

# Inclusive small group work

Group work is difficult for many students, particularly where a single mark or grade is awarded to the outcome. Personal differences between group members (eg ethnicity, disability, age, religion, previous educational experience) are often a source of anxiety and stress, and sometimes hostility. Speakers of English as a second language may feel disadvantaged. Anyone who is in a minority within a group can feel excluded or unwelcome.

At its best group work can be a rewarding opportunity for students to develop skills in collaboration, communication, time management and presentation that are transferable to the workplace.

## 1. Expectations

Many students will have little experience of working in groups, and may not see this as a legitimate learning experience.

Explain the learning benefits of working in diverse groups.

- Do you expect all students to perform all roles? eg do you require all students to make a presentation?
- Encourage students to set ground rules eg
  - What is acceptable
  - Separate role for everyone
  - Clarity about task and individual contributions
- Remind groups that practical arrangements should work for all.
- Everyone will be expected to participate.
- Do you give students guidance on giving presentations before this is formally assessed? It may be a new skill to acquire.

## 2. Getting started

- How will you achieve diverse groups at the start of the course? eg allocation, random groups.
- Consider ice-breaking sessions, with pre-task question and answer to help everyone understand the task.
- Give a brief initial task to encourage the group to start working together.
- Try to break initial tasks into specific briefs for each participant, so that everyone can contribute.
- Can you schedule time within class for groups to start to work together?

### **3. Environment**

- Are rooms acceptable and accessible to all group members? eg the bar is unlikely to be acceptable for strict Muslims; is there wheelchair access?
- Is extra equipment needed? eg hearing loops, pcs with assistive software.
- Can accessible rooms in the School be used by groups?
- Are meeting times convenient for all? eg consider caring responsibilities, religious commitments, availability of support workers.

### **4. Design a task which**

- is better done in groups than individually.
- involves all group members.
- makes use of participants' skills and experiences.
- makes diverse skills and knowledge an asset.

eg comparative studies, a global marketing campaign, impact assessment.

### **5. Assessment**

Summative assessment can be a source of anxiety in group work.

- Consider the use of group contracts or some form of peer assessment.
- Do your marking criteria reward working effectively in a diverse group?
- English language competence can be a source of worry for international students. Be clear about what is being assessed.
- Encourage students to practice presentation skills before assessment.
- One option is to learn in groups, but assess individually.
- Consider alternative assessments for disabled students eg extra written work instead of an oral presentation if this is difficult due to a disability.
- Do your criteria take into consideration that multicultural groups can take longer to reach the same level of effectiveness as mono-cultural ones?
- Consider how your assessment will recognise different contributions of group members eg planning, coordinating, research, IT skills, writing skills, presentation skills.

### **6. Dealing with conflict**

Conflict is inevitable in all groups, and is likely to be more significant in a more diverse group. Anticipate it.

- Use ground rules and agreements.
- Discuss potential problems and ways of handling them.
- Observe groups in action, and intervene if necessary.
- Ensure that all students know how to seek help if necessary.

## 7. Electronic group work

Electronic collaboration in group work

- improves students' IT skills.
- encourages contributions from disabled or part-time students.
- allows time for students whose first language is not English to formulate their contributions.
- avoids organisational problems with rooms and timing.

## 8. Student issues

- Check with any disabled student how they want other group members to be informed of their support needs.
- Remind the group to speak in turns, and check that all have heard what is said and able to contribute.
- Arrange a notetaker within the group, who can circulate notes to all.
- Brainstorming in groups can be difficult to follow. Take turns round the group.

## 9. Checking

- Check that groups are working satisfactorily.
- Check that all students are achieving the desired learning outcomes.
- Break a project down into smaller components, and check progress regularly.

## 10. Further information

- **Upgrade Study Advice Service** – provides support for any student in study skills, maths or statistics. They provide 1:1 tutorials, drop-in sessions, and take-away advice.  
<http://www.brookes.ac.uk/services/upgrade>  
email [upgrade@brookes.ac.uk](mailto:upgrade@brookes.ac.uk)
- **Student Disability Service** – for advice & guidance on support available  
<http://www.brookes.ac.uk/student/services/disability/>  
email [disabilityservice@brookes.ac.uk](mailto:disabilityservice@brookes.ac.uk) (48)4640
- **School Equal Opportunities & Diversity Co-ordinator** – for a list see  
<http://www.brookes.ac.uk/services/hr/eod/eodcs.html>