

# Advice on Group-working

<<http://www.hope.ac.uk/gnu/stuhelp/groupwk.htm>>

## Character types

*Some first thoughts about learning*

Pause for a few minutes and try to answer the question:

### How do I learn things?

If you talk to other students you will probably find that there are many different approaches. You will also find that you learn different things in different ways. Some things you will learn by reading (e.g. influence of location on crime) others are best learnt by doing (e.g. how to survey a fieldwork site).

Many factors influence how well we learn. Not only is it **what** we wish to learn important, but also **why** we want to learn (motivation). There is also a great deal of research into the influence that our own **personality** has upon the quality of our learning.

When we work in a group, we are brought into contact with others who will have different ways of learning. Some people are very methodical and have a logical approach to problems, others bring an intuitive approach and will want to move quickly to test new ideas. We also react in different ways when we join a group. Some students are willing to propose ideas from the start, while others prefer to get to know the other members of the group before they say anything.

A group brings together people with a wide range of characteristics and abilities. The strength of groupwork is that problems can be tackled from different angles which use the diverse skills of its members.

Think about the different types of personality within different groups.

- What would be the best way to form an effective group?
- Grouping together similar characters?
- Having a range of types?



Write down the different strengths and weaknesses of various characters, and how they could each have something useful to offer to the group.

***The aim of this exercise was to show you how we are all different, with different positive attributes and ways of working. You will spend many hours working with other students as a group and it is essential that you feel comfortable with each other, in order to function as an effective team.***

## Ground rules

- Take 5 minutes to brainstorm ideas on the theme:

***"How could I wreck group sessions and make sure they are an ordeal for the group and the tutor?"***



Write down your list of ideas.

In a brainstorming session, ideas are not thought about in depth. Just write down any words or phrases which come to mind, without any questioning of exactly what they mean.

- Now take another 5 minutes to go through the list of ideas asking:

***"If that is how I can wreck the session, how can I make it work?"***



Make a new list of how to succeed.

- These two lists can be used to think about negotiating group ground rules. Generate a list of ground rules which would help a group to work together.
  - Some example ground rules are given below:
    1. Students and tutor will arrive and finish on time
    2. All group members will have done any agreed preparation
    3. Group members should encourage everyone to contribute and value all opinions
    4. No-one should dominate the discussions
    5. Anyone can remind the group of these negotiated rules

***Every group needs ground rules, many of which are never stated explicitly, e.g. whether you can swear, what you should wear, if you always need to show up etc.***

***It is helpful, when establishing a new group, to set ground rules which will make your group into an effective and pleasant unit, where everyone knows what is expected of them.***

## Student diversity exercise

Below are descriptions of three different student characters. Read each one and imagine that you are working in a group with this person. Write down any strengths and weaknesses that you think that this person would have in a group-work situation. If you have identified any problems, what strategies would you suggest to overcome them? *An example case study is given below.*

### John

John is 18 and passed his A levels with good grades. He is very quiet, but always attentive and makes detailed notes in class. He is uncomfortable when asked a question, and tends to respond with 'don't know' answers. He is punctual, well-organised and always does the preparation work asked.

*Your assessment: John already has some important skills, such as time management, organisation and reliability. He needs to develop his self-confidence and realise he has a useful contribution to make.*

*Strategies: John might be encouraged to speak out by doing a 'round' of the group, when everyone has a chance to speak and the group isn't dominated by one or two outspoken individuals. Lots of positive feedback on any contributions made by John will boost his self-confidence. Giving him a role such as time-keeper or scribe will help him to value his positive qualities.*

### Frank

Frank is 45 and left school with no formal qualifications. He has worked as a lorry driver for most of his working life. When he was made redundant, he did an access course which got him a university place. He has a lot of experience to offer other group members, but he has fixed views about things and also doesn't feel he needs skills training.



*Write down your assessment and strategies to overcome any problems you have identified*

### Val

Val is 33 and a mother of two children aged 5 and 7. After her A levels, she worked in an office, until her first child was born. Now that her youngest child is at school, she has decided to return to study. She is fascinated by her subject, and really enjoys the group sessions where she has the chance to engage in challenging discussion. Despite her motivation though, she is quite anxious about coping with undergraduate work and feels (wrongly) that she is not as competent as the recent school-leavers.



*Write down your assessment and strategies to overcome any problems you have identified*

### Attia

Attia is an 18 year old Muslim. She has achieved good A level grades at a single sex school. She comes from a closely-knit family which has high expectations of her undergraduate career. It is part of her cultural practice to show deference to male family members and so her confidence in presenting and defending her own ideas and views is low. She is also unused to being with students who have very different expectations, motivations and experiences to her own.



*Write down your assessment and strategies to overcome any problems you have identified*

# Group Work

## Why work as a group?

Students who work in co-operative groups often do better than those who work alone, or competitively. Working in a group can provide opportunities which, as an individual learner, are not so readily available:

- Another member of the group may have knowledge or experience which may help you
- A sense of responsibility to fellow students can provide good motivation and encouragement - for example, you may be more likely to do the preparation work if you know that your other group members are depending on you for one aspect of the group task
- More complex problems can be solved by breaking them down into separate tasks for group members - for example, a reading list could be shared out and group members make their notes available to others
- Discussing a subject with others can often help your understanding.

A number of **skills** are developed working as part of a team, such as:

- interpersonal skills, e.g. assertiveness, debate
- oral communication skills
- self appraisal, i.e. thinking about your own performance/contribution to the group task

as well as specific skills related to the group task, such as:

- critical reading
- time management
- negotiation
- decision-making

These personal and transferable skills are what employers say they want from graduates, and in some work areas they can be more important than subject knowledge.

## How to be a group

Your group may have been decided by your tutor, or chosen randomly by yourselves. Your group size, and mix, will probably change depending on the nature of the task in each seminar. Whatever the situation, it is important to consider the group dynamics.

In order to work effectively together, some effort must be made to get to know one another, to appreciate each others strengths (and weaknesses!) and to decide how you can best work as a group.

## How I work in groups



List some of the situations where you have previously been part of a group: *e.g. sporting activity, hobby, school/college society, mother & toddler playgroup*



Think about the way you work in group situations by writing down your responses to the following points:

In a group I tend to .....

In a group I prefer not to .....

I like groups where.....

I don't like groups where....

In this group I'd like to be.....

How I'd like this group to be for me.....

## Group roles

As you have already discovered, any group of people is made up of a variety of personality types, who will each have things they like doing best, and their own way of working and thinking. This can be very useful in group work where there can be a number of different roles to play.

For instance, you may be full of imaginative ideas, but unable to concentrate on one thing for long enough to carry it through, whereas someone else in the group may be more methodical and better at organising things, and can turn your ideas into plans. You may be confident and good at speaking, like organising other people but reluctant to do the leg-work, whereas another member may not wish to have responsibility but be conscientious, able to meet deadlines and be happy to do what is asked.

It is important to decide who will perform what function, otherwise the session may drift aimlessly and nothing will get done. Assigning group roles, outlined below, can help prevent the discussion from wandering from the point, or from one or two people dominating the proceedings.

Some roles need to be specifically allocated, such as a **leader**, to guide the team towards a conclusion, a **note-taker**, to keep a record of ideas and decisions, a **time-keeper**, to allocate times to specific tasks and remind the team to keep to them, or a **spokesperson**, to deliver your ideas and findings to the whole group. These roles need not be taken by the same people each week, and it can be good practice to have a go at different ones, even the ones you don't think you'd be good at. And don't forget that the other group roles, *i.e.* the **team workers**, are equally as important at getting the task in hand done.

***Remember that you cannot always take on the role that you want. A group with more than one leader is as likely to fail in its task as one without a leader. By taking on a role that you do not think you can do well, you are more likely to benefit, from the acquisition of new skills.***



Think about what you are good at and decide which of these roles (leader, note-taker, time-keeper, spokesperson, team workers) best suits you, and why?



Which of the above roles would you least like to do. Why?

Working as a group can be an exciting and fruitful experience, but it can also, if poorly managed, strain the best of relationships. It helps to decide certain things before you start, for example:

- What exactly is the task?
  - What are we supposed to learn? What skills to develop?
  - What are we supposed to produce?
  - What criteria will be used to assess it?
  - What are the deadlines?
  - Are there any guidelines?
- What do we want from the team project?
  - How high a mark are we aiming for?
  - Do we want to enjoy it or just get it done?
  - How much time do we want to spend on it?
  - Do we have other priorities?

*This second set of questions may vary for each team member, and some agreement is needed for the team to work together effectively.*

- How will we avoid falling out with each other? (*Setting ground rules will help*)
- What role(s) am I and the other group members going to take for this task?
- How are we going to manage the task?
  - Have we set a timescale?
  - Have individual tasks been shared out fairly?
  - Is everyone happy with what they have to do?

### **How was it?**

After a group work session, think about how it went. If it didn't go well, try and identify the reasons why. You may decide:

- We weren't clear about what we were supposed to be doing
- One group member dominated the discussion
- We wandered off the point
- We each stuck to our views instead of trying to reach a compromise

Try and think of how to go about things differently, and suggest these ideas at the next session, whether you are in the same group or not.

Evaluate your own performance as a group member.

- How did you help the group in its task?
- What didn't you do that would have helped?

Use these insights to improve your role in the next group session.

## Self/Peer Evaluation

This is not an idea thought up by your tutors to save themselves time, but an important part of your learning process.

Practising **self-evaluation** will enable you to adopt a reflective learning style, whereby you will become better able to judge the effectiveness of your own performance, and to become aware of your improvement in a particular skill over time. Indeed, there are some aspects of your work that no-one else can judge as well as yourself, for example, your motivation, or the amount of effort that you put into a task.

It may help you to keep a reflective diary, where you record not *what* work you have done, but how you went about doing it, and what you felt about doing it. The diary will focus on the *process* of learning, rather than the outcome, and will help you to learn about yourself and be able to monitor the improvements in your activities. It would also be a useful source of evidence of your achievements.

**Peer evaluation** will help you to develop your critical skills, and also help you to judge your own performance. By making a critical appraisal of someone else's work, it can help you to understand what is required of you. It is very important, however, that you are clear about the criteria on which the evaluation is based, so that everyone is judged equally.

*Self or peer evaluation can lead into **self or peer assessment**, whereby feedback is given and received, and grades awarded for work.*



### Try this self-evaluation exercise:

- Write down, on individual cards or Post-It notes, 7 or 8 qualities or skills that you possess
- Put them in order depending on how well you can do them
- Now try another order, for example, how important you think they are

This has been a simple practise at self-evaluation, but have you learnt anything about yourself that you hadn't thought of before?



### Try this group evaluation exercise:

Answer these questions as a group:

- |   |          |
|---|----------|
| 1. It was clear who was the group leader                      | Yes / No |
| 2. It was clear who was the timekeeper                        | Yes / No |
| 3. It was clear who was the spokesperson                      | Yes / No |
| 4. We identified clearly what the task involved               | Yes / No |
| 5. We completed the task satisfactorily within the time given | Yes / No |



Answer these questions individually:

1. What I liked most about the group was....
2. What I liked least about the group was....
3. Next time I think we should....
4. Next time I think I should....

***Working as a team involves contributions from different members for the mutual resolution of a task.***



### **Team evaluation exercise**

Think about a particular exercise you have taken part in where you had to work as part of a team. Consider the points below relating to how your group worked together on the set task:

Everyone in the group contributed to the discussion	Yes / No
We were clear about what we had to do	Yes / No
It was difficult to stick to the time	Yes / No
Everyone's opinion was valued	Yes / No
One person dominated the discussion	Yes / No
Everyone had done the preparation required	Yes / No
The group made a valuable contribution to the team task	Yes / No
I was happy with my contribution	Yes / No
We would do things differently next time	Yes / No

- You may find it useful to arrange a group meeting to discuss how you worked together on a particular exercise.
- The responses that you have made above can be used as a basis for this discussion. During the meeting each member should have the opportunity to give and receive feedback on how the group worked together. Be positive, but consider how you would improve things the next time. Even if you felt it went wonderfully, there are always things you might change.
- Think about what worked well with this group, and write down one suggestion for doing something differently next time you work in a group.

## **Ten 'Dos' and 'Don'ts' for a student working in a group**

(compiled using comments made by current first year Geography undergraduates at Liverpool Hope)

### **DO:**

1. Contribute to the group by putting forward ideas and getting involved in discussion.
2. Co-operate with other members of the group.
3. Select specific roles for every group member (e.g. Spokesperson, Leader, Time-keeper, Scribe etc.)
4. Take on your given role within the group.
5. Organise meeting times and stick to them.
6. Share the workload equally.
7. Respect the values and opinions of others.
8. Communicate and share ideas with each other.
9. Encourage others to speak.
10. Value diversity.

### **DON'T:**

1. Sit back and do nothing.
2. Think that others will do the work.
3. Take lead and ignore others.
4. Be afraid to speak.
5. Expect all your own ideas to be used.
6. Leave people out of the discussion.
7. Become distracted from the subject.
8. Be aggressive, interrupt or criticise unnecessarily.
9. Ignore other members of the group.
10. Allow one person to dominate.

### **References and Links**

Gibbs, G (1994) *Learning in Teams: A Student Manual*