



THE UNIVERSITY OF
NEWCASTLE
AUSTRALIA

LEARNING DEVELOPMENT

Centre for Teaching & Learning (CTL)

Assignment Types

Groupwork



Learning Development
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STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESSFUL GROUPWORK

Get to know each other

Each member of the group will have different expectations, goals and priorities. Make your first meeting a social one. Meet for a coffee or pizza, and share a bit about who you are outside this task; get to know each other as people and establish some common ground.

Then have some focussed discussion to identify:

- Different expectations of groupwork: individuals may have had positive or negative experiences of groupwork and it's good to start agreeing on some "ground rules".
- Different goals: some people are happy to get a pass, some strive for HDs. As a group you need to try to reach consensus about this.
- Various strengths: everyone has something to offer, but it's not always obvious. Find out more about each other's skills and experience. You never know what could be relevant to the task.
- Different understandings of the task: it is essential that everyone is on the same page about the purpose of the task and what is required. (This is enough to begin with; you can work out how to do it later).

Make a Group Charter

Formalise your "ground rules" in a group charter. This is an agreement for how the group will function, and every group member needs to be happy with it. It includes principles of behaviour, and practical matters.

Principles:

- Establish "ground rules" that make everyone feel comfortable in participating. This will include ways of ensuring respect for differences of age, gender, culture, worldview etc.
- Define leadership for your group: is it collaborative leadership, or will you elect a leader? What are the limits of an elected leader's authority?
- Establish "ground rules" for group discussion: how will you ensure inclusivity? What is not acceptable in group discussions?
- Establish processes for dealing with problems that arise. (See below: *Common Problems in Groups*)

Practicalities:

- Meetings: how many? What time? How long? Where?
- Preferred means of communication: email, facebook, phone, Blackboard – this needs to suit everyone, and needs everyone to stick to it.
- Roles for meetings: generally chairperson and minute-taker (these can change each time).

Understand the roles in a group

Clear roles help everyone to know who is responsible for what. The expectations of these roles should be discussed and agreed on.

Traditionally, people think of roles to get the work done, e.g.:

- meeting roles, e.g. chairperson, minute-taker, time-keeper;
- administrator (maintains forms and systems for staying organised);
- task roles, e.g. read and summarise article A, draft the methodology section.

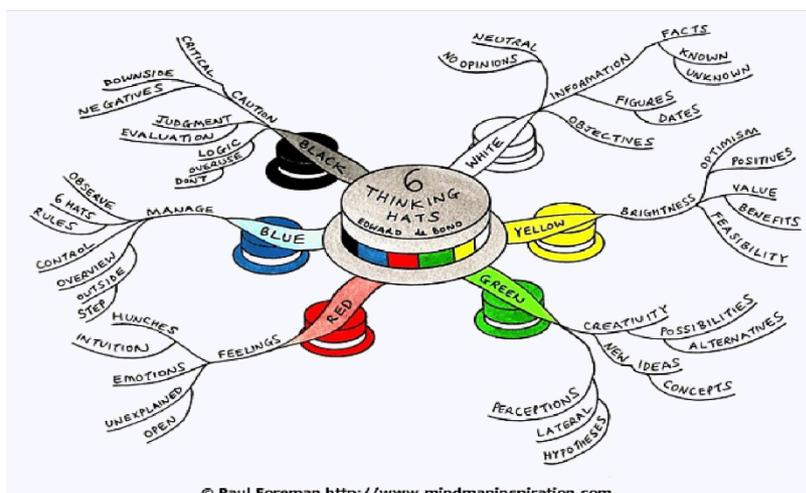
A more integrated approach is to understand that some roles contribute to the work, while other roles contribute to how the group functions. Both are equally important. They might include things like this:

Roles that help the work	Roles that help the group
<p><i>The initiator: gets things going</i></p> <p><i>The clarifier: checks that everyone understands the task</i></p> <p><i>The checker: checks for accuracy</i></p>	<p><i>The nurturer: gives positive feedback to group members</i></p> <p><i>The mediator: recognises disagreement, and works out the underlying cause</i></p> <p><i>The observer: gives feedback on how group members are participating</i></p>

These roles can be allocated specifically at any time, or you may simply observe that some people seem to show these kinds of behaviours in group meetings. Appreciate their value.

For more information, go to <http://bokcenter.harvard.edu/working-groups>

Another set of roles is for thinking, developed by Edward de Bono as the “Six hats” model:



This can be a useful way to think through an issue and make decisions. Each person adopts an attitude to the problem at hand by wearing a “hat”. Wearing the yellow hat, for example, means

that in discussion, you will contribute only an optimistic view on the issue, identifying benefits and feasibility etc. Your input will be balanced against the attitudes of the other hats. In this way, six perspectives on an issue can be considered in depth. This results in more understanding with less argument when making a decision.

Be organised

Developing systematic ways of doing things leads to efficiency and productivity. Some simple strategies are:

- Create a standard form for everyone's contact details, and make sure everyone has a copy.
- Make an agenda at the start of each meeting. It's just an agreed list of what needs to be discussed. Try to make agenda items goal-focussed, e.g. "Determine how to recruit focus-group participants" or "Clarify the process for data collection."
- Keep a record of group discussions. You can create a simple template, e.g.

Issue:
Key points:
ACTION: Who: When:

It doesn't need to be a table. It could simply be a notebook in which you follow this structure for the issues of each meeting.

Recorded minutes and agenda can help to identify progress, focus discussion and clarify tasks.

Reflect on group processes regularly

Set aside a defined time (e.g. 30 minutes) to reflect on your group's processes. This is not about making progress on the task; it's about how well the group functions in order to achieve the task.

- Check how well you are conforming to your group charter.
- Identify and celebrate the strengths of the group – this is good for morale. What does the group do well in terms of effective collaboration? Refer to the topics in this handout.
- Identify any problems the group is experiencing. Work out how to address them by using the ideas in this handout, or look online for more information about effective groupwork.

WRITING & PRESENTING TOGETHER

Writing together

There are different options for how you will draft a group report, and then present the final version. As a group you might consider these options:

- a) Each person writes one section: efficient, but some sections are more difficult than others.
- b) One person is the writer, the others contribute ideas: coherent result, but not an equal distribution of workload, and one person's ideas will dominate.
- c) The group writes together: equal workload and everybody learns, but requires good co-operation and planning, and patience with the writing process.

As a group you can also share and exchange the roles of writer, reviewer, editor, proof-reader and publisher. For more information on writing together, go to the [University of Sydney site](#).

Presenting together

Learn about the elements of effective presentations. There are many online resources about how to give a good presentation. We recommend that you come to a Learning Development workshop about presenting. If you cannot attend, you will find the workshop materials and additional resources on the [Learning Development Blackboard](#).

Additional tips for group presentations are:

- Work as a group to review the final slides for consistent formatting.
- Always rehearse as a group.
- The introduction to any presentation is where the structure of the presentation is outlined. In a group situation, you should include the name of each speaker in the introduction by saying who will be presenting which section/topic. The names can be included on the introduction slide.
- The transition to the next speaker should be smooth. Give your section a concluding statement and then introduce the next speaker, e.g. "So these are the main internal factors which have contributed to the current situation. Susan will now explain the broader political context."
- Try to allocate presenting time equally to each person. You might, for example, have the same person presenting the introduction and conclusion, as they are shorter than the body sections, and share one long section between two people. Everyone should be part of the presentation. There is nothing worse than having only one or two people speakers and the rest of the group standing silent.
- All group members should pay attention to the one speaking. Your body language should show that you are interested and supportive. Project the impression of a team!

COMMON PROBLEMS IN GROUPS

Group members feel controlled OR a group leader feels let down

Group problems can develop due to a lack of understanding about leadership. One of the main aims of groupwork is to develop the personal leadership capabilities in each group member.

Personal leadership means taking responsibility for your own behaviour in the group by:

- contributing in a positive way;
- encouraging the potential of all group members;
- not dominating discussion or dismissing different perspectives;
- respecting difference, even if you are uncomfortable with it;
- facilitating group processes, rather than trying to control them;
- doing your best to help the group reach consensus on issues and delegate tasks fairly.

A collaborative group, where everyone exercises personal leadership, is democratic, and decision-making is a shared process.

Chairing a group meeting is a leadership role. Ideally, in a collaborative group, the role is shared by group members taking turns to chair meetings. Chairing a meeting is not about dominating the discussion and making authoritative decisions. An effective chairperson keeps discussion focussed on the issue, encourages everyone's views, and clearly summarises key points of discussion to help the group make decisions. A chairperson is a facilitator, not a controller.

Some groups prefer to elect a group leader who takes responsibility for co-ordinating efforts. If your group decides to operate this way, it does not mean that you are off the hook! The elected leader needs to facilitate in the ways described above, and each member still needs to take personal responsibility, as described above. Another option is to allocate a different leader for each part of a project.

The role of an elected leader might sometimes be similar to an umpire: if the group cannot reach agreement on an issue, the umpire steps in and makes a call based on what is best for the group. If electing a leader, group members need to agree on whether they want this kind of decision-making structure for your group. It's a good idea to clarify it in the group charter.

“Great leaders
inspire greatness
in others”

Anonymous
Wednesday - Oct 31, 2012(6:49 pm)

The group doesn't know what it's doing

Quite often, the problems experienced by a group are caused by a lack of clarity about the task.

To avoid this, try these strategies:

- Ensure that everyone shares the same understanding about the purpose and requirements of the task.
- Break the task into manageable steps.
- Construct a timeline, showing meetings, deadlines, task objectives etc.
- Decide how to delegate tasks to individuals or pairs, and which tasks will be done as a group.
- Divide into sub-groups of 2-3 when it is appropriate. Even a single task might be done more effectively by assigning individual members responsibilities for sub-tasks.
- Make sure sub-groups and individuals always report back to the main group and obtain approval for their tasks.

The group doesn't seem to be making progress

Making initial progress can sometimes seem too slow, which may lead to frustration for some because individuals will have different understandings of what "progress" is. If this happens, remember the following points:

- Things may seem slow in the "getting to know you" of a group. It takes time to build common ground and trust, but this is really important.
- Recognise that some additional knowledge (e.g. relevant reading and research) may be needed before firm decisions can be made.
- Keeping minutes of each meeting can be a record of progress in thinking through ideas, even before big decisions are made.
- Progress may be hampered because it's difficult to see what needs to be done. If so, go back to clarifying the task, or breaking it into more manageable parts.

What to say to
help progress:

Are we all ready to make a decision on this?

Here's my understanding of what we are trying to accomplish...[summarise]... Do we all agree?

What would help us move forward: More data? Resources?

Let's take a few minutes to hear everyone's suggestions about how this process might work better and what we should do next.

What's stopping us from making this decision?

SOURCE: Derek Bok Center for Teaching & Learning, 2015

Some group members are not doing their share

If it really is the case that someone is being lazy, there might not be a lot you can do about it. Just get on with the task, and be honest with peer assessment of contribution at the end.

However, don't be too quick to judge. It's better to find out the whole story. The person may have commitments or problems causing a great deal of stress. If so:

- Offer support and encouragement; people are more likely to make an effort for others who are sympathetic.
- Work out a flexible way to allocate tasks; perhaps there can be a trade-off of time or effort.
- Perhaps you can help decrease the stress by offering practical help with the problem (within reasonable limits).

The person may lack motivation, or confidence. If so:

- Acknowledge a person's strengths and allocate tasks based on strengths.
- Allocate some tasks to pairs, rather than individuals; having a partner can be a motivator.
- When allocating tasks and roles, ensure that everyone is satisfied with the expectations and requirements.

Some group members dominate, others are too quiet

If one or more group members dominate discussion and decision-making, others feel that their contribution is not valued, or even possible. To avoid this, remember these strategies:

- At every meeting, make time for every individual to make regular contributions. (Including this kind of guideline in your group charter is a good idea.)
- Nominate roles for every group member, so that responsibility is shared.
- These roles can be rotated each meeting so that each person gets to experience each role.
- If you recognise that you are dominating the discussion, set a goal for yourself to be intentionally quiet, or pause for longer before you speak to give others more time to respond.
- Engage in constructive criticism about important points rather than engaging in any type of personal criticism.

What to say to give all members
the opportunity to speak

Let's go around and see where everyone stands on this.

Let's take a few minutes to hear everyone's suggestions about how this process might work better and what we should do next.

Let's check in with each other about how the process is working: Is everyone contributing to discussions? Can discussions be managed differently so we can all participate? Are we all listening to each other?

SOURCE: Derek Bok Center for Teaching & Learning, 2015

Group discussions go off on irrelevant tangents

If group discussion does not stay focussed, members can feel that their time is being wasted. To facilitate productive meetings, remember the following:

- From the first meeting, get into the habit of both expecting and allowing the chairperson to keep the group on task and work-focused.
- Set an agenda for each group meeting. If you are chairing, gently re-focus the group on the agenda item by summarising what has been said with the aim of making a decision about it.
- Perhaps the problem is the topic itself; maybe it's too complex and needs to be broken down into sub-topics that can be discussed on one at a time.
- As an individual, be disciplined so that you only contribute relevant additions to the group discussion—stay task-focussed yourself!

What to say to keep
the group on task

Can we go back to where we were a few minutes ago and see what we were trying to do?

We only have one hour today, let's try to stay task-focused.

SOURCE: Derek Bok Center for Teaching & Learning, 2015

The group rushes to the task, dismissing group processes

This is the most common underlying cause of other groupwork problems. Groups often only have a short time to achieve their task, so it is understandable that some group members become quite anxious about getting to work.

However, this anxiety can have a negative effect because if everyone is so worried about the task that group processes are ignored, the group experience can be difficult, even destructive.

Running your group according to the *Strategies for Successful Groupwork* (above) need not take extra time. In fact, it can save the time often wasted on dealing with problems that could have been prevented in the first place.

It is sometimes thought that achieving a task successfully is the best way to create group trust and harmony. However, some management research (Chang & Bordia, 2001) has shown it is the other way round: groups that begin with greater cohesion achieve better performance.

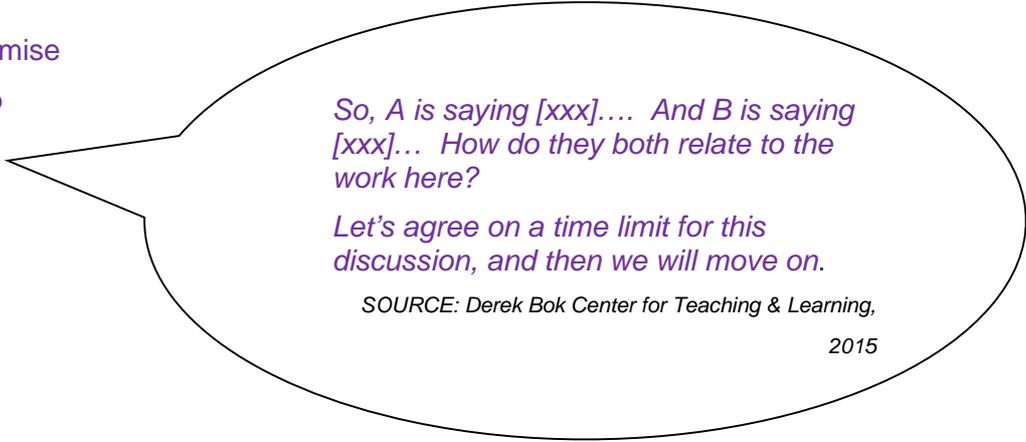
Conflict arises between group members

Some form of conflict may occur in the group. Be ready to resolve it. Ignoring it is the worst thing you can do. Remember the following:

If the conflict is about competing perspectives on the task, the group should focus on the issue, and not let it become personal.

- Group discussion should be respectful at all times.
- Really listen and empathise with a different perspective; use the “Six Hats” strategy.
- Notice body language: be aware of how people are really feeling.

What to say to minimise
conflict in the group



So, A is saying [xxx]... And B is saying [xxx]... How do they both relate to the work here?

Let's agree on a time limit for this discussion, and then we will move on.

*SOURCE: Derek Bok Center for Teaching & Learning,
2015*

People in conflict need to listen to each other. Really listen to the other's point of view, and be prepared to reconsider your own view if it is in the groups' best interests.

If the conflict is between two personalities, they may be able to work out their differences in their own time – and perhaps over a coffee.

Group members who take the time to get to know each other, and to appreciate each other's strengths are more likely to build trust than to descend into personal conflict.

For more resources about working in groups, go to the [Learning Development Blackboard: UoNline > Blackboard > my other sites > Learning Development](#)

Sources used in the preparation of this handout:

Chang, A. and Bordia, P. (2001). A Multidimensional Approach to the Group Cohesion-Group Performance Relationship. *Small Group Research* 32 (4), 379-405.

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