

Developing Group Work Skills through Majors and Programs

Introduction

Group work or team work (and its more nuanced terms cooperative learning and collaborative learning) is a highly desirable generic skill in both learning and employment contexts. In some educational philosophies learning with and through engagement with others is an essential element of a transformational educational process. Group work is not just a means to an end; it has important outcomes in its own right and requires the explicit development of particular skills.

Despite the potential for employment-related benefits, group work is often unpopular with students. They report experiences of dysfunctional or inefficient groups, unclear assessment tasks leading to complicated and inefficient processes, lack of support and process around dealing with miscreant peers resulting in compromised grades for capable students and good grades for undeserving students. It is not surprising that many students prefer to work individually because they find this the most efficient and productive way to undertake assessment. However, not all tasks in real world contexts can be achieved by individuals, and working in groups has a range of organisational benefits which are valued by employers and more generally within society. Being an effective member of a group is as significant a skill as being able to work independently. For this reason, group work needs to be actively taught and assessed in an intentional and progressive way throughout majors/programs.

The highly problematic nature of group work means that for students to be fully engaged they will need to understand its importance, be confident that their skill development is supported through carefully designed assessment tasks and learning experiences, and that their efforts are acknowledged and protected through guidelines and processes, incentives and penalties.

The remainder of this document is divided into four sections. Section 1 outlines a number of key issues in undertaking group work in the context of courses, majors and programs. Section 2 provides the University of New South Wales framework for the implementation of group work with supplementary links to a range of other universities and organisations. The web links include practical activities, proformas, examples, assessment ideas, rubrics, etc. Section 3 provides links to resources on group work especially written for students. Section 4 provides links to the group work websites of a number of other universities and a range of useful resources and related documents. Because of the importance of group work there are many very valuable and comprehensive websites and so those identified here are only a small sample of those available.

Section 1

Differences between group work and team work

Although the terms 'group work' and 'team work' are often used interchangeably there are accepted ways of differentiating them. Generally speaking, groups tend to be more informal and are focussed on short-term interactions. They are often the context for brief exchanges focused on transitory tasks with membership drawn from those available at the time. They develop skills associated with these encounters including speaking and listening, giving constructive feedback, building on others' views, summarising ideas and reporting back to a larger group.

Teams, on the other hand, are established to undertake longer-term tasks and have more coordination and structure. They draw on generic group skills and in addition members may be selected because of complementary personal skills and capacities, or required to play specific roles

within the group. Members are interdependent, with the work of all individuals having a direct effect on the team's success. Over time, teams have the potential to build satisfying collegial networks and to develop a range of complex skills.

Arguably, students need experience in both groups and teams to develop the full range of skills. Group work operates best where brief interactions are useful in promoting student engagement within a large or small group learning context. Team work is typically the basis for group assignments where tasks are allocated to specific members, or where students engage in long-term collaboration. A useful discussion of the characteristics of team work (referred to as cooperative learning) is provided in the following article.

Cuseo, J. (1992). *Cooperative learning vs. small-group discussions and group projects: The critical differences.* (This article was originally published in *Cooperative Learning and College Teaching*, 2(3), 5-10.)

Benefits of group/team work

Groups work skills are valued by employers because they are the basis of much activity in the work place. Groups also provide an important context for students to engage actively in learning, testing and challenging ideas, and constructing and debating arguments.

In summary, group work:

- develops skills that enable graduates to work effectively and efficiently with others in the work place including: collaboration and negotiation, providing sensitive and timely feedback, problem solving, conflict resolution, planning, delegation, leadership, personal accountability, critical thinking and time management
- has the potential to improve student employment rates
- enhances the social aspects of student life, improves student satisfaction and consequently reduces attrition
- increases student engagement in learning through discussion
- provides a context for student ideas to be articulated and challenged
- has the potential to solve problems too complex for an individual
- provides opportunities for students to learn from the experiences of their peers
- assists students to gain an understanding of their strengths and limitations
- increases interpersonal skills by exposing students to a broad spectrum of people from different back grounds with diverse perspectives and values
- has the potential to decrease academic workload through reducing marking

Free riding, social loafing and the sucker effect

One of the significant impediments to successful group work is students taking unfair advantage of the work of other team members. This is known as 'free riding'. There are many causes of free riding ranging from social, economic, cultural and linguistic issues to students who see group work as an opportunity to avoid real effort. A variation on the notion of free riding is known as 'social loafing' where students believe their contributions are not recognised or acknowledged and they withdraw, ceasing to actively participate in the group. In response to the lack of engagement of free riders and social loafers, some capable students may decide that they will not allow themselves to be exploited (to be 'suckers') and may delay any work on the assessment until very close to the deadline. This may appear to be procrastination or poor time management but has roots in much more significant issues.

Where the arrangements for team work do not include practices that minimise free riding, social loafing and the resulting sucker effect there is a significant risk that the academic intentions of team work will be undermined.

The following journal articles are useful resources on the issue of non-performing students and provide strategies to address this.

Davies, W Martin (2009), 'Group work as a form of assessment: common problems and recommended solutions', *Higher Education*, 58(4), 563-584.

Maiden, B & Perry, B (2011), 'Dealing with free-riders in assessed group work: results from a study at a UK university', *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 36(4), 451-464, DOI: 10.1080/02602930903429302

Teaching students to work in groups/teams

Groups or teams are more than just the aggregation of individuals; members are bound together for specific purposes and operate according to particular conventions and social practices. Learning to be an effective member of a team involves understanding and operating within these conventions and practices. At the personal level it requires suspension of self-interest and competitive advantage in order to collaborate with others for mutual benefit. At the team level it involves an appreciation of the collective capacities of each member and the insight to harness strengths and minimise limitations in order to achieve the designated outcome.

Operating successfully in this complex way, requires students to build up a substantial repertoire of sub-skills such as listening, speaking clearly, introducing themselves, interacting with unfamiliar people, clarifying a point, summarising an issue, contributing to a lively conversation, supporting others to express a view, understanding an issue from another perspective, respectfully disagreeing, leading a discussion, managing conflict, taking direction, knowing when to let others speak, scribing in a group, reporting back to a larger group, time management, developing an agenda, note taking, planning a process, developing an action list, delegating, and so on. More formal processes such as team résumés, team policy statements, team contracts, peer evaluations, meeting agendas, etc. can insert some structure and accountability into the arrangements and allow for assessment of the process as well as the outcome.

Furthermore, operating effectively as a member of a group is not just about acquiring a set of skills; it is a complex social, cultural and linguistic undertaking that requires those skills to be applied effectively in specific contexts with people who have various social and cultural characteristics determined by factors such as ethnicity, gender, class, social status, age and religion. Despite the challenges of diversity, homogenous/self-selected groups are generally seen as less beneficial because they reduce the learning opportunities that arise from working with people who have different communication styles and perspectives.

Where students are required to demonstrate particular skills through assessment it is a high stakes activity, particularly if students come from backgrounds where these skills are unfamiliar or contrary to their own social and cultural practices. For students to acquire these skills, their educational experiences need to include a carefully designed and managed progression, including explicit teaching of the various aspects of working in groups, opportunities to practice these aspects and then assessment which demonstrates their achievement.

Group work will be present in some form within many, and perhaps most, courses but assessed in only a limited number; the critical point is that these experiences should not be random, ad hoc, or dependent on the inclinations of a lecturer, but part of the design and implementation of a carefully thought through strategy for the major or program.

Key components of teaching group work include the following:

- students understand the importance of group work, the staged approach being taken and how it will be assessed
- the purpose of particular group work exercises in the overall strategy for group work are made explicit to students
- the aims of specific group work exercises and their relationship to assessment are made explicit to students
- group processes such as introductory exercises, setting agendas, monitoring group performance, managing conflict and giving feedback are supported through resources and staff involvement
- groups have a mix of social, cultural and linguistic diversity
- group size is related to the nature of the task
- brief group work exercises are included frequently as part of lectures or tutorials
- critical aspects or issues about a skill are explicitly taught in conjunction with an exercise
- all students get the opportunity to practise skills, not just those who volunteer
- students monitor their own skill development by reflecting on their performance and identifying areas for personal improvement
- students have in-class opportunities to get to know each other before they undertake assessment together
- before students are expected to undertake group work in assessment they have been taught and practised the component skills
- assessment criteria for group work are made available to students as part of the assessment information

A comprehensive list of [group work downloads and proformas](#) is available on the University of Sydney web site.

Assessing Team Work

Assessment of group work is qualitatively different from assessment intended for individuals. The design of the assessment generally involves focus on both the task and the group processes that facilitate the successful completion of the task. This dual focus is interdependent, that is, students demonstrate their capacity to work in groups by producing a group-based assessment and, the group-based assessment task can only be completed by working in a group. This approach emulates the work place where a structured and often formalised process is undertaken by teams because that is the best or, in some cases, the only way to achieve the outcome required.

Key components of group assessment include the following:

- assessment is achievable within the timeframe
- assessment is directly related to the course learning outcomes
- completion of an assessment requires all members to actively contribute

- expectations about the student contribution to each component of an assessment are clear and unambiguous
- membership in groups which focus on assessment is small (3 to 5 students); the larger the group the more likely student effort will be unevenly distributed
- groups have a mix of social, cultural and linguistic diversity
- assessment tasks are stimulating and engaging
- assessment tasks are complex enough to actively engage all members of the group
- assessment has discrete components undertaken by individuals as well as other parts undertaken by the group
- marks are associated with both the work of individuals and the work of the groups
- group processes are reinforced and rewarded by allocating marks for evidence of useful practices such as agendas of meetings, planning, draft documentation, critical feedback, etc.
- group processes are supported by resources including models and proformas for contracts, agendas, plans, peer evaluations, etc.
- students are accountable to each other and undertake mutual peer appraisal on their engagement and productivity
- students engage in peer review of each other's work before submission
- arrangements make provision for signalling when the group is dysfunctional

Section 2 Group Work Resources and Downloads for Staff

The left hand column in the table below provides the University of New South Wales framework for the implementation of group work. The right hand column provides links to additional resources at other institutions for the same aspect of group work.

Resources for Staff	
UNSW site Group Work	Other universities
Ideas for Effective Group Work	<p>University of Adelaide Creating and Maintaining Teams</p> <p>Oxford Brookes Principles for Student Group Work Small Group Teaching</p> <p>Carnegie Mellon Group Projects</p> <p>Griffith University Graduate Attributes Tool Kit: Teamwork</p> <p>University of Michigan Centre for Research on Learning and Teaching Resources on Cooperative Learning, Group Work and Teamwork</p> <p>Worcester Polytechnic Institute Group work in Distance Learning Courses Tips for participating in group work online</p> <p>Deakin University Group Assignments</p> <p>University of Technology Sydney Enhancing Experiences of group Work</p>
<p>Preparing for Group Work</p> <p>Make your Expectations Clear Setting Up Groups When Groups First Meet Building Group Dynamics Dealing with Uncertainty & Challenge</p>	<p>Carnegie Mellon IS Skills Inventory Sample Group Resume Sample team contract Team contract template Devote time specifically to teamwork skills Composition of Groups</p> <p>Oxford Brookes Group size Procedures Inclusive small group work</p> <p>Conflict Resolution Network Icebreakers and Energisers</p> <p>University of Waterloo Implementing Group Work in the Classroom</p> <p>University of California, Berkley Guidelines for Designing Group Work Learning Objectives How to Form Groups Group Size and Duration The Structure of Group Work Fostering Group Interaction Tips for Formulating Productive Group-Work Assignments</p>

	<p>Deakin University Team Charter Interpersonal style inventory Setting milestones (GANTT and PERT)</p> <p>University of Sydney Catering for Student Diversity Proformas Planning activities Delegating activities Team Tasks Meeting Agenda Sample Meeting Agenda Meeting Minutes Facilitating and Participating in Meetings First meeting checklist</p> <p>University of Technology Sydney Group work Resources Exercises and templates Readings Icebreaking and Learning Activities Introduction activities, Getting acquainted activities, Teambuilding activities, Content/learning activities</p>
<p>Developing Students' Skills</p> <p>Reflective Listening</p> <p>Constructive Feedback</p> <p>Structuring Group Discussion</p> <p>Managing Groups</p> <p>Group Presentations & Report Writing</p> <p>Reviewing Group Member Contributions</p> <p>Identifying Group Issues</p> <p>Dealing with Group Issues</p>	<p>University of Sydney Activities for small groups</p> <p>University of Waterloo Small Group Tasks Types of small groups</p> <p>University of California, Berkley Group Work Learning Techniques Creating Discussion Guidelines</p> <p>Deakin University Decision making Nominal group technique: An alternative to brainstorming, Force field analysis</p> <p>Conflict Resolution Network 12 Skills Summary</p> <p>Pennsylvania State University Conflict Resolution Tips</p>
<p>Facilitating & Monitoring</p>	<p>Carnegie Mellon Monitoring Groups</p> <p>Oxford Brookes Evaluating Groups</p> <p>Big Dog and Little Dog's Performance Juxtaposition Teamwork Survey</p> <p>Deakin University Supporting Student Teams Encouraging Collaboration</p> <p>University of Technology Sydney Monitoring Groups</p> <p>University of Sydney Good Meetings checklist Good Leadership of Meetings checklist</p>

	<p>What is going wrong checklist Template to help decide 'Who's talking'</p>
<p>Helping Students Reflect</p> <p>Checklists: group contributions, performance in group meetings, group presentation or written report</p>	<p>Carnegie Mellon Sample Group Work Self Evaluation Sample Self Evaluation Form</p> <p>Deakin Employability Skills Framework Team Effectiveness proforma Student self reflection</p> <p>University of Technology Sydney Helping Students to Reflect</p> <p>University of Sydney Writing plan checklist How to NOT give a boring presentation</p>
<p>Assessing Group Work.</p>	<p>Carnegie Mellon Peer Evaluation Form for Group Work Peer Work Group Evaluation Form Sample Numerical Peer Evaluation (Self Excluded) Sample Numerical Peer Evaluation (Self Included) Assessing Group work Best Practices for Designing Group projects</p> <p>University of Melbourne Assessing Group Work (AUTC)</p> <p>University of Sydney Tutorial Participation Grade Descriptors Self and Peer Assessment Self and peer assessment criteria Self and peer assessment criteria form</p> <p>University of Waterloo Assessing Group Work</p> <p>Deakin University Assessing Group Assignments Peer Assessment</p> <p>University of Technology Sydney Designing Group Assignments Assessing Groups</p> <p>Oxford Brookes Assessing Group Work</p>

Section 3 Group Work Resources and Downloads for Students

University of Adelaide

Group work

RMIT

Group work, Challenges, Stating A Group, Meetings, Feedback, Conflict, Assignment

UNSW

Guide to Group Work: Students

University of Reading

Effective Group Work (pdf)

[Getting organised](#) [Developing your speaking and listening skills](#) [Giving constructive feedback](#)
[Managing conflict in groups](#)

University of Southampton

Working in Groups (20 pages)

Oxford-Brookes

Leadership interventions, Asking Questions

University of Waterloo

Working Effectively in Groups

Harvard University

Working in Groups: A Note for Faculty and a Quick Guide for Students

1. [Getting Started](#) *Organizing the Work, Understanding and Managing Group Processes*
2. [Include Everyone and Their Ideas](#) *Encouraging Ideas*
3. [Group Leadership](#) *Concerns of Individuals that May Affect Their Participation*
4. [Focusing on a Direction](#)
5. [How People Function in Groups](#) *Roles That Contribute to the Atmosphere of the Group*
6. [Some Common Problems \(and Some Solutions\)](#)
7. [References & Resources](#)

Pennsylvania State University

Building Blocks for Teams: Tips for Students

Worcester Polytechnic Institute

Tips for participating in group work online

University of Sydney

Getting started

- [First meeting checklist](#), [Building a team checklist](#)

Keeping going

- [Good Meetings checklist](#), [Good Leadership of Meetings checklist](#), [What is going wrong checklist](#) [Template to help decide 'Who's talking'](#)

Finishing well

- [Writing plan checklist](#), [How to NOT give a boring presentation](#), [Self and peer assessment criteria](#), [Self and peer assessment criteria form](#)
- An [example of a peer assessment form](#) used in one unit of study in the School of Business, courtesy of Iain Black, Discipline of Marketing.

More template examples

These templates developed for groupwork in ACCT1002 may assist you in planning, conducting, and reviewing the effectiveness of your team meetings and activities. There is also a [guide to using these templates](#) which you may find useful.

- [Planning activities](#), [Delegating activities](#), [Team Tasks Meeting Agenda](#), [Sample Meeting Agenda](#), [Meeting Minutes](#), [Facilitating and Participating in Meetings](#)

Section 4 Links to Web Resources

Below are links to some of the many group work resources and related documents available online. Many of the links have been included in Sections 2 and 3 but the complete websites are reproduced here to provide access to the various approaches by institutions and the related documentation.

University of Technology Sydney

Enhancing experiences of group work

[Introduction to Group Work](#), [Designing Group Assignments](#), [Preparing students for group work](#), [Forming Effective Groups](#), [Getting Groups Started](#), [Monitoring Groups](#), [Assessing Groups](#), [Helping Students to Reflect](#), [Group work Resources](#)

Carnegie Mellon

Using Group Projects Effectively

[What are the benefits of group work?](#), [What are the challenges of group work, and how can I address them?](#) [What are best practices for designing group projects?](#) [How can I compose groups?](#) [How can I monitor groups?](#) [How can I assess group work?](#) [Sample group project tools](#)

Harvard University

[Working in Groups: A Note for Faculty and a quick guide for students](#)

[Getting Started](#) [Organizing the Work](#), [Understanding and Managing Group Processes](#)
[Include Everyone and Their Ideas](#) [Encouraging Ideas](#)
[Group Leadership](#) [Concerns of Individuals that May Affect Their Participation](#)
[Focusing on a Direction](#)
[How People Function in Groups](#) [Roles That Contribute to the Atmosphere of the Group](#)
[Some Common Problems \(and Some Solutions\)](#)
[References & Resources](#)

Team Based Learning Collaborative (TBLC)

[Team-based Learning](#)

Deakin University

[Group Assignments](#)

[Rationale](#)

Topic 1: Why use group assignments?

Topic 2: Employer expectations and graduate skills

Topic 3: Student perceptions of group assignments Design

Topic 4: Design principles

Topic 5: Teaching teamwork

Topic 6: Effective teams

Topic 7: Forming groups

Topic 8: Encouraging collaboration

Topic 9: When things go wrong!

Topic 10: Supporting student teams Assessment

Topic 11: Assessing group assignments

Topic 12: Peer assessment

Topic 13: Student self reflection

University of Sydney

Group Work

- [What is group work? Aims of group work, Benefits of group work](#)

Plan

- [Preparing to use group work, Planning a UOS outline that includes group work, Tips for preparing yourself, Planning/Designing an assessment schedule, Choosing a group assessment task, Marking criteria and grade descriptors, Planning and starting group work](#)

Design

- [Designing student-centred group learning and teaching experiences, Converting theory into practice, Tasks suitable for group work, How to design a marking criteria](#)

Implement - Prepare

- Forming students into groups, Group size, Methods of selection, Tips for preparing learners, First class meeting, Warm up exercises and icebreakers, Team building, communication and problem solving exercises, Planning and starting group work

Implement - Manage

- Dealing with changes in group composition, Managing your time

Implement - Monitor

- Why monitor? When and how to monitor, Feedback, Reflecting upon and evaluating group work, Academic honesty, Preventing academic dishonesty

Implement - Assess

- Assessing group work, Options for assessing group work, Sharing resources (example tasks), Peer and self-assessment

Evaluate

- Evaluation and reflection, Evaluating group work, Self-evaluation and peer evaluation, Sharing resources (example evaluations)

Background Resources

- Student learning styles, Student centred learning, Online learning and teaching in groups, Benefits of online learning in groups, Online learning and teaching methods

Journal articles and related documents

University of Melbourne

Finding Common Ground: Enhancing Interaction between domestic and international students. A Guide for Academics

ALTC document detailing strategies for peer learning across diverse cultural and linguistic groups.

Group Assessment

Davies, W. Martin, (2009) 'Groupwork as a form of assessment: common problems and recommended solutions', *Higher Education*, 58:563-584

Very useful journal article including discussion of the literature with practical suggestions for implementation.

Oakley et al (2004) 'Turning Student groups into effective teams' New Forums Press, OK.

Very useful journal article providing practical ideas and processes.

Dealing with Free-riders and Social-loafing

Maiden, Barbara & Perry, Bob (2011) *Dealing with free-riders in assessed group work: results from a study at a UK university*, *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* Volume 36, Issue 4, pages 451-464

Useful tips on dealing with non-performing group members

Johnson, D.W., & Johnson, R.T. (1999). *Making cooperative learning work*. *Theory into Practice*, 38(2):67-73.

Useful article on cooperative learning (team work)

Cuseo, J. (1992). *Cooperative learning vs. small-group discussions and group projects: The critical differences*. *Cooperative Learning and College Teaching*, 2(3).

Useful article on cooperative learning (team work)