

Collaborative Group Work

Getting Started

One of the most challenging aspects of collaborative group work assignments is knowing how to get started. The first step is to make certain that you understand the assignment. Considering the following questions (adapted from Graham Gibbs, *Learning in Teams: A Student Manual* (Oxford: Oxford Brookes University, 1994), 7.) should help you to clarify the objectives and expectations that the course instructor has for the group project and should help you to establish your own learning goals:

- What is the purpose of the project?
- What are you supposed to learn?
- What skills are you supposed to develop?
- How is this group work assignment related to the course content?
- What are you supposed to produce?
- What format(s) will be used for the final project?
- Are you familiar with the requirements of the format(s) or will you need support, resources, or instruction?
- What avenues of support are available to you?
- Are the necessary resources readily available or should you secure them as soon as possible?
- What criteria will be used to assess your work?
- What are the main components of the project?
- Will there be clearly defined and separate sections, or is it meant to be wholly integrated?
- Will you work co-operatively with your group members, each completing a separate piece of the project to be compiled at the end, or will you work collaboratively to produce a jointly researched and authored final product?
- Will other groups be working on the same project or a similar project?
- What are the deadlines?

Once you've had an opportunity to answer these questions, and any others that are pertinent to your group work assignment, it's time to get to know the members of your group and establish some common ground in understanding the purpose of the project.

How can we develop good group dynamics quickly?

Whether you have been permitted to form your own group and you know the other group members socially, or if the groups have been assigned by the course instructor and the group members do not know each other at all, it is important to build a good working relationship early in the project. Take some time to get to know the members of your group at the first meeting, but try to keep the personal disclosures relevant to the work of the group. For example:

- Create a master list of names and contact information and distribute it to members.
- Find out the semester levels and degree programs of the group members.
- Find common goals and expectations.
- Share information and insights on objectives and work styles.
- Share your understanding of the project objectives and requirements. Try to identify common ground with other group members and have a group member write down the consensus position. This can serve as a rudimentary mission statement for the group and will be useful in keeping your project on track.
- Have each team member voice one concern and one hope for working with the group or brainstorm characteristics of best and worst group experiences. The outcome of this conversation can be used to establish more formal ground rules for group interactions.
- Decide if people are going to work according to their strengths or use this as an opportunity to stretch themselves in a supportive environment.
- Take turns identifying strengths and weaknesses in academic skills relevant to the design of your project.
- Identify preferences for which roles each group member would like to take on and negotiate responsibilities.
- Determine the quantity, length, and protocol of all group meetings. Then establish a regular meeting time.

What if our schedules do not permit all of us to meet regularly?

Occasionally, groups are so large or group members so busy, that it is impossible to find a time when every group member can attend all of the meetings. Absences can slow or stop work and can make it very difficult to coordinate the development of the project. It is important to know, as far in advance as possible, which meetings individual group members will be unable to attend so that the other group members will be able to work effectively in their absence. Here is some advice for lessening the difficulties associated with missed meetings:

- Find out what the course instructor expects for participation in group meetings. You will have to accommodate these requirements or negotiate a different arrangement with the course instructor.
- Set clear, mutually agreeable guidelines for attendance at meetings to encourage accountability.
- Encourage group members to be as flexible as possible in establishing meeting times. Make sure that family, work, extra-curricular commitments, and not mere preferences, are the cause of missed meetings. Keep accurate records of attendance at meetings.
- Figure out what happens if a meeting is wholly or partially missed and establish procedures for how a group member would get caught up.
- There are alternatives to meeting face to face. Keep in touch over the phone or via e-mail. If e-mail or conference calling will be used as a primary method of communication, be certain to establish a set time that is most convenient for all group members.

How can we deal with group conflict?

Some tension or internal struggle within groups is not unusual. Most students have spent years of their education working independently in a competitive, rather than collaborative, learning environment and are simply unfamiliar with the unique demands of group work. The diplomacy, co-operation, and tolerance of different perspectives and approaches required by group work are skills that take time and effort to cultivate.

- Set ground rules for appropriate group interactions. For example, jointly author a code of conduct for meetings.
- Clearly establish separate and equitable roles and responsibilities for group members at the outset of the project, but check on how the process is working for everyone and be prepared to renegotiate these jobs if necessary.
- Watch for the warning signs of trouble and deal with conflict proactively.
- Remember that patience and inclusive communication are essential to good group dynamics.
- Be familiar with human rights and equity policies.
- Recognize that negotiating differences and accommodating unique work habits in pursuit of a common goal is part of the value of participating in collaborative group projects.
- Try to make collective decisions professionally and democratically.
- Socialize with one another and have fun together outside of group meetings.
- Make sure that your course instructor or teaching assistant is aware of difficulties as they occur and get help when you need it.

How can we work together without wasting time?

Time is a precious commodity. Group work can conjure up fears of long, unproductive meetings spent doing something collaboratively that you are confident you could do much more efficiently on your own. Try some of the following strategies to use your group time effectively and to make the opportunity to work with others more enjoyable:

Ensure that group members know in advance what role they are to play during each meeting (i.e. leader, note-taker, trouble-shooter, detail person, big picture person, creative input, progress-chaser, and reviewer).

- Run efficient meetings - start and end on time.
- Set clear objectives for each meeting, arrive prepared, and keep to a schedule.
- Place reasonable limits on planning and brainstorming activities.

- Break large tasks down into logical chunks and check progress frequently.

What do we do if a group member is not contributing?

Group work functions best when everyone participates actively in the development of the project; however, it is not unusual for a group to have one or more members who are occasionally or chronically unproductive. Here are some suggestions for encouraging such group members to become more active participants:

- Find out why the group member is not participating or producing. The solution will depend on the reason for their withdrawal, so begin by determining the cause.
- Encourage shy individuals to contribute by soliciting their input on a topic that you are confident that they know something about. You may find that they just need an invitation and a positive experience before they will become more involved in discussions.
- Disinterested learners may need some assistance in uncovering their motivation for contributing to the group project.
- Check to see if the group member is stuck and needs some advice and direction in order to move forward.
- If a group member is very busy, try to accommodate the person internally within reason. Do not allow him/her to abdicate his/her responsibility to contribute to the group project.
- Have a progress-checker. Some people simply need to be held accountable and reminded to meet deadlines or conform to expectations.
- Let your instructor know what is happening.

What do we do if a group member is domineering?

- Some learners, whether they are highly goal-directed, self-confident, or extroverted, simply prefer to monopolize conversations or direct and delegate the work of the group. Strong leadership skills are excellent to have, but not all leadership skills are conducive to collaborative group work. Try the following techniques to prevent an

individual group member from overpowering the efforts of the larger group:

- Indicate that this is an issue of concern by addressing it in the ground rules for conducting group meetings.
- Deliberately take turns presenting ideas or updates. Limit the amount of time each person has to talk and discourage any interruption during the presentations.
- First try to discourage domination by using indirect, blanket statements regarding the nature of collaborative work, or by making humorous, but not critical, comments to the overly talkative or dictatorial group member.
- Designate a willing group member to have a private conversation with the individual who is monopolizing the group's meetings or dictating group direction.

Where do we go if we need help?

Go to your course instructor for help with:

- Understanding the learning objectives and requirements of the group project.
- If you need feedback or direction on process or content issues.
- For direction or advice on the use of resource materials.
- If you are having difficulties with group dynamics that you cannot resolve independently.
- As recommended in your course outline, assignment outline, or lecture.

Go to the reference librarians for help with:

- Individual reference and instructional assistance (e.g. advice on how to do a search, sources to consult, how to use electronic resources and journal indexes, and style manuals or guides relevant to your assignment).
- Keep in mind that the library staff will need to know the nature of the assignment and when it is due. Information about the question/topic you are researching, what limits there are on the kinds of resources you are expected to use, what resources you have already consulted and how much time you have to complete your work, will determine the search strategies and resources that library staff recommend.

Go to the Writing Centre for help with:

- The Academic Success Centre offers advice, information, resources, and tutoring on group work. Appointments can be made for face-to-face or online sessions with trained tutors. Your group can book an appointment at www.ufv.ca/asc/book-an-appointment/, drop in to G126 in Abbotsford or A1212 at CEP, or phone 604-854-4573.

Want more information?

The Counselling Department and the Academic Success Centre are your best sources for advice and information on issues related to learning, studying, time management, and academic performance.

Workshops on learning, studying, etc., are offered regularly each semester by the Counselling Department. Please contact Student Services at Abbotsford - 604-854-4528 (B 214) or Chilliwack - 604-795-2808 (A 1318) to make an appointment.

Study Skills Tip Sheets providing information on many learning and time management topics, as well as writing and referencing, are available free to students. The complete range of Study Skills Tip Sheets is available on-line at www.ufv.ca/counselling/study/.

Other Relevant Study Skills Tip Sheets:

Concentration
Learning from Lectures
Learning from Textbooks
Managing Nervousness During Oral Presentations
Reading and the Web
A Classic Method for Studying Texts: SQ4R

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