

How to Work in Groups

Setting out the ground rules

It is important to discuss the rules by which you will conduct your group process at the very start. This maximises the value of the learning process and minimises the risk of serious group conflicts and generally bad experiences.

- Ask each other whether you have constraints on your time availability. Does someone in the group have a job, family responsibilities, or a long daily commute? If there are grounds for believing that someone may not be able to carry their weight in the group because of these constraints, discuss how to handle this. Is the group willing to accept a smaller time commitment from this person? Can work be assigned to this person that reduces their need to attend meetings? Should they consider asking the tutor for an assignment they can do individually in place of the group work?
- Where will meetings of the group take place? Should you rotate meetings to locations near group member's homes', or meet consistently on the campus?
- When will meetings take place? Compare schedules and choose a couple of time slots that work well for all group members and try to meet consistently at that time.
- How will you run your meetings? Do you want to work by consensus, whereby everyone agrees with the decisions that are being made or do you want to vote on things?
- Do you want to assign group roles to single individuals who perform them throughout the group work period or do you want to rotate them?
- Should those who are assigned group roles have lighter group work assignments?

Assigning roles

It is suggested that groups assign the following roles:

Facilitator

- Ensures the meeting flows well and that each member has the opportunity to participate meaningfully.
- Proposes the agenda based on where the group is in the work plan and the action or follow-up items from the last meeting.
- Focuses the discussion on the purpose of the meeting.
- Ensures that the agenda is followed and that time constraints are respected.
- Adjudicates debates and closes discussions.
- Includes all group members in the discussion.
- Ensures that the decision making following the ground rules laid down by the group.
- Participates in the meeting as a member of the group, but avoids using their role as facilitator to dominate the discussion.
- The position of facilitator may be rotated among group members.

Recorder

- The Recorder ensures the continuity and efficiency of the group process throughout the group assignment.
- Ensures that minutes of meetings are kept, including a record of the discussion and decisions.
- Ensures that all action items are assigned to someone.
- Ensures that the assignments are balanced among group members.
- At the end of the meeting, reviews for the group the decisions made and tasks assigned.
- Ensures that the minutes of the meeting are typed up, circulated, and brought to the next meeting.
- Modifies work plans as necessary and ensures all members of the group have a copy of the most recent work plans.

- It is advisable for one person to perform this role throughout the group work assignment (but every student should ensure that they get experience with this role sometime during their university career).

Liaison

- Your group may decide or be asked to choose someone who will act as liaison with the module tutor.
- This should be someone who is easily accessible by phone, can receive messages, and feels comfortable talking openly with the tutor.
- You may want to rotate the liaison person if the group is working together over a longer time period.
- The liaison gets in contact with the tutor in order to arrange meetings the tutor should attend, to report on problems, to clarify the assignment, etc.

Setting up work plans for group work

When setting up work plans remember:

- The work plan should set out the major tasks to be accomplished and a timetable for doing them.
- Individual group members should be assigned to specific tasks outlined in the work plan.
- This work plan may evolve as the group continues to meet.
- The work plan should be maintained on the recorder's computer, changes made as appropriate, and new versions distributed to group members.
- The work plan should be structured in such a way so that if a member leaves the group, the remaining members have manageable assignments and can produce a meaningful product.

Running meetings of the group

General points

- Work in groups is divided into two types of activity: meetings of the group and individual work outside meetings.
- Group meetings have two main purposes: to guide and organise the individual work and to perform group functions as a team.
- Meetings guide the ongoing individual work so that it fits into the larger effort. Thus, a group meeting provides an opportunity to report on progress on accomplishing tasks assigned at a previous meeting and to assign new tasks accompanied by clear deadlines.
- Besides organising and directing individual efforts, group meetings are also an opportunity to perform group functions as a team. During meetings, groups are good at making decisions that affect the group, developing work plans, generating ideas for the assignment, brainstorming (e.g., prioritising things or developing criteria for assessing things), reviewing and criticising earlier drafts of assignments, preparing flow charts and overheads for a presentation, organising the layout and structure of reports, and resolving disputes between group members.
- Individuals working separately are better at gathering the information needed for making group decisions or for writing assignments, and for the writing or polishing of reports or report sections.
- In order to be effective, meetings must be well structured and formally conducted, i.e., with Agenda and Minutes.

The Agenda

- Always have or create an agenda, even for simple meetings, and stick to it.
- Decide on how long the meeting is going to last (i.e., does some one have to leave in half an hour?) and prioritise the agenda accordingly.

Minutes

- The minutes serve as the group “memory” – who said they were going to do what and when. They also serve as the basis for your journal to be given to the tutor at the end of the group assignment.
- They are vital – there is no use meeting without keeping a record.
- Can be simple, e.g., written in point form.
- Items that must be included in the minutes:
 - date, time and place of the meeting
 - who attended, who was absent
 - flavour of the discussion on various proposals
 - decisions made (including adjustments to the work plan and associated timetable)
 - task assignments and persons responsible for task completion
 - date, time and place of next meeting
- You may be asked by your tutor for a copy of your minutes. We recommend you keep one journal as a continuous record.

Dealing with conflict within the group

- The most frequent source of conflict in group work is free-riding, i.e., an individual attempts to reduce their work load at the expense of other members of the group but benefits from the overall group effort in terms of learning experience and group mark.
- Free-riding takes several forms:
 - imbalance in the work load
 - imbalance in the responsibility people take for organising and motivating the group
 - people not doing what they agreed to do at a previous meeting
 - people not showing up for or showing up late at meetings
- If you find resentment building up within your group over free-riding or anything else, its time to do something about it.

Group resolves its own problem

- It is important that the group try to deal with conflicts as they arise, rather than attempt to ignore them.
- Discuss the problem as a group with everyone present (taking minutes, as usual).
- Do not get into accusing each other of past failings, rather, focus on what needs to change for everyone to feel the process is fair.
- If you are able to reach an understanding that everyone agrees with, then assign tasks based on the new understanding and make whatever changes are necessary to the work plan so that it reflects this understanding.
- If you are unable to resolve the conflict, or if you find that the understanding is not being properly implemented, then it is time to approach the module tutor. *Do not hesitate going to the module tutor once you have determined that internal mediation is not working.*

Module tutor assists in resolving group problem

- The module tutor may be approached by the group as a whole (i.e., at a meeting to which the module tutor is invited), by the group liaison person, or any other member(s) of the group.
- When approaching the module tutor the student(s) should (if possible) bring a written statement outlining the perceived problem and as many facts as possible (e.g., how many meetings or deadlines a person missed and when) and indicate whether they wish to communicate with the module tutor as a group or individually.
- The module tutor will have a discussion with each member of the group, either together in a meeting, or individually, face-to-face or by telephone, whichever is the group’s stated written preference. The module tutor will ensure that each member of the group has the opportunity to state his/her concerns. The module tutor will determine if individual contact with students is necessary, if the initial contact is with the group as a whole. The module tutor will keep a written record of all individual and group discussions.

- The module tutor will invite ideas for solutions to the perceived problem from the members of the group in the course of these discussions. The module tutor will then propose a solution to the problem if he/she believes that a solution is possible.
- If the students agree to the proposed solution, or to a modified version based on discussion with the module tutor, each will sign a copy of the solution outlining each student's obligations. The work plan will be adjusted as necessary.
- If the module tutor does not believe that a solution is possible, or if the students cannot reach agreement on a proposed solution, the student(s) that cannot meet his/her obligations will be removed from the group. The remaining members of the group will complete the assignment, with whatever modifications are made in discussion with the module tutor to make it manageable to do so. The remaining members will modify the work plan and the associated timetable accordingly and submit a copy to the module tutor.
- The student(s) removed from the group will be given the opportunity to complete some equivalent project on his/her own. This equivalent project will be determined in discussion with the module tutor and have the same deadline as the group project. Whether or not a time extension will be granted to the student will be decided by the module tutor. Where a time extension is not granted, the normal academic penalty for the programme will apply to late submissions.

(needs bullet point)As is the case for any other assignment, a student who is not satisfied with the outcome of this process, may appeal the matter with the Programme Director. In order to initiate the appeal, the student(s) should contact the Director in writing, providing the reason for the appeal and as much documentation as possible. After discussing the appeal with the module tutor, the Director will determine whether the student's appeal is valid. If successful, the student and module tutor will determine a satisfactory alternative course of action, and this will be approved by the Director.

