

## Working in Groups

During the course of your studies you will be required to work with others in order to complete various tasks. Group work is collaborative learning, working together, with a shared responsibility, pooling individual skills and knowledge for a common goal. Team work develops social, academic and vocational skills, including improved long term retention of information, greater academic achievement, and the ability to work with different people.

### Groups can be:

- Informal in-class groups to complete immediate short tasks;
- informal out-of-class groups where students organise themselves into study groups;
- formal in-class and out-of-class groups, organised by the tutor in order to complete more complex tasks. These usually run for a longer period.

### Benefits:

- **Sharing of ideas:** The input from a group will be greater than that from an individual. A task is broken down into smaller pieces, lightening the workload and saving time and duplication.
- **Team skills:** Working with others is an important life and workplace skill. Many different interpersonal skills are part of successful collaborative learning, such as listening, dealing with challenging situations and conflict resolution, tolerance, cultural awareness, and leadership.
- **Self-awareness:** Working with others gives you an opportunity to identify your own strengths and weaknesses, to improve on these, and to evaluate your understanding of a subject while developing your critical thinking skills as you listen to others' viewpoints. During the life of a group, you may have the opportunity to fill different roles, as the group moves through various stages. Different roles may include leader, supporter, recorder, mediator, thinker, and even humourist.

### Some ways to work together:

Groups that work well together are effective and develop positive group dynamics. This can be achieved in a number of ways.

- Small groups of around 2-5 are an optimum size.
- Define goals. At the outset, establish a clear objective, with a shared understanding of the tasks and with set deadlines, accepted by all members.
- Set regular meeting times and places for the duration of the project. Decide on an agenda for each meeting. Check progress.

- Exchange contact details. Get to know one another.
- Elect a leader. Often this role may pass to another during the course of the project.
- Each member is to have specific, clearly defined roles and responsibilities which contribute to the whole. Tasks are best allocated according to the strengths and interests of individuals. This builds confidence, makes individuals feel valued for what they can bring to the group, and reduces the chances of conflict.
- Open, honest and respectful dialogue, relevant to the task, builds trust. Everyone should be given an opportunity to build their communication skills, and feel sufficiently comfortable to voice their opinion even though it may differ from the majority. In turn, this means everyone has the chance to build their listening skills. Interpersonal interaction is key to successful communication within a group.
- Defuse potential conflict immediately. Acknowledge the problem, discuss its impact, and agree to a solution. A lot depends on the present group leader's mediating skills. Different points of view, disagreement and difficult questions are opportunities for open discussion. It is when feedback becomes personal that conflict is difficult to resolve and places the group in jeopardy.
- Honest, but encouraging feedback is valuable, as is personal reflection on what you are contributing to the team.
- It is the best not to always work with friends. Working with others broadens communication and cross-cultural skills, what Baker (2007) refers to as "cross cultural communication competence" (p. 27), improving your ability to work with many different people.

## Challenges

Deal with issues immediately. If the matter cannot be resolved within the group, consult your tutor.

- Unfair division of labour. The unfair allocation of tasks, without considering personal interests and skills, can build resentment. A member may feel they are doing all the "hard" work, while others are not doing their "fair share". Initial delegation of tasks needs to be clear, and progress reported at each meeting.
- Ineffective or weak leadership, competition for leadership, no nominated leader, or domination by one member. Shared leadership, and flexibility in who fills the role may resolve a leadership issue.
- Deference to authority. Some members, for various reasons, may feel reluctant to express a viewpoint, especially if it challenges the leader.
- Blocking. Team members may be inappropriately outspoken, negative in their attitude, domineering, refuse to participate, or feel excluded; others may either withdraw or will not compromise. It is important for each member to feel their opinion to be valued. Strong teams build on differences, harnessing individual strengths. Team building exercises, or "getting to know you" activities at the beginning, help to break down those initial barriers.

- Free riding, where one or more individual leaves the work to their colleagues. Roles and responsibilities need to be clearly defined at the outset, and individuals to be held responsible for their fair share of the group effort.
- Problems relating to the task: difficulty in finding resources, time constraints, shortage of skills within the group, not understanding the task, and difficulty in getting everybody together for regular meetings. Address these as they occur, and with your tutor if necessary

#### A brief note on communicating within a group:

- Have a seating arrangement where everyone feels included;
- express your views as an opinion, not an absolute truth;
- be specific in your praise and offer constructive comment;
- always ask, never demand;
- be aware of your (and others') body language;
- stick to the topic.

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