ALAYEN IRAQI UNIVERSITY
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Guide to Group Work

This page will inform you about the nature of group work, about what you should expect and the expectations teachers have of you in group learning situations.

Learning and working effectively as part of a team or group is an extremely important skill, and one that you will refine and use throughout your working life. Group projects should be among the most valuable and rewarding learning experiences. For many students, however, they are also among the most frustrating.

Here are some pointers to help you work effectively on your group tasks and assignments. These are mostly general principles that you should apply to group work here, in other courses and in the workplace.

Why we use group learning tasks

Learning in groups means that you need to share your knowledge and ideas with other students. There are two principal ways that you benefit from doing this:

- you need to think carefully about your own ideas in order to explain them to others
- you expand your own awareness by taking account of the knowledge and ideas of others.

When you work as a group on a project or assignment, then you have the opportunity to draw on the different strengths of group members, to produce a more extensive and higher quality project or assignment than you could complete on your own.

To do this effectively you need to learn group work skills, which are an extremely important part of your professional development. In most professions people are required to work in multidisciplinary project teams or teams with a responsibility for a specific task. Many professional organisations and employer groups stress the importance of interpersonal and group skills, such as communication, negotiation, problem solving, and teamwork. These skills can be as important as your subject knowledge in enabling you to be an effective professional.

This kind of group work is actually an ongoing process of generating ideas and planning as a group, working as an individual to carry out parts of that plan and then communicating as a group to draw the individual components together and plan the next step.

Skills in group work

Group work requires both interpersonal and process management skills. Group work is included in a course to provide a safe environment in which you can try out new ideas and practices and learn some group skills. Some of the

skills you need to develop are outlined here, you will discover some others for yourself.

Interpersonal skills

- Building positive working relationships
- Communicating effectively in meetings
- Negotiating to agree on tasks and resolve conflicts
- Accommodating people with different cultural orientations and work habits

Process management skills

- Identifying group goals and dividing work
- Planning and complying with meeting schedules and deadlines
- Managing time to meet group expectations
- Monitoring group processes and intervening to correct problems

Interpersonal skills and considerations

- Take some time early on to chat with and get to know each of your group mates. The better you know one another and the more comfortable you are communicating with one another, the more effectively you will be able to work together. The online discussion set up for your group can be used to exchange information about backgrounds and interests as an icebreaker that elicits information that may not normally be available. The online discussion often helps people who are shy or reluctant to speak in a conversational way.
- Build a culture of mutual respect within your group. You probably had little or no choice of your group mates, and you may have to produce several pieces of work in this group. It is best to get over these differences quickly: you will not have much choice of your team mates in the workplace and you will be under considerably more pressure there to be productive. Group members must:

- o feel comfortable voicing their opinions, and feel that these opinions will be listened to.
- o feel that all group members are contributing positively to the tasks by keeping to agreed procedures and plans and producing good quality work, on time.
- o feel that their feelings are being considered by team members, yet the goals and objectives of the group are not being compromised to accommodate the whim or the wants of a few members.

- Make sure that you both express your views and listen to others. There is nothing wrong with disagreeing with your group mates, no matter how confident they may seem to be about what they are saying. When you disagree, be constructive and focus on the issue rather than the person. Likewise when someone disagrees with you, respect what they are saying and the risk that they took in expressing their opinion. Try to find a way forward that everybody can agree to and that isn't the opinion of just one confident or outspoken member.

Managing the process

Effective group work does not happen by accident. It involves deliberate effort, and because there are many people involved it must not be left up to memory; good note taking is essential. Following these steps will help you and your group to work effectively together.

1. **Have clear objectives**. At each stage you should try to agree on goals. These include a timetable for progress on the project as well as more immediate goals (e.g. to agree on an approach to the assignment by Friday). Each meeting or discussion should also begin with a goal in mind (e.g. to come up with a list of tasks that need to be done).
2. **Set ground rules**. Discussions can become disorderly and can discourage shyer group members from participating if you don't have procedures in place for encouraging discussion, coming to resolution without becoming repetitive, and resolving differences of opinion. Set rules at the outset and modify them as necessary along

the way. An interesting rule that one group made was that anybody who missed a meeting would buy the rest of the group a cup of coffee from the coffee shop. Nobody ever missed a meeting after that.

3. **Communicate efficiently**. Make sure you communicate regularly with group members. Try to be clear and positive in what you say without going on or being repetitive.

4. **Build consensus**. People work together most effectively when they are working toward a goal that they have agreed to. Ensure that everyone has a say, even if you have to take time to get more withdrawn members to say something. Make sure you listen to everyone's ideas and then try to come to an agreement that everyone shares and has contributed to.

5. **Define roles**. Split the work to be done into different tasks that make use of individual strengths. Having roles both in the execution of your tasks and in meetings / discussions (e.g. Arani is responsible for summarising discussions, Joseph for ensuring everybody has a say and accepts resolutions etc.) can help to make a happy, effective team. See Sharing and organising work for more information.

6. **Clarify**. When a decision is made, this must be clarified in such a way that everyone is absolutely clear on what has been agreed, including deadlines.

7. **Keep good records**. Communicating on the online discussion for your group provides a good record of discussion. Try to summarise face-to-face discussions and especially decisions, and post them to the online discussion so that you can refer back to them. This includes lists of who has agreed to do what.

8. **Stick to the plan**. If you agreed to do something as part of the plan, then do it. Your group are relying on you to do what you said you would do not what you felt like doing. If you think the plan should be revised, then discuss this.

9. **Monitor progress and stick to deadlines**. As a group, discuss progress in relation to your timetable and deadlines. Make sure that you personally meet deadlines to avoid letting your group down.

Set up a contract

A useful tool to help with the steps above is a contract. Within the first week of each group task you and your group will need to negotiate and agree to a contract. In this signed agreement, you will outline what you are going to do, who is going to do what, and by when. As a guide to negotiating your group contracts a contract proforma is reproduced at the end of this document.

Sharing and organising work online

Two kinds of work must be shared: to make the team function and the task to be performed.

Making the team function

An effective team requires the following roles to work efficiently. It is useful to explicitly allocate these functions.

- **Facilitator or leader (depending on context)** for making sure the aims of the meeting are clarified and for summarising discussions and decisions; to ensure the meeting keeps on track and ground rules are followed.
- **Note   taker** to keep a record of ideas that are discussed and decisions that are made and who is doing what.
- **Time   keeper** to make sure that you discuss everything you need to in the time available for the meeting.
- **Progress   chaser** to chase people up and make sure that the jobs get done by the time agreed and sort out problems if they are not.
- **Process   watcher** someone who has an eye on process rather than content and can bring

problems to the attention of the team. It is important to be positive in this role and not judgemental.

- **Editor**
  to compile contributions, identify gaps or overlaps, and ensure consistency in the final submission.

Sharing the task

Tasks need to be broken down into smaller parts and scheduled. Sometimes one part cannot be started until another part is finished so it may be worth drawing a simple time line.

- Consider the resources that you have and those that you will need to find.
- Define the outcome required.
- Consider how will you know when you have done it well enough?
- Divide the tasks among the team and
- Set the deadlines for the sub-tasks and times for future meetings.

Team writing

Three methods are possible (and acceptable).

1. One person writes the lot -this tends to mean a narrow range of idea are used and the rest of the team don't learn from the activity of preparing the report.
2. Each person writes one bit - it is then hard to make a single coherent report and you don't learn about much except your own section.
3. Joint writing. This is the most productive way of approaching group tasks, and ensures the greatest benefits from collaboration. Eg: Each section has a writer and at least one reviewer with each team member being both a writer and a reviewer of some section. The final product should be reviewed by all team members prior to finalisation by the editor. Alternatively you can have a single writer with others editing, adding and proof reading and someone tidying up the finished report.

Check the following:

- Is the objective of the exercise clear from the report?
- Are the conclusions or recommendations clear?
- Do conclusions follow from the body of the report?
- Do the sections fit together well?
- Does the report achieve the objectives (and the assessment criteria)?
- Are the required components adequately covered?

Whichever method you use, all group members should agree on the process, and how they are going to maximise the collaborative approach to writing.

Collaborative writing

Writing collaboratively is one of the trickiest parts of group work. There are many ways to do this, and your group will have to resolve how to divide the work of writing, collating, editing and putting the final touches on your work. Writing by committee (six people crowded around a keyboard) is a recipe for conflict and lack of progress. The other extreme, where one person takes the most responsibility and ends up doing most of the work, is also unproductive and promotes resentment.

Try to divide the initial writing into tasks, and tackle these individually or in pairs. Once the first drafts of the components have been written, circulate all the components and read them. You will probably need to get together to discuss how to marry them together so that they are consistent with one another. Any members who were not involved in the initial writing can do some of this work. Then edit, improve and polish the manuscript.

Circulate the files as online discussion attachments, or set up a Google doc or Wiki for everyone to add to. If using attachments, ensure that everybody knows who has and is working on the current version; otherwise it becomes

Monitoring group effectives and overcoming problems

The checklist at the end of this document provides a list of common issues that emerge in group work. Use it regularly to identify problems before they get out of hand. If major problems and tensions do arise, use it to identify where things may be going wrong. First answer each question about yourself, then answer it about the group as a whole. Then get together as a group and discuss where each of you think there may be problems and consider how you might overcome these problems.

Marks

Group tasks and assignments may mean that marks are assigned to everybody in the group based on the result for the whole group. It is in everybody's interest to ensure an effective contribution from all group members, to make sure that the finished assignment is of high quality. Sometimes a system of peer assessment will be used to determine the relative contributions of everyone to the group process. This could be used to moderate the marks for the assignment, or simply as a way to provide feedback on your group work skills.

Teamwork checklist

Each member should complete this checklist. You will need time to reflect in order to make this a worthwhile exercise. You should complete this exercise reasonably regularly in order to monitor and improve how effectively your group is working.

1. Answer each question regarding your own performance in the group.
2. Answer each question regarding the rest of the group.
3. Get together with your whole group and discuss where you think any problems are arising.

Discuss what you are going to do to overcome these problems.

Are you:	Me	Group	Comments
Effectively clarifying your task or objective at each stage?			
Checking on progress?			
Clarifying and recording what your group decides?			
Clarifying who is going to do what?			
Clarifying when each task is to be done by?			
Establishing procedures for handling meetings?			
Keeping to agreed procedures?			
Listening to each other?			
Dominating / Allowing some members to dominate?			
Withdrawing / Allowing some members to withdraw?			
Compromising individuals wants for the sake of the team?			
Recognising the feelings of other members?			
Contributing equally to team progress?			
Following agreed procedures for writing and file naming?			

Adapted from Scoufis (2000).

Teamwork contract

Here's an example of how you might format a group contract.

We, the members of .....(group name)..... agree to the following plan of action regarding our work toward the group assignment tasks:

(The following is a list of items you may wish to include in your contract).

Meetings and communication

- Times and places for in person meetings.
- Frequency of checks to WebCT discussion area.
- Rules and procedures during face-to-face meetings.
- Who will summarise decisions, when will he/she post them on the discussion area.

Work and deadlines

- How will the group come to agreement on a topic (what research are members expected to do before you meet / go online to discuss the topic)?
- When will you make a final decision on a topic?
- Who will write the first draft of and who will first edit each component? Deadlines.
- Who will collate the whole submission and then circulate it for the group to comment on? Deadline.
- Who will prepare and submit the final submission? Deadline.

Penalties

- What happens if members don't meet agreed-to deadlines?
- What happens if members do not contribute / come to meetings?

The agreement should be finalised within the first week. It must be signed and dated by the group members. Each member should get a copy, a copy should be posted on the discussion area and the original should be submitted to your tutor.

References

- Gibbs, G. (1994). Learning in Teams: A student Manual. Oxford: The Oxford Centre for Staff Development.
- Scoufis, M. (2000). Integrating Graduate Attributes into the Undergraduate Curricula. University of Western Sydney. (ISBN 1863418725).