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Working in Groups



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Introduction

At some point in your course, you will be expected to work in a group to produce a piece of work. This could be a presentation, a research project or a demonstration.

Why do we work in groups?

Group work is part of most academic learning now and can have lots of benefits such as:

1. Sharing ideas and giving each other constructive feedback.
2. Different perspectives or approaches can contribute to interesting and well-rounded projects.
3. You will develop skills in communication, negotiation, listening and organisation.
4. Your skills can be applied in the workplace. Employers value good team-working skills. Confidence, initiative, and team spirit will help you not only gain a job, but also to get ahead in the workplace.

How are we put into groups?

Tutors may decide to either let you form your own groups or put you into groups of their choice. Sometimes, they may simply group the students alphabetically. You may think that choosing your own group members is the best way to go, but this is not always the case. If you choose good friends, it can be difficult to be critical or honest about their input. Learning how to give constructive criticism will develop good working relationships, but do it badly and you could ruin friendships. So, be careful about insisting on friends in group work.

What about arranging the first meeting?

It is important to organise a schedule of meetings that you can all attend easily. You need to decide how often you will meet: weekly or fortnightly? A regular time slot would be an advantage so find a gap in your timetable when everyone is free. By having a schedule, everyone has to make a long-term commitment to the project. Flexibility is also needed, however. We all know how random life can

be, so absences should be accepted and dealt with by sending out notes from missed meetings or by catching up later to tell the group member what happened.

In the first meeting, the group should decide on a set of targets and outcomes for each week. The long-term objective is obviously the end product, but short-term goals are important to set too. By doing this, everyone is aware of what should be happening week by week.

I don't want to work in a group; I'd rather do it on my own.

It is a well-known fact now that employers like their employees to be “team members” and be able to work in groups together. By overcoming any objections to group work now, you will be well equipped to face it once you are out in the workplace. If you are worried that other group members may not pull their weight, consider the fact that although they may not put much effort into finding evidence, they may be an expert on PowerPoint or writing up. It may surprise you what they can put into the project. The whole point of team working is to pull on individual strengths and to overcome weaknesses by working together. Some people are natural leaders while others are happy to be led. Of course, group dynamics can sometimes be uneven and effort has to be made to stabilise the team.

How do groups work together?

Your group consist of individuals who will have different feelings about working in a team. Some may have had previous experience and others will have none. But these individuals have to come together to form an effective team. Tuckman (1965) developed a model to explain this process:

1. Forming: a busy time initially trying to figure out what you are all going to do in the task. Many members will worry whether the task will get done at all.
2. Storming: conflict may arise at how each member thinks the task should be done. Some may feel anxious that they are being ignored or not treated equally.
3. Norming: you will eventually settle down into roles and be able to take the task on fully. Differences should be resolved and members should be showing co-operation and consideration for each other's needs. Members should now feel valued, and work can continue.
4. Performing: the members now feel confident working together and work progresses. Members should feel they can voice opinion without prejudice and all members should be enjoying the task.

Are “ground rules” a good idea?

Ground rules are necessary if you want your group to work effectively. They should be set at the “forming” stage. These rules will help set time scales and expectations of each other. They should obviously be achievable and fair. Some rules could include the following:

1. Length of meetings.
2. Apologies to be sent prior to meetings for absence if possible.
3. Openness and honesty.
4. Where and when should work be collated together?
5. Responsibility for taking notes.

Obviously, your team should create its own ground rules – these should ensure consistency in your work and the goal will seem easier to achieve.

What role should I play?

A team has to take care of three things: the task, the group dynamics, and its individuals. Each member will contribute something different to the team. The key thing here is that even though each member is doing something different, the team as a whole produces one end product. There are many different roles that you can take on, but ask yourself these questions:

1. Am I a doer? Do I want to get on with things quickly and on my own? I can appear bossy or extrovert.
2. Do I prefer to think about something for longer? I can be considered an introvert, quiet and thoughtful.
3. Can I tell how others feel about themselves? I probably enjoy talking to people and communicate more than work alone.

Consider which type of person you are most like and then think about the roles in a team.

1. **Coordinator/leader:** leads the team in its meetings; clarifies objectives; keeps the team moving and makes decisions.

2. **Thinker:** collects information; researches; listens to others; considers obstacles; sees solutions and anticipates other problems.
3. **Go-Getter:** strives for results; wants to progress the task quickly; impatient if delays occur; motivational; questions laziness of others.
4. **Carer:** works to develop and keep up team spirit; notices if other members are not performing as usual; strives for agreement; keen to keep everyone involved; promotes positivity.
5. **Worker:** active member who wants to get involved with any job; team player; keen to stick to the plan; dislikes too much chatter and digression; wants to get the task completed on time or earlier.

Can I play two roles?

You very rarely fit into one category completely. For example, you may be a natural **worker** but with a **carer's** nature who will watch out for the quieter members of the group. You may feel like a **thinker** but then have to take on the role of **leader** because there is no strong leader there and you have the widest knowledge of the subject matter. So, yes, you can take on more than one role.

Once you have established each member's role, jobs can be allocated according to their strengths. There are other strengths to consider of course. If one member has excellent IT skills, they could be in charge of the computer-based tasks. If a member is very artistic and you need illustrations, they would naturally be a good choice. These things should be discussed in the "forming" stage.

What can we do to keep up morale?

There are few things you can do to keep team spirit up.

1. Try to get to know things about each other, like where you live, your musical taste or hobbies.
2. Arrange a social night at the pub or somewhere where you all enjoy.
3. Share some personal thoughts with each other if you want to.
4. Accept that life is random and that members may have “off” days. Be respectful of everyone’s problems and offer help.
5. As a team, accept that everyone has strengths and weaknesses.
6. Make sure every member feels free to express themselves.
7. Be sure that everyone feels like a “member” of the team and no-one is excluded.

How do we maintain the momentum?

Keeping everything moving forward can be tricky, particularly since at university there are so many other things going on. However, with careful planning, momentum and team spirit can be maintained.

Communication is the key. At the first meeting, make a list of everyone's email addresses, telephone numbers, and times when they are available for meetings. One member could take responsibility for emailing each week with a reminder of the time and place of the meeting. A central point of communication would be a useful thing to set up (e.g. Facebook or WhatsApp). Then, if someone was unable to attend a meeting, they would only have to send one message to the whole group.

There are apps and software available to help you plan and record your work like OneNote. Plus, if one member is absent, notes can be easily accessed so they can catch up on what they missed.

Allow everyone to contribute. At your meetings, make sure everyone knows that they will have the

chance to speak and take part. There is nothing worse than sitting in a meeting that is being dominated by one or two speakers when you really want to add something important. If each meeting has a running order with each member getting a chance to take part, no-one will feel left out.

Active listening. Failing to listen to others is perhaps one of the best ways to lose any team spirit already created. If a member feels they are not being listened to, they will feel left out and undervalued.

Talk about any problems as soon as possible. If you feel that you have been given an unfair amount of work to do for the team, then tell someone. This could be another member you feel close to or the established leader. Whatever you do, if you feel you are being treated unfairly, you must communicate it to the team in some way. If the work is dealt out equally at the beginning of the task, then this can be avoided.

What do I do if something goes wrong?

Teams and groups don't always work together perfectly. Sometimes, members forget about the fact that they are part of a machine that needs all of its elements to perform well. Here are some things that can go wrong and what you can do to remedy them:

One member is shy:

Encourage them to join in. Give them a job they are happy with. Make sure they get plenty of time to rehearse before giving a presentation.

One member talks too much:

Create a time limit for each member and stick to it! Then everyone will get a fair chance to speak.

Some work is late:

You can try to create a deadline at the beginning of the task so each member knows exactly when work is expected in or assign one member as a checker to liaise with others on their progress.

We end up wasting time on chat:

There is nothing wrong with talking about other things in your meetings, but try and keep this to a minimum. Perhaps you could allocate an extra 15 minutes for chatting at the beginning or end of each meeting, but always keep in mind that there is still a job to do.

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