**Using group work to support students’ learning**

Produced by the Centre for Learning & Teaching

This guidance outlines some of the key points from a range of sources to support you in the use of group work with your students.

**Benefits of Group Work**

Research into the effectiveness of academic group work highlights a wide range of benefits to support a student’s learning and development needs. Group work develops higher levels of achievement and promotes skills such as collaboration, communication, trust and belonging.

Group work allows a student to learn in more detail and gain a wider understanding of the subject. Students can learn more through a shared group experience than they would if working alone (Hammar Chiriac,2014). Listening, discussing, and questioning the views of others leads to a more complete perspective. Students working with others, learn to inquire, share ideas, and clarify differences. This motivates students to work harder and achieve more. Gillies (2003a, b)

From a group work perspective Hammar Chiriac and Granström (2012) highlight two primary ways of discussing cooperation in groups: ***working in a group*** *(*cooperation) or ***working as a group*** (collaboration).

The first approach – **working in a group** – suggests students work individually on separate parts of a group assignment. This allows a larger group task to be undertaken collectively. Specific responsibilities are allocated to each student, either by the students or the tutor. At the end of the task, the work is pulled together to produce a joint product. This approach may lack tight collaboration but allows individuals to take ownership of their work. This removes one of the common downsides of group work, that poorly motivated individuals - so called ‘free-riders’ – can pull down the marks of other students (Hammar Chiriac and Granström 2012). Working in a group might suit situations where an individual student’s availability is limited, they may be working full time or studying remotely and tight collaboration with others might not be possible.

The second approach - **working as a group** – is characterised by a shared effort where each group member can contribute to improve the overall quality of the work. Much can be gained from this collaborative focus, but the realities can be different from expectation. Discussions become side-tracked, individuals take over, there is little agreement and next steps become unclear. Overcoming such challenges is a life skill – and not just something limited to the classroom. It suggests a need for the tutor to keep in regular contact with the group, to act as a mediator to keep the group focused and moving in the right direction (Hammar Chiriac, 2014. Working collaboratively on a task reflects situations that students will come across in the workplace. Despite the challenges it is seen as ‘real group work’ or ‘meaningful group work’ which students seem to value).

**Group Formation**

There are two common approaches to group formation (Rufai, et al., 2017). One approach is for the tutor to assign students to a group either randomly or selectively. The other approach is to allow students to choose which group they want to join. There is no consensus over which is the best approach, with strengths and weaknesses of each method.

For example, a tutor can form a group with a view of pulling together students with a mix of personalities and experience. This can be based on gender, age, background, and skills. The aim here is to avoid ‘group think’ where group members are so similar, they produce a narrow view or lack of opinions (Hammar Chiriac, 2014). On the other hand, selecting students for a group may not really be fair. It is easy for unconscious bias to creep into the selection process, by trying to mix the groups as much as possible based on characteristics or ability. This may have a negative effect on the overall outcome, as students work on being a group more than doing the work (Bacon, Stewart, and Anderson, 2001).

Random selection can overcome these problems, by leaving the group formation to chance. Students may see this as fairer (Chapman et al. [2006](#_bookmark17)) and it can certainly quicker for the tutor to allocate students this way.

Alternatively, students may decide which group they wish to join. This can lead to a more relaxed, harmonious group (Hammar Chiriac, 2014). As friends, they know each other’s personalities, they have familiarity and they feel relaxed in each other’s company. Higher levels of trust, commitment and communication can result in more effective learning (Myers, 2012). Challenges arise when such groups start to fracture. Friendships can get in the way of group cohesion and other members of the group can become left out (Bacon et al., [2001](#_bookmark17), p. 9).

**Preparing Students**

It is important to consider a student’s perception of group work and how this reflects their attitude towards it (Hammar Chiriac, 2014). Some students will have had bad experiences of groupwork in the past which will affect their outlook. Others may lack confidence in group environments or prefer to work individually. Students struggling with the course material will worry about how the group will view them if they cannot keep up.

Here are some points to consider when preparing students for group work:

* Have a clear strategy on how students can be supported to a more successful outcome.
* Outline the rationale for assigning a group project and the benefits to students.
* Introduce complex group work activities as soon as possible and take time in the classroom to discuss the task in more detail.
* Discuss with your students when makes a successful group experience (Boyan and Smith, 2012).
* Before students start on the group project, consider setting an ice breaker activity, game or task to get people working together. The aim is to encourage a sense of ‘belonging’ within the group and a positive atmosphere (Hammar Chiriac, 2014).
* Remind your students that some of them may struggle, so avoid automatically labelling someone as ‘lazy’ because they are not contributing.
* Promote the idea of a group as a ‘safe’ space where everyone can have their say (Hammar Chiriac, 2014).
* Discuss with your students how to handle disagreements within a group, how to keep the discussions on track and how to manage their time effectively.
* Invite your students to share their thoughts or concerns about group work.
* Address any negative experiences by encouraging students to reflect on why they might have happened in the past and how they could be avoided in the future.

**Overcoming Barriers**

Students may be resistant to group work and this can be for a range of reasons. Sometimes students have had problematic group work experiences in their prior education where conflict, difficult dynamics and poor communication and lack of mutual understanding and respect have made group activities difficult.  Students might disagree with the way groups have been allocated, feel guilty that they could have participated more or resent other students who they perceive did not contribute sufficiently. Other students may be naturally more used to ‘lone’ working and find group situations frustrating or perceive them as limiting.  It is important staff colleagues help the students address intra-group issues.

**Online & Blended**

Students participating in the Student Digital Experience Insights Survey (Jisc, 2021) were asked what they considered to be the most positive aspects of online learning. The opportunities to engage in group work with classmates was highlighted as one of the top responses. The elimination of physical presence, group work can be an important activity to bring students together Hanna (2013).

However, when students were asked about the range of online activities they had experienced, only 23% had recently engaged in an online group project (Jisc, 2021), the findings suggest a lack of opportunities for group work in the online environment.

Moving classroom-based group work online can be challenging. It requires finding the “right tool for the job” (Travers, 2020). This means matching the requirements of the group activity with the software that will fulfil them. On other occasions, there may not be a direct means to transfer a face-to face activity online. In these situations, it is beneficial to take a step back and remember what the essence and purpose of the group activity is. What are you trying to teach students and how will they demonstrate this? Reducing group activities to their very basics allows them to be examined from a fresh perspective.

If in doubt about the tool to support your group activity, then seek advice from the Digital Learning Service.

**Defining an Approach**

Here are 10 points to consider when choosing to use group work as part of your teaching and assessment activity.

1. The **choice of the right task** for group work is crucial to allow students to fully engage and utilise the skills to succeed in a group activity. **Communicate to students** why you have chosen group work over other forms of activity or assessment and clarify for them how it supports the learning outcomes.
2. Create a **clear task list** within the overall activity so that students can approach the work-load more easily and allocate the work between the different group members to suit the group skill set.
3. Set agreed **ground rules and clear expectations** at the beginning of the activity to ensure everyone is clear of what is expected from them and others. It is sensible to articulate clear expectations of group work participation during induction week and give practical group collaborative exercises early on – as formative, developmental, and fun ways to encourage social mixing and normalise it.
4. Use **preparatory work** to look at different roles within a group setting (e.g. Belbin, Myers Briggs) to help students understand how a successful group needs people who have a range of skills and approaches. It is particularly important that group leadership is discussed and documented.
5. Ensure you have considered a process for **conflict management** and that it is communicated to students (and agreed upfront with them) so they understand how to deal with issues as they arise rather than just at the end.
6. Can you develop a **peer marking component** to take into account different contributions and perceptions of contribution during the task?
7. Think carefully about what is being assessed - is it the group’s output only, a group reflection on the process, or an individual reflection on the group work?
8. Ensure you have thought about **resit options** if an individual or whole group fails a summative assessment based on a group activity.
9. Where possible, create **timetabled slots for group work** so that time challenges can be reduced, and you can check on progress, manage group issues and work with the students on any emergent conflict quickly before it escalates.
10. The **allocation of students to groups** can be staff led or student led. During the first year, group allocations can benefit from being controlled by the staff to ensure there is mixing and no student is isolated due to friendship groups. Later in the course, allocation can be left in the hands of the students themselves because students will have a greater understanding of what a successful group looks like and make their own choices based on this knowledge.

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**Further Information and resources**

The Digital Learning Service can provide more information on moving group activities online. <https://teachlearn.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/digital-learning-service>

If you want to find out more about assessing group you can find out more information here: <https://teachlearn.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/-/media/files/clt/groupworkassessmentresourcesv3.pdf?la=en>

Group work information can be found on this site: <https://teachlearn.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/teaching-and-learning-activities/assessment-and-feedback/assessment-methods/group-work/>

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