Working in groups

How to work and contribute effectively in groups

One of the great things about being a university student is the social environment. There are a lot of bright, interesting people to talk with at university and some of your university contacts will become lasting friends. This social environment also provides many opportunities for you to work together and learn from each other.

The term '**collaborative learning**', or working in groups, broadly refers to students working together and using a variety of practices in order to answer questions, use course materials or to solve problems (Colbeck et al., 2000).

Why work in groups?

Although some students prefer to work alone, many students learn better when they can discuss with others. Two heads can be better than one! You can benefit from someone else's strengths, and they can benefit from yours. Explaining something to someone else is also an effective way to reinforce your own learning.

Sharing and clarifying ideas in pairs or small groups both increases your interest in your studies and enhances important critical thinking and interpersonal skills.

Collaborative problem solving is also thought to promote 'deep learning', which enables students to apply critical thinking skills in other contexts, and improves knowledge retention (Johnston et al, 2000). Your peers can also provide a supportive, non-threatening environment for you to try out new skills or ideas.

Many students find learning from each other enhances their problem-solving abilities. Similarly, students who work on group projects learn team-working skills that are highly valued in the professional workforce.

Being able to work effectively in groups, is not only required for assessment in university, but is a lifetime skill for the workforce, particularly your professional dealings with colleagues and clients.

This flyer presents practical ideas about how you can study productively with your fellow students.

Types of groups

In university you will have the opportunity to work in groups in and outside of the classroom. Some common groups within university include:

- **Study group:** students form a group from a specific class that meets weekly to study subject material

- **Class discussion or activity:** group work during class about a topic from a lecture

- **Group assignments:** where students meet frequently and work together to produce work, and often receive a shared grade

(Burns & Sinfield, 2008)

Whatever kind of group you work with remember that you are learning transferable skills in teamwork, conflict resolution and time management. Your future employer, particularly in business, will value your group work experiences (Burns & Sinfield, 2008).

Group lifecycle

Working in groups can be challenging. Despite all the benefits of group work mentioned earlier, sometimes groups fail. The most common reasons groups fail are conflict, 'social loafing' (not putting in the work) and lack of leadership (Turner et al., 2008). However, groups also follow a developmental lifecycle and, by familiarising yourself with that lifecycle and expectations, you can develop and maintain a successful group dynamic. According to Tuckman (1965, cited in Turner et al., 2008 p.141) the four stages within the group lifecycle are:

- **Forming:** Group members get to know one another, the task, and the expectations

- **Storming:** Conflict, disagreement or criticism could arise

- **Norming:** Group members have worked together to overcome issues in the storming stage. As a result, communication between group members becomes more positive and productive

- **Performing:** The group begins to achieve goals. However, if problems arise, the group could revisit the storming stage.

Strategies for successful group work

Whether you are working in a study group or on a group assignment it is important to stay positive. You may not always get to choose your group, but when you do, choose wisely! Try to find people who are as motivated as you.

Generally, the most successful academic groups have only four or five people (Burns & Sinfield, 2008). A smaller number of participants helps to assure that everyone has an active role within the group. Some strategies for making group work easier are outlined for you below.

Getting started

Things to do:

- Check with your tutor about **what your group will be assessed on**. This will prevent any unnecessary work and potential conflicts between group members.
- **Exchange contact details**: phone numbers and email addresses.
- Make sure you share a c**ommon understanding of the task**.
- **Analyse the question or task** together and discuss your understanding of it.
- **Allocate roles** within the group: Be very clear about who is doing what, and set deadlines for completion.

Perform a SWOT analysis

Once your expectations are clear, perform a **SWOT** analysis (**S**trengths, **W**eaknesses, **O**pportunities, **T**hreats). Knowing these details will help you to allocate tasks.

During a SWOT analysis of your group, discuss and note your group's answers to these questions:

- What are your groups' strengths?
- What are your groups' weaknesses?
- What opportunities are there for you in group work?
- What are your groups' threats?

(Burns & Sinfield, 2008 p. 167)

The answers to these questions can help you to understand your group members and how you fit into the group, and help to decide on the best approach for the work your group has to do.

Problem-solving strategies

Coping with non-cooperative team members

Things to do:

- Solve the problem with your group
- Try to discover why your colleague is unable to complete their part of the project
- See an Academic Skills Adviser to seek advice

Things <u>not</u> to do:

- Don't complete their work for them
- Don't complain directly to your tutor / lecturer without having tried to deal with it in the group first

Coping with over dominant team members

A dominant group member can stop other team members contributing equally to the group (especially during discussion).

Things to do:

- The group leader / chairperson should point out that everyone needs to be heard: the group may have allocated speaking times during a meeting where everybody must speak
- Quiet members can be asked more directly for their ideas

Coping with silent team members

Things to do:

- Provide opportunities for everyone in the group to speak
- Leave an open space after each contribution, so that quieter members can speak up
- Acknowledge that everyone's contribution is valuable (even if you don't agree with it)

Works Cited

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