

# Successful Group Work

At university, group work is a common tool used in seminars, labs or tutorials. It is an increasingly popular means of assessment at QUB and is perceived as a vital skill at the job market. However, far too often students find working with others a very difficult task as e.g., conflicts arise, communication problems occur or there are issues in regard to time management.

To overcome this and enable a successful group work it is crucial to be aware of the benefits of collaborative work, ongoing group processes and tips and tricks which support a cooperative learning and working environment.

## Why group work?

| Advantages  | Disadvantages  |
|---|--|
| <b>Flexibility:</b> It is up to the group in which direction the project is going.                    | <b>Adjustability:</b> Members need to accept Believes, attitudes and work ethics of others.    |
| <b>Efficiency:</b> Greater use of talents and resources.  | <b>Irritability:</b> Groupwork is often hard work, which can lead to conflict and frustration. |
| <b>Creativity:</b> A lot of people have more ideas and more expertise than just one.                  | <b>Disparity:</b> Sometimes the commitment of group members is not equally distributed.        |
| <b>Justifiability:</b> Groups are likely to come up with better judgments than individuals.           | <b>Practicality:</b> There are various practical difficulties connected to group work.         |
| <b>Employability:</b> Students increase learning and develop skills valuable for their future career. | <b>Continuity:</b> It not only takes time to get a group established, but to keep it working.  |
| <b>Communality:</b> Meet new people, make friends and gain networks for your career.                  | <b>Disparity:</b> or anxiety can hinder contribution of all equally.                           |
| <b>Conviviality:</b> Group work can be really good fun if all members embark it.                      | <b>Dependability:</b> Each member has to be able to rely on the other colleagues.              |

## Key challenges of and barriers for group work (Hartley & Dawson, 2010)

- ✓ Lack of **effective communication:** Complexity, jargon, lack of clarity
- ✓ Weak **relationship** between group members: Lack of trust, attitude to task/people
- ✓ **Emotions:** Dismissiveness, assumptions, defensiveness
- ✓ **Organisational difficulties:** Inappropriate facilities, time management problems
- ✓ No fair **share of workload** and commitments: Lack of participation and contribution

## Stages of team development (Tuckman, 1965)

- ✓ **Forming:** Anxiety, weakness, covered up
- ✓ **Storming.** Emotive, testing, conflict
- ✓ **Norming:** Listening improves, group settles
- ✓ **Performing:** Mutual trust, risk taking, results

**Info!** A **group** is a number of people working together but have divided task with individual contributions. A **team** goes a step further. It is a number of people who have developed collaborative relationships.

## Tips for the first meeting

- ✓ **Make a positive start:** Smile, ask questions, offer suggestions, make notes, talk predominantly about your group project
- ✓ **Introduce each other:** Some people might not know each other
- ✓ **Take time:** Don't rush into the first meeting, first impressions are important
- ✓ **Identify the task:** Make sure everyone understands the assignment and what is needed to successfully complete the group work i.e., read the assignment instructions together
- ✓ **Agree on rules:** Everyone should be clear on what to expect, how to contribute and what happens if he/she does not participate appropriately
- ✓ **Identify areas of expertise:** Who is good in what? Look up *Belbin's* (1981) Team Role Inventories to help you with that process
- ✓ **Identify common practice:** Who will be taking notes, who are you going to decide on things?
- ✓ **Agree on a time for the next meeting:** It is always easier to arrange a date face-to-face than via email

**Tip!** Set up a "Contract" e.g., no phones during the meeting, being polite etc.

**Tip!** Agree on a fixed time schedule for the next weeks e.g., every week after class.

**Tip!** Arranging dates and making decisions is easy via the scheduling tool "Doodle".

## General tips for meetings

- ✓ **Meet in a quiet, appropriately sized place and all group members should be able to face each other:** Form a circle, book a room in the McClay Library, ask for an empty lecture room
- ✓ **Make a plan:** In one of the earlier meetings agree on a schedule e.g., when is what finished by whom?
- ✓ **Have a set agenda:** Agree at the beginning of the meeting what issues need to be addressed
- ✓ **Be organised:** Leave the meeting knowing what each of the group members has to do
- ✓ **Evaluate:** Start off the meeting with a summary of what has been achieved so far
- ✓ **Be democratic:** Let all people have a say and be polite to each other
- ✓ **Keep records:** Keep clear records of meetings and attendance and make sure there is a record of who has done what

**Tip!** Use Mind-Maps to help you structure your thoughts when planning.

## Things to consider

- ✓ Before you submit or give the presentation make sure you've met all the demands set out by your lecturer or school
- ✓ In case you are asked to work on a written assignment be aware that it should be a coherent piece of work i.e., allocate who will proofread, who edits the paper, how are you referencing, what kind of abbreviations etc. you will use
- ✓ Email communication can be a challenge. Be aware of your tone of voice as written words can often sound harsher than intended

**Tip!** Share tools with via the tool "Google Drive".

**Tip!** "Google Docs" allows all group members to write on a paper together and enables you to track the writing process.

Despite all efforts to prevent problems, it is impossible to completely eradicate conflicts. It is therefore important to be aware of the ongoing processes and ways to deal with it:

### Stages in the escalation of group conflict (Simmonds, 1995)

- ✓ **Discussion:** This occurs where a group is convened to tackle a task, signs of tension may appear
- ✓ **Debate:** Psychological pressure begins to mount, co-operation is still existent but is now matched with competition
- ✓ **Deeds not words:** Non-verbal behaviour has become more important, boundaries start to be drawn
- ✓ **Fixed images:** Perception of others and their motives have begun to change and solidify so that stereotyping becomes prevalent
- ✓ **Loss of face:** Huge doubts and contradictions come up, dissenters from the “right” approach are thrown out and there is a sense of “seeing behind the mask” of people
- ✓ **Strategies of threat:** Threat within the group has arrived, people react to others in an inappropriate manner
- ✓ **Inhuman:** Destruction of others is now seen as legitimate, people become fixed in their views, people distance each other
- ✓ **No retreat:** Attacks on the source of power become important, people anticipate retaliation and tend to cut off any means of retreat
- ✓ **No way back:** Totally irrational behaviour begins,

**Tip!** Awareness is the key. Ask yourself: What behaviours are likely to start conflicts. Discuss these issues with your colleagues.

### What to do if group conflict arises (Hartley & Dawson, 2010)?

- ✓ Get each group member to write down what they think the problem is. Put the comments up for everyone to read and get the group to discuss the priorities.
- ✓ Get the group to sit down together and discuss.
- ✓ Focus on moving forward with the task and how successful completion will benefit every group member.
- ✓ Focus on the project actions and ignore any personal differences. What needs to be completed to finish the project
- ✓ If all else fails: Contact your lecturer

### What to do in case of non-participation (Hartley & Dawson, 2010)?

- ✓ Attempt to contact the person and ask them to explain why they are not engaging and what they suggest to do.
- ✓ Explain what will happen to the person if you do not hear from them.
- ✓ Re-allocate any work you need to and complete the project without the member
- ✓ Have a plan for if they re-engage – is there anything you could give them to do?
- ✓ Inform lecturer of your situation as soon as it is obvious there is a problem
- ✓ Keep your lecturer up to date on how it develops

**Tip!** Keep clear records of meetings and attendance. This will allow to identify who has done what.

### Group work will be successful if you...

- ✓ Have clear objectives, agreed goals and allocated roles
- ✓ Reach agreements at most meetings
- ✓ Complete tasks as agreed
- ✓ Are all participating
- ✓ Are listening to each other
- ✓ Generate an open and trusting atmosphere
- ✓ Allow opinions to be questioned
- ✓ Respect each other
- ✓ Use your time effectively
- ✓ Have a systematic approach to discussion
- ✓ Regularly review the process
- ✓ Share information
- ✓ Can keep up a good communication

**Tip!** Consider group work as a "means to an end". All of you want to do well in the course. Thus, make an effort to get a good grade.

### Group work will go wrong if you...

- ✓ Are wasting time
- ✓ Are not taking the task seriously
- ✓ Have no clearly articulated roles and tasks
- ✓ Have a weak leadership
- ✓ Lack planning
- ✓ Have no clear agendas
- ✓ Lack support
- ✓ Isolate certain group members
- ✓ Are going into too much procedural detail
- ✓ Shot down ideas of each other
- ✓ Lack innovation and communication

