning in group work is in illustrating how the use of both approaches to discourse analysis, where each one is allowed to guide the analysis and inform it in different ways, allows for a richer understanding of data. Through the use of sociocultural discourse analysis in this study, the story could be told of how, over time, Alice and Janet’s participation in this ‘knowledge community’ became increasingly competent, and how the reduction in Martin and Donald’s obstructive or ‘blocking’ behaviour allowed for their contributions to influence directly group progress in their task. In addition, when used appropriately, Tan’s framework allows for insight into specific instances of learning, and how these instances were arrived at through tracing the cumulative effect of Additive Framing. Thus, used in
conjunction with each other, these approaches provide a more powerful and comprehensive approach to the discourse analysis of group talk transcripts.

9.3  

9.3  **Researching as an ‘insider’**

As the methodology adopted in this study involved the use of tape recordings of group work talk, and recordings of group interviews with students and of staff discussions, the data that were obtained were liable to be determined by the recording situation as well as participant perspectives determined prior to those meetings. Moreover, as referred to in Chapter Four, the tutor/student relationship carries with it issues related to power and status which inevitably influence the contributions students make; although the students were given assurances that the study was concerned only with how they worked together in a group, and that they should not associate the study with their assessment on the course, they would have been very aware of my role as their tutor. In addition to these factors, I believe that the importance and seriousness I attached to the study because of its research significance for me personally could have been sensed by the group. This factor, combined with the issue of power relations, would possibly affect consciously or unconsciously their group work performance, though more directly perhaps, on their reporting of their experiences and impressions in the group interviews.

However, a key feature of the methodology in this study relates to the four recorded group work meetings. As is clear in the literature in this area, there is a great deal of debate about group work in Higher Education which is *not* based on empirical data, and one of the contributions of this study is that it is based on careful analysis of such data, recorded in ‘real time’ as groupwork unfolded. I also believe that the four extended recordings over a number of meetings was important in terms of alleviating possible concerns over criticisms one may attribute to the validity of the data. To begin with, the students were given time to become familiar with being recorded and, as a result, became less reticent. Evidence for this was increasingly seen over the four recordings, where discussion more frequently lapsed into non task-related topics and where the style of language was informal and often of a personal nature. I also feel that this confidence about being forthcoming was enhanced by a ‘safety in numbers’ mentality, where the group context diffused attention from the individual.
A further consideration that may be seen to affect the validity of the data is the notion of ‘group think’ (see Chapter Three), where the influence of individuals on what others say affects the validity of the data. I believe that this proposition could be more strongly argued in relation to data from group interviews, where student opinion is asked and where the student may be more predisposed to ‘pleasing the teacher’, as opposed to discussion about carrying out a task. It seems reasonable to suggest that the risk of such distortion in talk while the students were engaged in group work would be considerably less. This point supports the primacy of the group talk data in this study.

With regard to analysis of the group talk transcripts, my reading of the data was influenced both by the unfamiliarity with this task and my close involvement with the development of the course. Concerning my reading of the data, my status as an insider researcher meant I had to be sensitive towards adopting selective and more favourable interpretation. This involved developing an ability to challenge notions I had always taken for granted, as beliefs about how things work give a perspective that can make it difficult to appreciate alternative interpretations. For instance, inexperience combined with my own gender provided challenges in being able to ‘see’ gender related issues or realise their significance, particularly in the earlier stages of analysis. However, I believe that these issues became easier over time as a consequence of having full transcripts, and repeatedly reading those transcripts in order to develop an understanding the processes that were taking place. In other respects, what is perhaps more problematic is analysis of comments made by other tutors, as this inevitably involves tensions and dilemmas related to my professional working environment in terms of challenges to their beliefs or professional judgement.

Overall, therefore, I believe that experience is the key factor to developing confidence in one’s interpretations, as is continuing to study the literature in the field. In this respect, a key outcome of the research journey I have undertaken is that my ability to ‘read’ such texts improved over the duration of analysis. However, I have also come to realise more acutely that this process can never be considered ‘complete’ or ‘final’ when working within an interpretive research paradigm.
9.4  The value of group work for learning

This study into group work has resulted in a number of clear insights regarding its use as an approach to pedagogy in HE. This section will firstly consider conclusions with regard to skills development through group work. It is followed by a discussion of the value of group work for learning in HE arising from this study.

9.4.1 Group work and skills development

As outlined in Chapter 2, much of the discussion in the literature is critical of university policy aims regarding the development of transferable or employability skills in HE, where working in groups can be expressed as both a ‘skill’ in its own right, as well as an environment which promotes other skills, such as ‘negotiation skills’. Typical of such criticism is the notion that skills practices are only “appropriate to the social arena” and possess a “set of identities or, positions, appropriate to that social arena” (Holmes, 2001: 114). Indeed, in a study sanctioned by the Higher Education Funding Council for England into the impact of teaching employability skills, Cranmer (2006) concluded the following: … it is a cause for concern that whilst substantial resources are being committed to the development of employability skills in the classrooms, there was no confirmation in the study that these efforts had a significant independent effect on graduate labour market outcomes (Cranmer, 2006: 182).

This thesis supports this critical stance. To begin with, evidence for such skills practice in the data was deemed unremarkable, and it was difficult to draw meaningful conclusions in terms of what students ‘learned’ in this respect. What is more, the ‘skill’ of ‘working in a group’ as an outcome in its own right is seen to be problematic. This is because the data showed that the notion of group work is nebulous in the sense that there are a variety of ways in which groups can ‘work’, which may depend on a particular task the group are engaged in, as well as the unique features of any given group in terms of their specific norms and relationships between group members. This study told the story of how one group managed to find a path, collectively but not without difficulty, towards establishing a collaborative relationship that allowed them to achieve their aims. I believe that the best that may be claimed from this is that those individuals experienced group work, and achieved a measure of success in that experience; there are no grounds for suggesting that they are necessarily better equipped for success in an entirely different group work context containing a different set of challenges.
Yet the pressure remains on HE institutions to adapt more to the needs of employers in terms of producing students who are better equipped for the world of work. However, if one accepts the centrality of context when it comes to developing skills for employment, these can only be developed in employment. HE may therefore be more usefully employed by focusing on facilitating learning amongst students. By becoming better learners, they may then be in a better position to learn new skills in their work context. The message here, therefore, is that policy and marketing claims regarding the development of employability/transferability skills in a HE context are exaggerated at best and that employers have a responsibility to look at their own training programmes and what they require from employees, which will inevitably be grounded in the cultural contexts of their own organisations.

9.4.2 The value of group work in the HE classroom: lessons from this study

The data revealed a clear distinction in group work behaviour between creative activity on the one hand, and working on more restricted assessed tasks on the other. The conclusions from the data were that if it is the aim to get students to work as much as possible in ways more akin to creative group work activity, where the best evidence for learning was seen to occur, considerable thought needs to be given to the way in which group assessment tasks are set up. In particular, attention needs to be given to presenting the task in distinct stages and avoiding task elements which prioritise summative over formative evaluations, as this tends to reinforce existing student preoccupation with assessment. In addition, the data showed that groups were highly instrumental in their approach to task completion, and were prepared to adopt approaches to achieve their aims that may be regarded as outside the collaborative spirit of group work, such as individuals taking on a disproportionate amount of work and responsibility on behalf of the group. This section considers the implications of these findings for professional practice as a tutor on the Communication Skills unit.

In the tutor-led task, reported in Chapter Seven, the students were engaged with assessing a peer group text using performance criteria for writing. On the one hand, this task enabled the group to focus on a specific goal, and in this respect it appeared to give them a clearer sense of purpose. On the other hand, discussion tended to be constrained by focus on the
performance criteria, which the group were largely unfamiliar with. In addition, the group were most interested in giving marks for the text rather than discussing it in detail.

Data from the performance of the tutor-led task suggest that the students may benefit, in the first instance, from determining their own criteria for effective writing. This perception is drawn from findings in Chapter Six, where the discussion was less constrained and where ideas were generated more freely. Thus, a more open approach initially for the tutor-led task may better promote the kind of discussion seen in Transcript 1, the outcome of which would be to produce a set of features that are felt to be important in an academic text. These features may then serve as scaffolding onto which more generally recognised or ‘established’ criteria would become more understandable. The criteria may subsequently be made available to the group, at which point they can further develop their task of reviewing the peer group text. This staged management, therefore, removes emphasis on scoring the text, exploits the features of an open task by encouraging more open discussion, but retains focus on the learning aspect of the tutor-led task by becoming progressively guided towards the learning items embodied in the established criteria for writing.

The data also provided insights into student reaction to feedback on their work when a number of comments referred to the ‘nice’ tone of the feedback for their draft text. In fact, all groups were given general guidance on avoiding ‘destructive’ feedback for the peer review task. It is a feature, however, which could be formalised further through more explicit guidelines for giving feedback, such as beginning and ending on positive notes, and making sure, for instance, that a positive comment would follow two negative comments. This would also give the students more confidence in a task that may be viewed as uncomfortable to carry out, as encountered in the data in this study. More generally, this theme is a reminder of student sensitivity to written feedback on their work, and that those who provide feedback need to be aware of this.

A further significant conclusion about group work to emerge from the data is the value students give to its social aspect, both in terms of meeting people at the beginning of the course and also in terms of collaboration on the task. However, the literature appears divided on this issue in connection with group formation; for example, Phuong-Mai et al., (2009) present ‘friendship’ as important in grouping students, while Hughes (2010) asserts
that knowledge-related identity overrides the social aspect of group activity. It is significant, however, that the conclusion in the latter study was derived from a year-three undergraduate group, where the relevance of making new friends may not be significant compared to the context of the present study, and where they had already acquired disciplinary knowledge.

In this study, having socially compatible individuals in a group is seen as having a high priority by students. Not surprisingly, the groups interviewed reported satisfaction with the self-selection approach as they also reported being happy with their groups. However, one could imagine members of less successful groups taking a different view, such as those socially less confident who may feel uncomfortable participating in this process. In addition to this alternative perspective, an approach to group formation needs to be considered against wider course aims. In the context of the Communication Skills course unit, there is a largely tacit course team ethos that students should be integrated, especially native speakers and overseas students. Such a desire for integration may therefore override a freer self-selection approach, requiring, perhaps, a wider socialisation process to group work involving specific tasks the groups are asked to perform (Orsmond et al., 1996; Rust et al., 2003; Berg et al., 2006; Janssen, 2006).

Gender knowledge that emerged from the data can also be seen to have implications for group work pedagogy. On this theme, Luke (1996:06) points out that ‘‘feminist pedagogy’ has long claimed that it refuses traditional authority and power in teacher-student relations and, instead, claims to construct pedagogical encounters characterized by cooperation, sharing, nurturing, giving voice to the silenced.’’ This reference to ‘traditional authority and power relations in teacher-student relations’ has resonance with the gender issues highlighted in the inter-personal relations within the group in the present study, where the absence of encounters characterized by feminist pedagogy was seen to be a feature that adversely influenced learning. The importance of establishing the types of pedagogical encounters referred to by Luke therefore suggests specific pedagogical strategies for the tutor when establishing group work. These strategies may include emphasising the selection of topics where individuals in the group are on a more equal footing in terms of their existing knowledge. In addition to this, group may be encouraged to establish ‘Ground Rules’ for behaviours that will or will not be tolerated. To this end, newly formed group may establish their own codes of behaviour through group discussion,
as well as receive suggestions from their course tutor. Such suggestions may include the following: respecting the views and ideas of others; ways of avoiding or dealing with conflict; ideas for dividing responsibility amongst group members and establishing individual roles. However, once established, their successful implementation may require further formalisation into the course unit through reflective accounts with tutors as to their influence on group behaviour, or even the incorporation of such reflection into the assessment programme.

Ultimately, the pros and cons of issues such as alternative ways of establishing groups and behaviour that constitutes group work need consideration amongst tutors, and agreed perspectives established. In addition, tutors would need to be persuaded of the value of proposed amendments, particularly with regard to an alternative approach to the peer review activity and the use of assessment criteria. The task of achieving these aims would require considerable sensitivity given the issues related to challenging their professional judgement referred to previously. However, this may be addressed in pre-course meetings where the value of change may be argued through the lessons drawn from this study, and this may best be achieved through presentation of the evidence from the study.

9.5 Further research

In terms of methodology, this study has outlined a number of advantages of using data derived from transcripts of recorded student discourse of a group work task, in conjunction with student perceptions obtained through group interviews. In comparison with using student accounts of their experiences alone, these advantages were expressed both in terms of the validity of the inquiry and the richness of the data obtained. However, this approach has limitations in that it is time-consuming, with conclusions drawn from a restricted sample. Nevertheless, my experience of conducting this study suggests that in future research, recording group work data is a necessary supplement to the more common approach of capturing student opinions of group work.

In terms of research focus, two areas for future research indicated from this study include (i) investigating learning in groups in culturally mixed classrooms, and (ii) student understandings and attitudes in relation to plagiarism. As Phuong-Mai et al. (2009:871) argue, cooperative learning “needs to be researched, re-examined and reconsidered in
relation to its operation in differing cultural contexts.” Examining group learning in culturally mixed groups would provide an opportunity to understand how cultural diversity may be seen to influence the type of learning processes identified in this study. Such influence may extend, for example, to differing views of leadership and attitudes towards contributions to group discussion.

Finally, the present study highlighted issues related to student perceptions and understandings of plagiarism, where the group work data revealed evidence of confusion and ambivalence over the topic. Further research may lead to a clearer picture of the ways plagiarism is understood, and could also provide valuable insight into how students from other cultures understand it. This is particularly relevant for some overseas students who currently make up a significant proportion of HE students in UK universities, and whose cultural values and conventions differ with regard to the use of expert knowledge within their own writing. Such inquiry may serve to help develop greater awareness of differences in understanding between tutors and students over an issue that increasingly occupies the concerns of both academic staff and their students.
REFERENCES


The University of Manchester Website (2010a). *Faculty of Engineering and Physical Sciences*. Available at [http://www.eps.manchester.ac.uk/](http://www.eps.manchester.ac.uk/).


Appendix I

Course Description

Aims
- To enable participants to develop presentation skills for tertiary study.
- To develop an awareness of some important features of academic writing at tertiary level, and provide opportunities for putting these in to practice.
- To provide opportunities for working in groups, and for participation in effective group presentations.
- To provide students with the experience of studying autonomously using computer-based materials.

Learning Outcomes
On completion of this module, successful students will be able to:
- Write a well-structured discursive report, drawing on relevant sources, and adhering to conventions of academic writing.
- Demonstrate an ability to make an interesting and effective presentation, deploying a wide range of skills.
- Demonstrate the ability to make a full and positive contribution to a group project.
- Access and make use of electronic sources to support learning.
- Effectively complete examinations and other coursework requirements within the stipulated timeframes.

Skills Development
The course aims to improve your academic communication skills, specifically in the following areas:

Writing Skills
- Planning, drafting and editing
- Improving text organisation
- Improving grammar and accuracy
- Writing clear and well-structured paragraphs
- Ensuring that texts ‘flow’
- Referring to sources, paraphrasing and summarising
- Using academic conventions
## Appendix II

### Types of transferable skills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transferable skills</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>writing reports, giving presentations, using media (e.g. video, posters)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group work</td>
<td>leadership, chairing, co-operation, teamwork</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>independence, autonomy, self-assessment, self-confidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal</td>
<td>influencing, counselling, listening, interviewing, assertiveness, negotiation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisational</td>
<td>time management, project management, objective-setting, project evaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching and training</td>
<td>identifying learning needs, designing and running workshops, coaching, peer tutoring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning</td>
<td>reading flexibly and with purpose, note-taking flexibly and with purpose, literature search and review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information gathering</td>
<td>locating information sources, evaluating sources and data, extracting relevant information, interpretation of data, presentation of data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem solving</td>
<td>problem analysis, creative problem solving, decision making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language</td>
<td>oral skills, use of a foreign language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information technology</td>
<td>using word-processing, databases, spread sheets, graphics, DTP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entrepreneurship</td>
<td>taking initiatives, seizing opportunities, creativity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Appendix III

### Transcription Conventions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The end of a tone group or chunk of talk</td>
<td>/ So what shall you and me do cos I don’t want to go on to the same line as you/do you know what I mean?/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. An utterance which appears to be a question</td>
<td>? Fighter jets?/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. An incomplete word or utterance</td>
<td>... And then, we shouldn’t be spending ...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. A short pause less than 0.5 of a second</td>
<td>. And you can leave a big gap, like, 1970s and 80s when we started getting fighter jets/yeah/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. A longer pause</td>
<td>(.) You can leave all that crap out (.) just say(.) that’s what, 2nd generation/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Italics in parenthesis indicates transcriber’s descriptions: additional information such as laughing, or a particular tone of voice</td>
<td>(italics) I’ll see what I’ve got in my 13 pages of printout (laughter)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Overlapping speech</td>
<td>[ ] Left brackets indicate the point at which a current speaker’s talk is overlapped by another’s talk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. The absence of any discernible gap between one utterance and the next</td>
<td>= Donald: Which generation are we talking about?= Janet: First generation(.), well, not first generation/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. It was not possible to ascertain what was said</td>
<td>(XX) Right. can I write about (XX)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Words or morphemes uttered with emphasis</td>
<td>CAPITALS Cos a BOMBER carried the bombs(.) apparently/</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from:
