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Using group work to support students' learning

Produced by the Centre for Learning & Teaching

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This guidance aims to bring together some of the key points from a range of research evidence to support you in the use of group work with your students.

Students may be resistant to group work. 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. Some students might disagree with the way groups have been allocated or feel guilty that they could have participated more themselves. Some may 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 are tuned in to helping the students address intra group issues.

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 module 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 course 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 - a different person can take the lead at different stages of the activity so that a single person does not perform the role throughout.
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?
<https://www.brookes.ac.uk/aske/resources/assessment/>
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?

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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 **intra-module 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.

Further Information and resources

You can read more information about group work from the Higher Education Academy (now AdvanceHE) in their group work guide <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/group-work>

If you want to find out more about assessing group you can find out more information here:

<https://teachlearn.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/-/media/files/ct/groupworkassessmentresourcesv3.pdf?la=en>

Additional information on group work can be found here:

<https://teachlearn.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/teaching-and-learning-activities/assessment-and-feedback/assessment-methods/group-work/>

Further Reading

Group work as a form of assessment: common problems and recommended solutions

W. Martin Davies, Higher Education (2009) 58: 563–584

The assessment of group work: lessons from the literature

Professor Graham Gibbs, Assessment Standards Knowledge exchange
<https://www.brookes.ac.uk/aske/resources/assessment/>

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Assessing group work: advice and examples

HEA UK Physical Sciences Centre produced by Paul Chin and Tina Overton Edited: June 2010

https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/assessing_group_work.pdf

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Please contact the Centre for Learning and Teaching if you need any more information:

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