Effective Participation in Group Work: Guidelines for Students and Teachers

“…students who work in groups develop an increased ability to solve problems and evidence greater understanding of the material” (Davis 1993, p. 154).

## Why is group work important?

* We can learn effectively from each other.
* More information can be gathered, as workload is shared and resources can be combined.
* Many interpersonal skills can be developed such as:
  + conflict resolution
  + collaboration
  + communication
  + negotiation
  + evaluation
  + tolerance
  + leadership
  + time management
  + confidence
  + active listening skills
  + responsibility.

## Getting Started

“Students are *more effective interpersonally* as a result of working cooperatively than when they work alone, competitively or individualistically” (Johnson & Johnson 1988, p. 34).

Often the success of a task is influenced by the organisation and set up at the start. More information on setting up group work can be found in the Setting up Group Work Guidelines available at <https://www.sace.sa.edu.au/>.

It’s useful to keep notes at each meeting. These notes can provide evidence of work completed, or not completed, by particular group members.

**Group dynamics**

Establishing a good relationship with the other members of the group can contribute to the overall success of the task.

* + Find out about each other's backgrounds.
  + What are some common expectations or goals?
  + Discuss how you prefer to study or learn - what are your preferences?

**Goals**

Ensuring everyone in the group has a clear understanding of the task and can agree on the goals will help to avoid confusion in later stages.

* + Discuss your understanding of the aims of the task.
  + Discuss your understanding of the assessment.
  + This may be a suitable time to negotiate and agree on a set of ‘ground rules’ or ‘norms’.

**Group organisation**

* + How will you communicate with each other and exchange information? Consider setting up a group blog or email list.
  + What is the time-frame for the task?
  + Agree on meeting times and negotiate possible dates.
  + Start to agree on and delegate subtasks. You could create a timeline or schedule for subtask completion and responsibility. This would need to be negotiated and re-negotiated as the work progresses. Everyone should have a copy of this schedule.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| What? | Who? | When? | Where? | Other comments |
| Research and find definitions for responsible tourism/‘voluntourism’ | Jenny | March 14 | Internet / library | Write up on group wiki page |
| Research voluntary projects - international | Mark | March 24 | Internet / library | Select 3 to present to group for final selection at next meeting |
| Research voluntary projects in Australia | David | March 24 | Internet / library | Email summaries to the group |

## Group Roles

Interaction with other members of the group is essential for maintaining progress in the task. Think about a time that you worked with others. What role/s did you take? Compare your thoughts with the lists below.

**Problematic Roles**

* Non-participant
  + does not interact, will not contribute, discourages others
* Attacker
  + expresses disapproval of others, acts aggressively
* Clown
  + does not take discussions or task seriously, distracts others
* Dominator
  + takes control of discussions or task, does not allow others to speak

**Acceptable Roles**

* Initiator
  + starts discussions, suggests ideas
* Information seeker
  + asks for facts, data about the topic
* Information giver
  + suggests answers, offers facts
* Goal setter
  + helps team set goals
* Progress monitor
  + checks team is on-track and meeting deadlines
* Summariser
  + restates suggestions, summarises discussions after meetings
* Planner
  + Organises schedules and times
* Troubleshooter
  + Predicts problems, suggests solutions.
* Encourager
  + praises contributions, responsive to new ideas
* Gatekeeper
  + helps ensure everyone is heard
* Mediator
  + resolves problems

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Taking on acceptable roles during the task may enhance group performance and bonding. There are times, however, when group members may take on roles that are unacceptable or problematic and deter from completion of the task.

## Dealing with Conflict

If you have taken part in group work, what types of problems have you encountered? How did you overcome these problems? Consider the list below and think about how these issues could be resolved:

* a lack of confidence
* a dominating team member
* a few members of the group being non-participants
* disagreement over task outcome or subtask delegation
* a member of the group being a ‘clown’ and disrupting meetings
* making decisions.

What could be possible solutions in the following scenarios? Compare your ideas with the suggestions given.

**Scenario 1**

*We’re about to have our first meeting and we have no idea where to start! We don’t have much time to do this assignment so I don’t want to spend weeks just talking about what we are going to do without deciding anything.*

**Suggestion**

Follow the advice in the *Getting Started* section above. Spend a bit of time getting to know each other and sharing contact information. Start brainstorming ideas in your first meeting to make sure everyone has a shared understanding of the task, perhaps use a mindmap. Work out an initial timeline and negotiate some ‘ground rules’. Decide on a specific time for your next meeting and ensure everyone has a task that they need to complete before the next meeting.

**Scenario 2**

*I don’t feel confident in taking part in my group meetings. I don’t think my ideas are as useful as other people, and I’m not sure if I’m right.*

**Suggestion**

Prepare before the meeting and do some background reading. Understanding the topic and having a clear idea of what the task involves may increase your confidence in speaking up. It’s not necessary to be ‘right’, but it is useful to have an informed view – which comes from reading about, researching and understanding your ideas.

Instead of trying to think of questions during the meeting with other students, think about what you would like to know and prepare your questions before the meeting, you could even write them down and practice saying them. Take a deep breath before speaking and don’t rush – this can make it difficult for others to understand you.

**Scenario 3**

*My team is quite dysfunctional. I try to participate, but there is one person who just takes over and makes all the decisions, while the other person doesn’t say anything. I’m worried we won’t complete the task on time.*

**Suggestion**

Consider establishing some ‘ground rules’ or ‘norms’ for the group. This is a set of behaviours that are acceptable to the whole group and are agreed upon. It is often useful to set these up at the first meeting so that expectations are clear. If problems then occur, you can refer back to the rules and mention that they were set up to help complete the task successfully. For example,

Our Rules

- be on time to meetings

- let everyone have a chance to say something

- don’t be mean and criticise the person

- everyone should take on an equal workload

- do what you said you were going to

Take on a ‘gatekeeper’ role and draw attention away from the dominating team member by saying ‘*That’s a good suggestion. Does anyone have any others?*’ or *‘I’m going to interrupt because Susan hasn’t had a chance to say anything*’. Time limits could be placed on contributions in meetings. Consider using an agenda or list of action points to assist in maintaining the discussion.

Perhaps the non-participant is shy or unsure of how to act in a group. Try to find out why they are quiet, perhaps by talking to them individually. Encouraging a response by asking direct questions and showing that you value their opinion or ideas could help. You could also add to the group’s ground rules that everyone has to make a contribution to the meetings.

**Scenario 4**

*Jack, one of the members in my group, hasn’t completed the tasks he was supposed to do by our meeting. I’ve already done my part and I don’t think it’s fair.*

**Suggestion**

Focus on the problem rather than the person. Ask questions to keep the attention on the task.

*What work still needs to be done? When does it need to be done by? Are there any problems?*

Think about how it relates to the whole task and the reasons for Jack not participating. Some options available are:

* Jack finishes the work; it’s only part of the task and can be a bit late. Deadline for subtask is re-negotiated and agreed upon
* the task is shared between all members of the groups
* the task is handed up without Jack’s part. The other members of the group make a note that Jack has not participated.
* set up meetings at which each person has to present their completed work. The group decides that this is a compulsory element of their collaboration to avoid issues like this occurring.
* the students report this issue to the teacher.

References

Davis, B 1993, *Tools for Teaching,* Jossey- Bass, San Francisco.

Johnson, R & Johnson D 1998, ‘Cooperative Learning: Two heads *learn* better than one”, *Transforming Education*, In Context No. 18, p. 34.