Help Your Students Make the Most of Group-work

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Introduction

Working in groups can **improve learning outcomes** and support the development of **key graduate attributes** in students. In the context of the COVID pandemic specifically, group work can bring additional important benefits.

> *Working in groups can support social interaction and peer-learning, both of which may require some extra nurturing in a virtual classroom.*

However, group work can be challenging for students. Many require support to flourish in group or team work activities. And teachers need to give special consideration to planning, preparation, communication, the provision of instructions, monitoring and stepping in if things go wrong.

Here we present a few strategies for supporting students to work effectively in groups. The following 15 tips constitute good practice whenever students are asked to work in groups, regardless of whether the module is being taught online or in person.

How will you arrange the groups?

1. Think carefully about **how students will be arranged into groups**. How you will allocate the students to groups? Assigning students at random has some advantages while allowing students to choose their own groups can have others. If the activity/activities are taking place on campus, how will you layout the room to facilitate? If the module will involve more than one group activity, do you want the groups to remain the same? Or to change?

2. **Decide on group size.** Some students will defer to others in large groups, but contribute actively in pairs. Similarly, the extent of the task(s) involved and the size of the group has implications for what constitutes an equitable workload for the members.

What can you do to help the groups function well?

3. **It is vital to promote good conduct between students** with respect to students' differences and strive to create an inclusive environment. Here, you may find it helpful to use a learner agreement with the class.

4. You may wish to begin by **talking to students about their past experiences with group work**. What worked and what were the challenges? What makes a good group member? This conversation can lead to the co-creation a few ground rules for successful collaboration. If a learner agreement has been drawn up, you can use this as the basis for a meaningful conversation. Contributions can be elicited anonymously, if you wish, using note-cards or a tool like Mentimeter.

5. **Share your rationale for using group work**. Understanding is a powerful source of motivation and, on order to undertake the task(s) effectively, students should be supported to understand the benefits of collaborative learning and its pedagogical purpose. This discussion should refer back to module- and programme-level learning outcomes and graduate attributes as appropriate

6. **Consider identifying roles for each group**. A set of clear roles for the group can help your students avoid some of the more common teething problems. A group chair, for example, can be given responsibility for arranging group meetings. A secretary can take responsibility for taking notes during the meetings and compiling a 'task list' and following up after the group has met. For longer projects, each group can identify a 'teacher liaison' to limit email traffic, but all students should know how and when they can contact you if problems arise.

Participants are more likely to stay on task when their roles in the collaboration are clear and distinct. Role allocation can help groups get up and running quickly, rather than each member waiting for others to initiate activity. Group members are also more likely to hold each other accountable for not completing work if a particular task is assigned to them.

How will you introduce the task(s)?

7. **Put students into groups first!** If you try to give instructions before putting students into groups, students are often too preoccupied with deciding on group membership to listen to you. Therefore students should be in their groups before you give them instructions.

8. **Explain the task(s) clearly**. This means both telling students exactly what they have to do and describing what the final product of their group work will look like. Exemplars may be useful, since students may find it difficult to visualise specific project outputs like 'academic posters' or 'reflective videos'.

9. If the group work is being assessed, **ensure learning objectives are clearly outlined** to the students and that they know exactly what is expected of them, individually and collectively, to successfully respond to any marking criteria. Again, exemplars can be highly effective in this regard.

10. **Always encourage students to ask questions.** Even if you believe your instructions are crystal clear, students may have legitimate questions about the activity. Give them time to ask questions before they get to work and be prepared for difficult questions such as 'how will I be given credit for my contribution to the group' or 'what happens if I have a "social loafer" in my group'.

How can you support your students during group activity?

12. Early on, you may wish to **facilitate some form of group cohesion exercise**. Students work best together if they know or trust each other, at least to some extent. Even for brief group activities, have students introduce themselves to their group members before attending to their task. For longer periods of group work, consider an activity designed specifically to build a sense of teamwork.

13. **Monitor groups without hovering**. These principles hold true whether you are using break out rooms to facilitate a group activity online or working with groups in a classroom. As students do their work, try to circulate among the groups and answer any questions raised. This will allow you to listen for trends that are emerging from the discussions, so that you can refer to them during any subsequent plenary discussions. Avoid interfering with group functioning — allow time for students to solve their own problems before getting involved. You might consider leaving the room for a short period of time. Your absence can increase students' willingness to share uncertainties and disagreements.

How will you draw the activity to a close?

14. **You can end with a plenary session** in which students provide a report or make a presentation based on their group work. Effective group reporting can make the difference between students feeling that they are just going through their paces and the sense that they are engaged in a powerful exchange of ideas

15. **Ask students to reflect on the group work process**. They may do so either orally or in writing. This reflection helps them discover what they learned and how they functioned in the group. It also gives you a sense of their response to group work.

NOTE: Many group projects will conclude with a piece of assessed work. The question of how to assess group work will be explored in a future microCPD input

Do you use group work in your modules? What tips would you give to a colleague who might be introducing group work to students for the first time?