Overview

Group work or cooperative learning is a method of instruction that gets students to work together in groups. Employers value a person's ability to work cooperatively. Indeed, studies show that they value it more highly than the ability to work independently. This is because, in most contemporary workplaces, people work in teams, which are often cross-disciplinary and quite diverse (DETYA, 2000). The value, to students, of cooperative learning has long been well recognised.

This page discusses the use of group work as a fully-fledged teaching strategy that requires students to engage in learning activities within the same group over a period while working on a substantial task with a shared outcome (e.g. a report or a project).

When to use

In the past two decades there has been a rapid growth in the use of small group learning experiences in higher education (Fink, 2004), where group work is used:

- occasionally in small discussion groups in Lectures and Tutorials, or
- as a fully-fledged teaching strategy that requires students to engage in learning activities within the same group over a period while working on a substantial task with a shared outcome (e.g. a report or a project).

This page discusses the latter use of group work.

To help you decide whether to use a blog, a wiki or a discussion forum, visit the page Blog, wiki or forum—which should you use?

Benefits

Research shows that group work:

- allows students to become active participants in their learning
- helps students develop skills valued by employers (such as problem solving, negotiation, conflict resolution, leadership, critical thinking and time management)
• exposes students to diverse ideas and approaches
• acknowledges and utilises individual students’ strengths and expertise
• through discussion, helps students articulate their ideas, refine concepts and develop interpersonal and communication skills
• allows students to experience situations that resemble the workplace, e.g. authentic real world projects, and
• facilitates a deeper understanding of course content

For teachers, group-based learning can often reduce the marking and feedback load associated with individual assessment.

Challenges

Although group work has the potential to encourage positive student learning experiences, research evidence suggests that this potential is not always realised (Fink, 2004, Pieterse & Thompson 2010). Although some students report that their group work projects or tasks are the best learning experiences of University, others find them the worst, and feel reluctant to work in groups again.

Some students (particularly students who do not feel confident about their ability to communicate, or to communicate in English) prefer to work independently, and find the group experience challenging and confronting.

Added to this tension is group work's appeal for teachers in the face of increasing class sizes and staff workloads (Burdett, 2003). But teachers often underestimate the effort involved in organising effective group work. Staff have commented that group work can be time consuming and difficult to implement.

Nevertheless, given the benefits for learning and future employability, it is important that all students have the chance to work in groups during their study at the university.

When it comes to developing students’ group work skills, there is no single best approach or assessment strategy. It all depends on your particular learning and teaching context and objectives. The challenge is to choose a range of strategies that will allow your students to develop effective group work skills within the context of your discipline.

Strategies

The page Ideas for Effective Group Work is a useful quick guide to some group work strategies you might use.

For more in-depth resources, consult the following pages of this website:

• Preparing for Group Work
  All about expectations, group setup, the first meeting, group dynamics, and dealing with uncertainty and change.

• Developing Students’ Group Work Skills
  Help students learn how to identify group issues, listen reflectively, give constructive feedback, structure discussions, manage their groups, give group presentations and compile reports, review individuals’ contributions and deal with common group work issues

• Facilitating and Monitoring Group Work
Your role in facilitating and monitoring group work.

- **Helping Students Reflect on their Group Work**
  Getting your students to monitor their development, reflect on their performance and identify how they can improve.

For advice on using group work for assessment, see *Assessing by Group Work* in the Assessment Toolkit section of this website.

For how to embed group work in your course and incorporating reflection into skills development, see *Integrating Group Work* in the Curriculum Design section of this website.

**Case studies**

*(Transcript of videos)*

**Video series - Group Work Case Study**

In these videos, Dr Christine Van Vliet from the School of Medical Sciences discusses her experiences in teaching with team-based learning.

**Additional information**

**External resources**

- Guidelines for Student Groupwork/Teamwork, Oxford Brookes University Centre for Staff and Learning Development
- *Assessing Group Work*, University of Melbourne, Centre for the Study of Higher Education

**Further readings**
