

Group Work Guidelines

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Group work has a number of benefits for students. Peer learning and teaching has been found to be extremely effective in accomplishing a wide range of learning objectives and caters for a range of student abilities. Skill in working cooperatively with others is essential for most vocations. Miller and Groccia (1997) found that cooperative learning produced positive results in ability to work with others as well as better cognitive outcomes. Groups have the capacity to outperform individuals in solving problems. This is due to the verbal interaction during which information, interpretations and critical thinking are exchanged, Galanes and Brillhart (1997). However the introduction of group work requires some careful thought. The following guidelines may be useful in informing your decision to introduce group work and in facilitating the process.

- Explain to students why working with others is valuable and what you are trying to achieve by using this form of assessment or activity
- Make sure students are clear about what the task is. Give them some time at the end of a tutorial or lecture to make plans with their group and to check with you that their plans are on the right track
- Provide students with advice on how to make their group work effectively (Appendix A)
- The optimal size of a group depends on the nature of the group task and on the group dynamics. However generally it is better to keep the groups relatively small - four seems to be about an ideal size in this faculty. Any smaller and there is insufficient interaction and any larger contributes to the group becoming unmanageable. Larger groups are harder to organise and the opportunity for the 'free rider' problem is increased
- Think carefully about the task that you set. Is it conducive to group work? A task that is straightforward and relatively simple may not be appropriate. If an individual can do it easily then it is probably better done this way. Group tasks should be more complex and require a range of skills and insights.
- In all group work students must have sufficient background in order to be able to contribute either from reading enough to have an informed discussion or where the topic relates to personal experience. Students need to be provided with sufficient background or materials with which to contribute effectively to the groups work. In this sense group work tasks require more thought and preparation 'up front' than individual tasks although there may be efficiencies gained at the end of the process in terms of assessing the work.
- Decide on the composition of the group. By forming students into groups who are not initially friends you assist them to develop collaboration and negotiation skills and more accurately reflect the work place experience. By taking control of group formation you can mix nationalities and thereby increase the possibility of bringing a wider range of perspectives to the task. Pairing extroverted students with other extroverts improves their learning (Leith 1974).
- Make sure that students 'sign off' on their contribution to the group work. A statement of their contribution is a motivating device to ensure equitable participation in the task (Appendix C)

- Use an individual-contribution marking scheme and explain this clearly to students at the outset (Appendix B). This assist students to take responsibility for ensuring that the group members contribution are equitable and if not to ensure that this is reflected in the mark. If you decide to use such a scheme encourage groups to decide at the start of the process what criteria they will use to decide if an individual has contributed equitably to the groups work eg attendance at meetings, completion of tasks set for each meeting, meeting deadlines An example is provided in Appendix D.
- At times groups become involved in unresolvable conflict. Think about the process you can put in place if this occurs eg an outside mediator – could be a tutor or a member of the faculty TLU staff.

Appendix A

Advice on effective group work for students

How to make your group effective

The capacity to work effectively in teams is an important skill and one that is much valued in the workplace. Like all skills, this is one that is learned, sometimes only through trial and error.

We cannot tell groups precisely how to achieve the goals that have been set for them. Each group must work this out for themselves; however, the following hints may help. They are based on what is known about effective and ineffective student group work.

Some Tips

1. It is vital to make a smooth start. The first meeting or two is when an effective group dynamic is established. If a group hasn't clicked and settled into productive work patterns at this time it is unlikely to happen later.

2. The first meeting is especially important, for it's probably the best opportunity to get to know your colleagues. Spend some time finding out about each others backgrounds and experience. Clarify the objectives of the group, talk about the reason for the groups existence, what it is going to achieve, and the best way of doing it.

3. You may or may not wish formally to elect a group coordinator. If you choose to do so it would be wise to be clear about his or her powers. If you do not elect a designated coordinator your group will need leadership from all members of the group. Distributed leadership can work well in small groups.

4. Establish a regular schedule for meetings and choose an appropriate meeting place. As a guide, groups will probably need to meet at least once a week. (The Pub or cafe is not a good place to meet for these purposes.)

5. There are strict deadlines to be met. You simply cannot allow your group meetings to lapse into unproductive social occasions. One way to stay up and running is to maintain an appropriate level of formality. Once everyone has arrived, get straight down to business.

6. Prior to the meeting establish your goals and re-state these at the start of the meeting. Every ten minutes or so check how much you have covered and how far there is still to go in achieving the objectives. This will help with time management and in maintaining the focus of the meeting. Assess the outcome at the end and state clearly the responsibilities of each group member for the week and the deadlines to be met.

7 Don't jump to conclusions too quickly. Be sure that minority views are heard. Don't assume consensus because no one has opposed an idea or offered an alternative. Check agreement with each group member. Making group communication productive is the responsibility of every member of the group.

.....8. It is useful to remember that disagreement and conflict are not necessarily signs of a breakdown in communication. People can understand each other perfectly and yet disagree. However it takes goodwill and understanding to resolve these conflict within the group in order to achieve productive outcomes.

9. Keep notes. Minutes of these meetings are necessary, as a record of discussions, decisions and commitments. Most importantly, the group should take steps to ensure that the contribution of each individual is appropriately recorded. Later this could be important as it is the only formal performance measure on which the group can make and justify decisions about individual overall contribution. For each group member you should record attendance at meetings, completion of set tasks and other relevant information.

10. Allocate tasks to be done. Be sure that each person knows what they have to do and what the deadline is. Check this before ending the meeting. Be sure there is agreement on the time and place of the next meeting and on what you hope to accomplish.

11. Remember that syndicates work well when there is incentive for all to participate equally. You should aim to capitalise on the strengths of individuals. One group member may be an excellent writer, another may be a wizard with figures, yet another may be a confident presenter. Use these strengths to your groups advantage by delegating tasks and responsibilities accordingly. In the end, work to ensure that everyone has contributed their fair share to the group's work.

12. Watch out for the social loafer. This person may have a good deal to say in meetings and may be a pleasant member of the group, but they may also be happy to slipstream behind the productivity of others.

13. In all groups there will be disagreements and tensions. Effective groups understand this and are prepared to work through difficulties. If things go badly wrong then you should consult a staff member to arrange an impartial circuit-breaker. This could be your tutor or the lecturer in charge of the subject.

In short:

Establish clear expectations of the objectives of the group

Establish clear roles and responsibilities

Plan a regular schedule of meetings

Make sure that the objectives of each meeting are met.

Don't tolerate individuals who fail to meet their commitments

Don't settle for anything less than an excellent group production

Appendix B

Assessment of syndicate work to take account of individual contribution

Rules for deriving individual assessment from syndicate work.

1. Where the syndicate group is composed of four members the syndicate's assessment will be decided out of 400 points.

2. The assessment of syndicate work will be comprised of 200 points for the interim oral and written presentations and 200 points for the final report.

3. Once the syndicates overall total out of 400 points has been decided, individual marks are awarded.

This is a three stage process.

a) The total score is divided into five equal parts. The four members of the syndicate will be awarded one of these parts, this becomes their base points score.

b) What becomes of the fifth part? The syndicates themselves will have the opportunity to award these points to the syndicate members who the syndicate agrees made a special contribution to the group's achievements.

c) An individual's total point score is the sum of their base points + their reward points. This final points score is the percentage they receive for the syndicate component of assessment for the subject. Syndicates must inform their tutor of how they have awarded the reward points. A form will be provided for you to do this and must be submitted to the fifth floor economics office. This must be done by xxx.

4. It is up to each syndicate to reach consensus on the awarding of reward points. If a syndicate cannot reach consensus, then their tutor will decide how the reward points will be distributed on the basis of the syndicates report on the contribution of each member that is to be attached to the final report.

5. No syndicate member may receive a total of over 100 points.

These procedures will make more sense if you consider the following examples.

Example 1

Suppose a tutor assesses a four-member syndicate group's work at 320 points (out of the possible 400 points).

The tutor will divide this into five equal parts of 64 points. Each member of the group receives 64 points. The syndicate has the fifth portion, also 64 points, to divide amongst the group members.

Lets say they decide that the contribution has been equal, and therefore divide the 64 points four ways. Each group member will receive 16 reward points, bringing each members point score to a final total of 80 points. Thus, each member will receive 80% for the syndicate component of the subjects' assessment.

Alternatively, the syndicate may decide that two members made a significantly greater contribution than others and that these two should share the reward points equally. In this case, the two will receive 32 points each, bringing their total point scores to 96 points. The other two members scores remain at the base level of 64 points.

Example 2

Suppose the syndicate is composed of three students and the tutor assesses the groups' work at 168 points (out of the possible 300 points). The tutor divides this into four equal parts of 42 points. Each member of the group receives 42 base points. There are 42 reward points remaining to be distributed by the syndicate.

The syndicate decides that one member of the group made a significantly greater contribution than the others, and that this member should receive 20 reward points ($42+20 =$ a total of 62). The other two members share the remaining 22 reward points equally ($42+11 =$ a total of 53).

What should you be looking for to determine individual contribution?

You should consider:

- Completion of agreed tasks
- Timeliness of contributions
- Attendance at meetings
- Willingness to cooperate and reach consensus
- Contribution to group leadership

Criteria for assessment

1) Criteria for assessment of **oral** presentations

- Clear explanation of the problem
- Logical development of thought
- Kept to time limit
- Demonstrated an ability to teach others
- Effective use of teaching aids
- Ability to answer questions

2) Criteria for assessment of written interim reports

- Answers the question
- Clarity of explanation of key concepts
- Clarity of explanation of theory
- Appropriate application to the syndicate country
- Logical development of solution/explanation
- Correct citation and acknowledgment of all sources

3) Criteria for assessment of the final report

- Appropriate selection of article/data set.
- Clear explanation of the theory illustrated by the first article selected.
- Clear explanation of the theory illustrated by the second article/data set selected
- Assumptions relevant to the theory are made explicit.
- Concepts are used correctly
- Discussion of the application of the theory
- There is a logical development of the argument/story

Correct citation and acknowledgment of all sources

Includes a detailed report on the contribution of each of the syndicates members

Includes paper copies of the articles and data set used in the report.

Includes copies of the interim reports

Appendix C
Example of a cover sheet for group work

Syndicate work submission

Each syndicate submission must be accompanied by a short paragraph for each syndicate member that outlines the contribution they have made to the final submission.

Syndicate member 1 _____

Signature _____

Syndicate member 2 _____

Signature _____

Syndicate member 3 _____

Signature _____

Syndicate member 4 _____

Signature _____

We agree that each member of the syndicate has made a fair and equitable contribution to the final work that has been submitted.

Syndicate member 1 signature _____
Date _____

Syndicate member 2 signature _____
Date _____

Syndicate member 3 signature _____
Date _____

Syndicate member 4 signature _____
Date _____

Appendix D

Criteria sheet for determining individual contribution to group work

Peer assessment of contribution to group rating sheet			
Studenthas contributed to the group's work in the following ways:			
	Major contribution	Some contribution	Little contribution
1. Leadership and direction	0	-1	-2
2. Organisation and management	0	-1	-2
3. Ideas and suggestions	0	-1	-2
4. Data collection	0	-1	-2
5. Data analysis	0	-1	-2
6. Report writing	0	-1	-2
7.			
8.			

References

Galanes G. J. Brillhart J.K 1997 Communicating in groups: Applications and Skills, Third edition, Brown and Benchmark, Dubuque.