



# Making Groupwork Work



Learnhigher

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# 1. The Importance of Groupwork

During your degree studies you will be expected to work collaboratively with other students in small groups. You will, for example, work with other students on joint projects that will be assessed. This will require all members of the group to contribute to the planning, research, presentation of findings and to writing the final report. You will also work informally in groups during seminars, tutorials and practical work.

Group size can be small, for example, 4-6 students, but it can also be much larger, with up to 15 or more students involved. The groups may be self-selecting, or the tutor may organise the composition of them to mix people from different backgrounds together.

Most students have had experience of being a member of a group before they come to university. This is likely to be as a member of a social grouping of some sort: family, neighbourhood or community group, or member of a small or extended group for a particular interest, vocational or educational related purpose.

Every group of people will begin to form its own ground rules and ways of working together. The roles of people in these groups can be formalised and explicit - complete with titles - or implicit and informal. For example, in the latter case, the dominant role of an older family member may be implicitly acknowledged and accepted by others.

Working in a group in university will bring with it for most students a mixture of the familiar with the unfamiliar. Familiar, in the sense that it is another social situation in the life of that person that has to be negotiated, and navigated. But unfamiliar too, in that the 'rules of the game' are unknown, and that the student's prior education experience may not have included any previous opportunity to work closely in a group for assessment purposes - and particularly with a culturally diverse group of unknown strangers.

## Opportunity

What are the advantages of group work? Group work presents an opportunity to:

- Share your ideas and find solutions to problems
- Work closely with students from a range of different cultural and social backgrounds
- Develop your key skills, e.g. team working and time management, which are essential for most jobs today
- Discover your specific strengths in group or team working
- Learn how to deal with challenge and conflict
- Gain new, additional, and even creative perspectives on study topics
- Get to know a small group of students socially
- Make new friends
- Develop your communication skills

*"Group work has helped improve my spoken English, and time-management, as we all need to work together and communicate with each other."*  
Postgraduate student from Vietnam

## **Challenge**

Group work in a university context - and particularly when assessment is involved - presents a challenge to students.

For many students, particularly those who have studied in countries outside Britain, group work can be a very new experience. They may not know what is expected of them and so do not gain from the group, or contribute to it, as much as they could.

Work in a group presents a challenge to all its members: to work together as a group and to overcome as a group any problems that occur.

This text looks at the roles that people play in groups, and includes questionnaires to complete. It also looks at the stages of group formation, and the skills needed to succeed in any group today, whether it is at university, at work or in any other social situation.

Like most significant human endeavours and encounters it takes effort, and knowledge, to get it right, so read on...

## **2. How groups are used with students in HE**

Some examples of work being done with student groups taken from Journals 2000-2007:

### **1. Teaching in HE V11 N1 Jan06 pp33-46**

Smith, Goldsmith & Strachan (Sheffield Hallam University) used the "Business Strategy Game" simulation for Masters students to develop skills in teamwork and study at postgrad level. BSG is a simulation of the athletic footwear market and it was run with 2 cohorts (including distance learning students) over 3 days. Groups had to submit business plans and strategies. Student and tutor feedback was used to evaluate (using questionnaires) with the main focus being positive. Two student concerns were highlighted: the length of time devoted to simulation and the composition of the groups.

### **2. Active Learning in HE V6 N1 March 05 pp32-45**

Finlay & Faulkner developed reading groups at the University of Toronto to encourage students to engage in scholarly practice. Groups were small (3-5) and each member had a text to read. They had to write a synopsis for others each week and this was also sent to the lecturer. Time was also allocated for groups to discuss the reading and prepare a class presentation (2 groups only). The questionnaire found that students felt that introduction to a wider range of literature and improved critical ability didn't necessarily reduce workload. Concerns from students were that too much preparation time was needed for the presentation (those groups not doing it felt time was wasted) and some wanted model answers to the synopses.

### **3. Journal of Further and HE, V26, N4, Nov02 pp327-337**

Chris Frost from Liverpool John Moores University used "The Reporter", a year long simulation with third year journalism undergrads, to prepare them for employment. It made up half of the assessment for the module and the work represented a third of the final year workload. Student groups had to produce a weekly newspaper in real-time simulation taking on a role in the production process and they were also involved in the grading process. The module was supported with lectures. Observation and interview found that the project was well received by students, with some concerns about the tutor feedback sessions - namely the tutor responsible was changed too often. Students were unhappy about role selection on the paper, with popular posts using random selection methods due to the large number of volunteers for the role. There was also concern that students could pull away from the teaching delivered which related to the work done on the paper - the paper usually continued but principles from teaching were not included. Students felt a more directive approach around expected input from students would be beneficial.

### 3. Why groups fail

#### A Nightmare Scenario

Imagine you have joined a group of relative strangers to work on a project for your course together. There are ten of you. From the start things go badly wrong – and get worse! Group members fail to get on with each other and fail to work together successfully on the project. This is a nightmare scenario. So, what do you think would cause this to happen?

Try and separate out the reasons into two types: process related reasons (the procedures for running the group don't work) and people related reasons (there are problems among the group members themselves).

Write in the spaces provided the reasons why a group would fail?

***People related***

***Process related***

## Why Groups Fail

| People problems   | Process problems  |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is no attempt to get to know each other as people.</li> <li>• One or two people try to dominate the others.</li> <li>• Some group members try to monopolise the discussion.</li> <br/> <li>• Some group members do not speak at all – they just sit in silence.</li> <li>• Most of the group wants to talk – and not listen.</li> <li>• Individual members’ ideas are ridiculed or dismissed by other group members.</li> <li>• Group members are reluctant to take the initiative to start a discussion.</li> <li>• Individual members’ ideas are ridiculed or dismissed by other group members.</li> <li>• Some group members make racist or sexist remarks that are not challenged.</li> <li>• Individual members prove to be unreliable: they do not do what they say they will do.</li> <li>• Group members are unpunctual or fail to show up for meetings.</li> <li>• Two or three group members quarrel and create a bad atmosphere.</li> <li>• Some group members are deliberately isolated or ignored.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There are no ‘ground rules’ agreed, on, for example, when, where and how often the group will meet.</li> <li>• There are no agreed agendas for meetings – there is a lack of clarity on the purpose of each meeting.</li> <li>• Specific roles or tasks are not agreed and delegated to group members.</li> <li>• No deadlines are agreed on.</li> <br/> <li>• There is no chairperson agreed or allocated for each meeting.</li> <li>• Meetings start late or run on over time.</li> <br/> <li>• No record of the meeting is made, e.g. who has agreed to do what and by when.</li> </ul> |

Many problems in groups stem from the individual members themselves. Specific problems, particularly talking too much – or not at all - often arise from anxiety and misunderstanding. But we all have strengths to contribute to the success of any group – and weaknesses that we need to be aware of. Try the exercise that follows to learn more about your potential strengths and weaknesses in any group.

It can be a good idea if all the members of your group try this exercise and then discuss the result collectively.

## 4. Personality and group roles

This exercise introduces you to the MYERS-BRIGGS PERSONALITY TYPE INDICATOR and will present you with a summary of your personality type. It can help you to clarify what your strengths and weaknesses may be in any group or team.

The MBTI Personality Type Indicator is a test to measure psychological type based on the theoretical work of Carl Jung and developed into a practical application (questionnaire) by Katherine Briggs and her daughter Isabel Myers.

There are 16 different personality types. It is important to acknowledge that each individual is unique e.g. genes, background, parents, experiences and interests but that they will also have a tremendous amount in common with other people who share the same type.

There are some basic assumptions that underlie type theory including the belief that whilst preferences are inborn environment can enhance or impede expression of type. One thing that is not an assumption is that all of the types are equally valuable!

The Myers-Briggs theory is based on four basic aspects of human personality:

- How we interact with the world and where we direct our energy
- The kind of information we naturally notice
- How we make decisions
- And whether we prefer to live in a more structured way or in a more spontaneous way

Myers-Briggs assert that everyone will incline to one end of a spectrum of response to each of these four basic aspects of personality:

*How we interact with the world and where we direct our energy:*

(E) Extroversion----- Introversion (I)

*The kind of information we naturally notice:*

(S) Sensing----- Intuition(N)

*How we make decisions:*

(T) Thinking-----Feeling (F)

*Whether we prefer to live in a more structured way (making decisions) or in a more spontaneous way (taking in information):*

(J) Judging----- Perceiving (P)

Myers-Briggs argue that everyone's preference of response will fall on one side or the other of the midpoint on each of these four scales.

This can result in a profile for yourself that falls into one of sixteen possible combinations:

|      |      |      |      |
|------|------|------|------|
| ISTJ | ISTP | ESTP | ESTJ |
| ISFJ | ISFP | ESFP | ESFJ |
| INFJ | INFP | ENFP | ENFJ |
| INTJ | INTP | ENTP | ENTJ |

Each of these sixteen types can result in a preference and predisposition to respond in a particular way to situations, although these are not 'carved in stone' – people can and do behave in often surprising and unexpected ways to situations.

The exercise that follows will help you identify to which of these sixteen types you belong. When considering your response to the statements it is important that you do not spend too long thinking about each one. Generally your initial reaction is the true one. Don't respond to the statements based on how you would like to be, or how you think other people would like you to be - try and aim for how you are when you are just able to be yourself.

## Extroversion & Introversion

### ***Where, primarily, do you direct your energy?***

*To the outer world of activity and spoken words, or to the inner world of thoughts and emotions?*

If it is toward the outer world of activity or words, it is called Extroversion, denoted by the letter E. If it is toward the inner world of ideas, information, or thoughts, it is called Introversion, denoted by the letter I. Extro- is a prefix meaning 'without' and Intro- is a prefix meaning 'within'.

Most people think that extroverted means 'talkative' and introverted means 'shy' or 'reserved'. But this is a very simplistic way of looking at these two dimensions. During each day you will undoubtedly spend time spontaneously doing or saying things, as well as retreating into the inner world of contemplation and thought. If your working day has involved much interaction with the world, even the clearest Extrovert may feel at the end of the day that he or she wants to be left alone with his thoughts. Conversely, if an Introvert has been working in isolation all day, he or she may feel the need to socialise in the evening to restore some balance.

You, like every other individual, need to find a particular balance of both introversion and extroversion. However, laying aside special circumstances like those in the previous paragraph, generally introverts enjoy spending time alone to 'recharge their batteries', whilst the reverse is true for extroverts.

Some general points about extroverts and introverts:

#### **Extrovert types:**

- Are energized by being with others.

#### **Introvert types:**

- Are energized by spending time alone.

- Often think out loud.
- Share personal feelings easily.
- Are inclined to think things through without speech.
- Are more private with their feelings.

So on balance do you think you incline more to:

E or I ? Write which letter you incline to in this box:

## The Kind of Information we Naturally Notice

### *How do you prefer to process information?*

*In the form of known facts and familiar terms or in the form of possibilities or new potential?*

Some people focus on ‘what is’, whilst others focus on ‘what could be’.

If it is in the form of facts or familiar terms, it is called Sensing, denoted by the letter S. If it is in the form of possibilities or new potential, it is called iNtuition, denoted by the letter N (N is used rather than I, to avoid confusion with Introversion).

The term Sensing is used because information is taken in primarily by way of the senses (e.g touch, sight, smell, taste). The term iNtuition is used because information is perceived primarily in an intuitive fashion.

Sensing types tend to be interested in tangible reality, focusing on the present, and seeing what is, rather than what might be. At an extreme, Sensing types can have their feet so well and truly on the ground that they miss out on possibilities for the future.

The preference for iNtuition suggests a greater emphasis on insight and the future, focusing on what might be, rather than what is. At an extreme, iNtuition types can focus so much on possibilities that they lose touch with current realities.

Sensing types tend to communicate in direct ways, whilst iNtuition types prefer to communicate in creative ways.

#### **Sensing types:**

- Trust what is certain & “concrete”.
- Like new ideas only if they are “practical”.
- Value realism & common sense.
- Like to use established skills.
- Present information “step-by-step”.
- Are good at noting & remembering facts.

#### **iNtuition types:**

- Trust instinct, inspiration & inference.
- Like new ideas for their own sake.
- Value imagination & innovation.
- Like to learn new skills.
- Get bored easily after mastering new skills.
- Are best at interpreting facts.

It can be hard sometimes to decide which ‘side’ we are on with this particular element as people are often a mixture of the two – but again, it is about deciding which side generally we are inclined to.

So on balance do you think you incline more to:

S or N ? Write which letter you incline to in this box:



## How we make decisions

### *How do you prefer to make decisions?*

*On the basis of logic and objective considerations or on the basis of personal values?*

If it is on the basis of logic and objective considerations, it is called Thinking, denoted by the letter T.

If it is on the basis of personal values, it is called Feeling, denoted by the letter F.

Thinking types prefer decisions that make sense logically. They pride themselves on their ability to be objective and analytical. They make decisions by analysing and weighing the evidence, even if it means coming to unpleasant conclusions.

Feeling types make decisions based on how much they care or what they feel is right. They pride themselves on their ability to be compassionate in their judgements.

The terms 'thinking' and 'feeling' carry certain connotations. In Western culture, for example, there is a strong gender bias to certain types of behaviour. Men may feel they should choose 'thinking', even though their instincts draw them to 'feeling'. Conversely, women may be more inclined instinctively to the 'thinking' type, but socialised to feel they should opt for the 'feeling' category.

#### **Thinking types:**

- Step back from problems & analyses them.
- Believe truth is more important than tact & can take a hard line when necessary.
- Have strong motivation to achieve.
- Trust feelings only if they are logical.

#### **Feeling types:**

- Think hard about effects of decisions on individuals.
- Generally like to satisfy or please others.
- Will look for compromises.
- Believe feelings are important in decision making.

So on balance do you think you incline more to: T or F? Write which letter you incline to in this box:



## The Way We Organise Our Lives

### *How do you prefer to organise your life?*

*In a structured way, making decisions and knowing where you stand or in a flexible way, discovering life as you go along?*

If it is in a structured way, making decisions and knowing where you stand, then it is called Judgement (J). If it is in a flexible way, discovering life as you go along - this is called Perception (P).

Someone whose preference is Judgement prefers, in their lifestyle, to make decisions. This means that they prefer to make decisions about what to do, where to go, what to say, and so on. As a result of these decisions, their lifestyle appears organised. They like to feel they have control over their own bit of life.

Someone whose preference is Perception prefers, in their lifestyle, to learn or experience new things. This means that they prefer to find out more, rather than making decisions, and are more comfortable when they keep their options open. As a result of this openness they can appear, and feel to be, flexible in outlook and behaviour.

An important distinction between Judgement and Perception types is in the issue of closure of decisions. J-type personalities experience tension until a final decision on an issue is made. P-types, however, experience tension when they are forced to make a decision, as they often prefer to keep their options open.

**Judgement types:**

- Are happiest after decisions are made.
- Have a strong work ethic – work first, play later.
- Set goals & works toward these.
- Gain satisfaction from finishing projects.
- Prefer knowing exactly what’s involved.

**Perception types:**

- Prefer to leave options open.
- Have a strong play ethic.
- Enjoy adapting to new situations.
- Enjoy starting new projects.
- Cope well with ambiguity.

So on balance do you think you incline more to:

J or P ? Write which letter you incline to in this box:

## Working Out Your Own Preference

Everyone's personality will reflect all aspects of the Myers Briggs model. You use Extroversion as well as Introversion, Sensing as well as iNtuition, Thinking as well as Feeling, and Judgement as well as Perception.

However, you are likely to have preferences of response to situations that will help you to arrive at your MBTI profile.

List the letters you have chosen for each of the four dimensions.

**Your choice of letters:**

The combination of letters you have arrived at is our MBTI Personality Type.

You can obtain a description of the personality traits associated with each of the sixteen personality types on the internet at <http://www.teamtechnology.co.uk/myers-briggs/myers-briggs.htm>

How do these types connect with the role or roles you might play in a group or team? Keep reading!

## Group or Team Roles And MBTI Type

This table shows the relationship between team roles and MBTI type; this means the role you are likely to play in any team.

| Team Role | MBTI Type |
|-----------|-----------|
| Coach     | ESFJ/ENFJ |
| Crusader  | ISFP/INFP |
| Explorer  | ENTP/ENFP |
| Innovator | INTJ/INFJ |
| Sculptor  | ESFP/ESTP |
| Curator   | ISFJ/ISTJ |
| Conductor | ESTJ/ENTJ |
| Scientist | ISTP/INTP |

### Coach

Coaches try to create harmony in the world around them, by building rapport with people, creating a positive team atmosphere, looking after people's welfare, motivating people and/or providing a service to the satisfaction of others. They value people's contributions, seek to develop the role that others play, and invest a lot of effort in building positive relationships. They try to overcome differences of opinion and find ways in which the team can agree.

However, they can be easily influenced and may not always be assertive enough to promote their own ideas. They can also be easily discouraged, particularly if their contributions to the group are ignored or rejected.

### Crusader

Crusaders give importance to particular thoughts, ideas, or beliefs.

They are value driven, and in a team discussion they often bring a sense of priority that is derived from their strong convictions. They seize upon and emphasise ideas or thoughts that have the greatest import, bringing them to the fore and stressing their significance. They assess the inherent value or importance of new ideas, focusing on those about which they feel most strongly.

However, their own strong beliefs or values may lead them to distance themselves from, or clash with, others in the group who have contrary beliefs.

### Explorer

Explorers promote exploration of new and better ways of doing things, to uncover hidden potential in people, things or situations. They break new ground, and are often looking one step beyond the current situation to pursue unexplored avenues, until all the possibilities have been exhausted.

Explorers often challenge the status quo and experiment with the introduction of change, to see if the situation can be improved or new potential uncovered.

However, they can get bored easily and may not pay attention to detail, or want to get involved in discussion on small details.

### **Innovator**

Innovators use their imagination to create new and different ideas and perspectives. They observe the world around them, then use their imaginations to consider what they have observed from a number of different perspectives and dream up new ideas and insights. Innovators often produce radical solutions to problems, develop long-term vision and demonstrate an apparent understanding of what cannot be clearly known.

However, others may see them as 'up in the clouds' and inclined to disregard practical details of protocol. They can also ignore procedure and can be too preoccupied to communicate effectively with other group members.

### **Sculptor**

Sculptors bring things to fruition by getting things done, and getting them done now! They are very action-oriented, dealing with whatever tasks the current situation presents, and spurring others into action as well. They make use of their experience and utilise tools or processes of which they already have knowledge. They try to have an immediate impact on things, injecting a sense of urgency, and aiming to achieve clear goals and tangible results.

However, they may be inclined to show their irritation with others, particularly those they feel are not contributing or taking the group task seriously enough.

### **Curator**

Curators bring clarity to the inner world of information, ideas and understanding. They listen, ask questions and absorb information, so that in their mind's eye they can achieve as clear a picture or understanding as is possible. They expand their knowledge and collection of experiences, and also look to the future by envisaging clear goals and clear pathways to achievement of those goals. Their focus on clarity also brings greater attention to detail.

However, they may not always be responsive to new and unproven ideas and may be inclined to be over cautious to ideas outside their previous experience.

### **Conductor**

Conductors introduce organisation and a logical structure into the way things are done. They organise and systematise the world around them, by establishing appropriate plans, identifying and implementing the correct procedures, and then endeavouring to make sure they are followed. They try to ensure that roles and responsibilities are properly defined and that appropriate resources or skills are available to undertake the work assigned.

However, others may perceive them as manipulative or overly bureaucratic, particularly if they try to dominate any group or steer it in a particular direction without proper discussion.

## **Scientist**

Scientists provide explanation of how and why things happen. They bring structure and organisation into the inner world of ideas and understanding. They analyse things, formulate hypotheses and explanations of how they function, and gather evidence to assess how true those explanations are. They produce mental models that replicate how particular aspects of the world works, and try to understand the full complexity of any situation.

However, they may not always work collaboratively with others, preferring instead to work and pursue ideas independently.

## How You See Yourself

It can be helpful to complete this section individually, and then discuss it with other group members.

Do you broadly agree or disagree with the MBTI result? If you disagree, please state why.

What strengths & weaknesses do you feel you will bring to the group? Please summarise these in the space below:

## 5. Group development and change

### Group “Life Cycle”?

Groups may pass through different stages of formation or group development. It is worth thinking about how your group is changing and developing to make sure that you are going in the right direction and that everyone is committed to the task. If the group is not developing as you think it should then you need to diagnose what is going wrong and try to put it right.

There are a number of different theories of the typical group life-cycle, including Bass and Ryterband's four distinct stages of group development:

1. Developing mutual acceptance and membership
2. Communication and decision making
3. Motivation and productivity
4. Control and organisation

(Bass, B., and Ryterband, E., Organizational Psychology, Allyn and Bacon, 1979.)

The most popular however is that of Bruce Tuckman's group development model (1965). Tuckman identified four stages of group formation (and added a fifth stage 'adjourning' in the 1970's).

When individuals come together in groups they often experience the different stages of Tuckman's group 'life cycle'.

|  |
|--|
| <b>1. Forming</b>  |
| At the forming stage, there is little sense of it being a group; it is still a collection of individuals. People in the group are cautious of each other and what is expected of them. Many individuals prefer to keep quiet rather than speak out at this stage, until they are sure of their role and position in the group. The group will seek direction at this stage from a 'higher authority', e.g. a tutor.                                |
| <b>2. Storming</b>   |
| As the group begins to work together, people become bolder, and conflicts may emerge openly. Factions may form, and individuals may jostle for dominant positions in the group. There may be mutterings about 'other people's behaviour'. This can be a difficult stage in the life cycle of the group. The group needs to discuss problems openly if it is to move on to the next stage.  |
| <b>3. Norming</b>  |
| Open discussion of problems in the group, or the urgency of a group task, can lead to the group 'norming' stage, when it begins to work collectively at the task. Informal or formal ground-rules have been established, and group members are beginning to get to know each other and have more confidence individually and collectively. Individual differences are tolerated, providing all group members are working at their appointed tasks. |
| <b>4. Performing</b>   |
| At this stage, the group is working well together. The group has its own unspoken rules and members are often very supportive of each other. The group may assert its own identity; it becomes 'our group'. There may be group rituals or rites of passage, to celebrate the completion of the task, e.g. a meal or a party.   |



### Example: The Four Stages of Group Formation

These stages of group formation can happen quite quickly. Below is an example of group formation that happened in just one day. The comments below are the observations of a trainer leading a short training session with a group of people who did not know each other at the start of the day.

(Taken from 'Adults Learning' by Jenny Rogers, 1989)

| <i>First session</i>                          | <i>Second session</i>                                       | <i>Third session</i>   | <i>Fourth session</i>  |
|---|---|--|--|
| quiet & cautious; not sure of each other yet. | glances of irritation exchanged at the 'things people say'. | the 'break in the clouds'...they've talked during coffee and have discovered that other people are not so awful after all. | purposeful: emergence of jokes, sense of where people are going. At the end of the day, people are exchanging addresses and phone numbers. |

### But Groups Don't HAVE to Go Through These Stages!

Your group does not have to go through some of these stages - all groups are subtly different.

Some groups move quickly to 'norming' and 'performing' stages without any storming! It depends on the mix of personalities in the groups. Some groups work because the members fit in well with each other from the start and the group is soon focused on the task.

Some move even more rapidly from forming to performing because they target a particular outcome and work expediently together to do the tasks required of them. They may be indifferent to, or even dislike, each other. But they put this to one side and get on with the tasks because they have to. They are not interested in 'norming', because the group will break-up when the job is done. But this situation tends to apply to groups that form quickly and have to perform a particular task within a tight time schedule, or groups where members are arbitrarily grouped together for a particular purpose.

However, it is clear that the early stages of group formation can be very important. As a practical hint, make sure that you use the first few meetings to establish a good working relationship from the start.

There have also been some studies of student groups which found that certain groups did not go through these stages at all. In one study, the student groups got started on the task almost immediately without any conflict. The original momentum seemed to flag after a while and there was a critical point about halfway through when many of the groups seemed to re-assess their progress and the leadership often changed. The overall effectiveness and performance of the group was strongly influenced by this 'halfway review' and so this might be a useful practical point: when you plan your timetable for a group project, make sure that you have a meeting halfway through to review progress and make sure that you are on the right track (for further discussion of these theories of group development and their practical implications, see Peter Hartley, 1997, Group Communication, Routledge).

## 6. Cultural differences in group behaviour

For many international students, working in a group as part of an assessed project is an entirely new experience and it can raise two particular issues for them: about protocol and communication.

### Protocol

In every country there are accepted protocols about the roles and behaviour of individuals in groups. In many countries, for example, individuals learn that they need to assert their views to be heard, and that their status in the group can depend on the extent and ease of their ability to do this without upsetting other group members. So they learn that the frequency, pacing, pausing, intonation, and directness of their communication has an impact on this process. They learn to present their personal opinions in a way that encourages others in the same cultural grouping to give due attention to them.

In Britain and the USA, for example, the individualistic nature of these countries can result in the individuals involved seizing opportunities in groups to present a personal viewpoint, and to attempt to do it with enough confidence to gain the attention of others without antagonising them. This is a fine science, and not all get it right - as we have seen in section 3 of this guide. Nevertheless, this form of individualistic communication has been encouraged by their teachers, who tend to support and encourage the idea that we learn through debate, interaction and the expression of personal opinion.

However, students from more consensual and collectivist cultures may have learned in a very different way. For example, in parts of the Far East students learn through imitation and observation. They may feel, subsequently, that they need to internalise and understand the existing knowledge before they contribute their own ideas. To air one's unformed opinions on a half-understood subject can seem like the height of arrogance to a student from such an educational background.

They may also be deeply uncomfortable in any situation, such as a group, where an argument can flare.

Alan Macfarlane, Professor of Anthropology at Cambridge University, observed this, for example, of Japanese students:

*"Communication should never lead into disagreement. Interpersonal harmony is essential, and argument or debate avoided...much of British education is based on confrontational exchanges, where teachers and students are taught to think by way of an intellectual game or battle...Such an approach is puzzling to my Japanese students"* (The Times Higher, 10/08/2007, p.14).

Most international students with little previous experience of group work in education are driven hard by their need to succeed, and most will make a determined effort to fit in with the cultural norms of the host country and with their allocated group:

*"Group work with other international students can be a difficult issue. Once you are 'tuned in' or adjust to different communication styles, it becomes easier"* (postgraduate student from Dubai, School of Management).

This process of adjustment can be eased by all students being aware that their peers may share very different experiences of group work. It should not, therefore, be assumed that a quiet member of a group

has nothing to say, or is opting out of the discussion. It may be that their previous experience has not prepared them for this new situation - and they need time to weigh it up. For this reason, it is often a useful experience for students to share their cultural experiences of group work at an early stage of group formation.

The second important issue for international students is about communication - and overcoming anxiety associated with speaking in public.

*"I found out that the problem was not my language skill itself but the confidence to speak in English. Sometimes I was just not confident enough to speak out my thoughts"* (student from China).

*"I wanted to join discussions like the others but used to get so nervous that my body shook. In my mind I was fully engaged in the classroom and had something to say, but feared making a fool of myself..."* (African student quoted in Ryan, 2000, p.29)

If English is their second language, then the responses of international students to discussion may be slower than others, as they seek the right words and mentally frame them into coherent sentences.

All group members need to be particularly sensitive to this issue and give support to international students who need time and encouragement to contribute their ideas - which the majority will want to do.

For many international students faced with group work, the answer is to band with other students - if they have the chance - in monocultural groups. This is understandable, but often a mistake, and a loss of opportunity.

*"Working in a group makes synergy and you work faster; but when the group consists of people from more than one culture, it sometimes makes double synergy, as everyone in the group thinks from the different angle and has distinct knowledge"* (Postgraduate student from Pakistan, School of Management).

*"I think, on balance, it is good when students from different cultures are mixed together by the tutor. If left to their own devices students will stay in their own comfort zones and this often means grouping with others from the same country. In this situation you might have international students on the course, but it doesn't make it an international course!"* (Undergraduate student from Kenya, School of Engineering, Design and Technology).

The way around this situation in self-selecting groups is for two or three students from one country to form a small sub-group, but then to try and integrate into a main group to work alongside students from other countries. In this way they gain support - and often the courage to speak up - from each other, but have taken an important step toward working across cultural boundaries.

## **7. Making discussion work**

### **Get the Most out of Group Discussion**

The following advice will help your group to connect well together.

(Source: adapted specifically from: Cottrell, S. (2003) The Study Skills Handbook. Palgrave Study Guide.)

#### **Before Discussion**

- Ensure you have done any tasks agreed for the group
- Read around the subject
- What questions do you want answered?
- Decide who will chair the meeting – this can be done on a rotation basis to give everyone a chance

#### **During the Discussion**

- Check everyone can see and hear everyone else
- Be open to hearing something new
- Jot down useful information
- Jot down questions to ask
- If you don't understand something, ask
- Link what you hear to what you already know
- Make contributions to the discussion – try and contribute something to each meeting. This could take the form of encouraging others if you have no ideas of your own to add to any discussion

#### **After the Discussion**

- Go over your notes
- Check that you know exactly when you have to do activities arising out of the group.
- Above all else: Don't let the group down – do what you said you would do.

### **Listening to Other Group Members is a Key to Group Success:**

#### **Tips for Better Listening**

- Body language: nodding agreement, smiling, looking interested
- Encouraging: e.g. 'yes, that's a good idea'; 'yes, I agree'

- Ask questions: e.g. 'how do we do that?'
- Make suggestions: that build on the speaker's ideas
- Disagreeing creatively: if you disagree with the speaker's comments, you could ask for elaboration, e.g. 'what if...?' 'How will that work in practice?' When asked to elaborate on points made, speakers may begin to see the flaws in their own arguments!

## 8. Ways of getting started

### Forming a Group

At the first meeting, you may want to work through the following exercises and checklist.

#### 1. Contact List

You could start by all group members writing their names & contact details. This should be circulated to all members of the group.

| Name | Email/Telephone Number |
|------|------------------------|
|      |                        |
|      |                        |
|      |                        |
|      |                        |
|      |                        |
|      |                        |
|      |                        |
|      |                        |
|      |                        |

#### 2. Introductions (<http://www.learnhighergroupwork.com/episode1/>)

Group members should introduce themselves and say a little about their backgrounds. Even if group members know each other already, it can be useful to do this, as it gets everyone speaking.

#### 3. Clarify Aim and Purpose of the Group Task (<http://www.learnhighergroupwork.com/episode2/>)

For the first meeting, someone should volunteer to lead the discussion and another to take notes. However, it is a good idea for the leadership and recording of meetings to be rotated around group members so everyone gets the chance to do it. This could feature in the 'ground rules' discussion (see below).

The group should also clarify aim and purpose of the set task. This can involve, for example, looking closely at the wording of any question or project and making sure everyone is clear on broadly what is involved and when the task as a whole must be completed and who is going to do what. It can be helpful if a written summary is made of this discussion. Everyone should then sign this and copies should be made for all members (see example below):

**Group Task:** For our group project for the PDP module we agreed that we would explore what problems we experienced when preparing and writing essays. We are starting from a position that many students find essay writing difficult, but we are seeking to identify the specific reasons for this.

We have agreed that we should search for previous research on this topic and conduct a small scale face-to-face survey of other students on the module, using a questionnaire. We have agreed on who does what, as shown below.

**Time scale:** work must be completed by 30th November; our presentation is on the 8th December, which will leave time to rehearse before the presentation day.

**Method (agreed roles):**

Search journal articles for previous research (Zak)

Search books for previous research/opinion (Emma)

Prepare questionnaire (Yusuf)

Interview students: (Waqas, Paul, Shu, Adel, Mary)

**Next meeting:**

20th October: Zak & Emma to report; Yusuf to present questionnaire for discussion. Adel will lead this meeting.

**Signed & dated:** (all group members sign and date this)

#### 4. Ground Rules

Groups should formulate their own ground rules on the expected conduct of meetings and members. Ground rules are simple written statements on agreed conduct. All group members should receive a copy of these.

Ground rules could include:

- Punctuality
- Attendance
- Leadership of meetings (who does it)
- Recording discussion (who does it)
- Commitment
- Contribution to the group (everyone should contribute something to its success, but individuals need to commit in writing to this)
- Confidentiality
- Mobile phones, e.g. switch off at meetings

- The importance of listening to each other
- Respect (e.g. not allowing, for example, sexist or racist comments, and not accepting abusive or aggressive remarks etc.)
- Decision making procedures

The sheet on the following page could be printed off or photocopied and used to formulate ground rules.

## GROUND RULES

| Topic | Ground Rules |
|-------|--------------|
|       |              |
|       |              |
|       |              |
|       |              |
|       |              |
|       |              |
|       |              |
|       |              |

**Agreed on ..... by the following [names & signatures]:**

|  |  |  |
|--|--|--|
|  |  |  |
|  |  |  |
|  |  |  |
|  |  |  |

## 9. Reviewing your group progress

Once your group has formed and has been running a while, it is a good idea to review its progress, particularly if members feel there are problems in the group to overcome.

The evaluation form below can help your group to review its progress. With regards to your study group, rank your study group in the following categories on a scale from 1-10. It can be helpful if individual members of the group first complete the questionnaire, then the group as a whole compares and discusses individual responses.

| Positive Points   | 10 | 9 | 8 | 7 | 6 | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | Negative Points   |
|---|----|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Group goals clearly defined                             |    |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Goals unclear   |
| Agreement reached at most meetings                      |    |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Disagreement a feature of most meetings                   |
| Tasks completed as agreed                               |    |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Agreed tasks not completed                                |
| Everyone participating                                  |    |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Significant number not participating                      |
| We listen to each other                                 |    |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Listening skills weak                                     |
| Open and trusting atmosphere                            |    |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Distrust and defensiveness                                |
| All able to express opinions                            |    |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | No opportunity to express opinions                        |
| Opinions could be questioned without resentment         |    |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Opinions 'untouchable' and could not easily be challenged |
| Respect shown for each other                            |    |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | No or little respect shown by or for other group members  |
| Consensus decisions                                     |    |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Authoritarian decisions                                   |
| Leadership skills demonstrated                          |    |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Drifting or dominating by individuals                     |
| People present on time or send apologies if unavailable |    |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Unpunctuality a significant feature                       |
| Systematic approach to discussion                       |    |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Lack of systematic approach to tasks                      |
| Time used efficiently                                   |    |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Time wasted   |
| Challenging, rewarding, enjoying atmosphere             |    |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Flat, lifeless atmosphere                                 |
| Group committed to tasks                                |    |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Lack of commitment by significant number of group members |

Source: NIMBAS 2005: adapted from a group evaluation questionnaire produced by NIMBAS, Utrecht, Netherlands.

*Score 1-5:* is an indication that your group has suffered problems in this area and needs to find a solution.

*Score 6-8:* is an indication that your group needs to make some improvement in this area.

*Score 9-10:* is an indication that your group has done well in this area.

## 10. Dealing with conflict

### Surviving the Storm

As mentioned earlier, your group may blend well from the start and move quickly on to the 'norming' and 'performing' stages. This is much more likely to happen if you work through the exercises in the previous section. But if your group does hit a problem the group needs to discuss it, and resolve it quickly.

Here are some particular problems that can occur, and some advice if they do:

| Problem   | Advice   |
|---|--|
| Someone gets upset if his or her ideas are challenged or rejected.  | <p>This problem usually arises because of the way an idea gets challenged in the group. The person who put forward the idea may feel personally rejected or insulted if their suggestions are scorned or insensitively rejected. If someone puts forward an idea, and others don't accept it, the objectors need to make clear that it is the idea that they want to challenge, and not the intelligence or integrity of the person proposing the idea.</p>  |
| Problems from outside being brought into the group.   | <p>If group members are experiencing problems outside the group, they may find it difficult to ignore these. Worries from the outside can cause group members to be angry or aggressive to others without too much obvious provocation.</p> <p>It can be helpful if group meetings started with members saying what has happened to them generally since the last meeting. This may bring worrying issues up to the surface.</p> <p>The group may also want to build in a ground rule about not accepting abusive or aggressive behaviour.</p>   |
| Group imbalances, e.g. one or two people tend to dominate the discussion; a few people do all the work; some members opt out of most discussion/work. | <p>If these issues are coming up to the surface, they need to be openly discussed, otherwise resentment will start to destroy group cohesion.</p> <p>The chairperson needs to lead discussion on to the topic of group dynamics by inviting group members to say openly, candidly, but not abusively or aggressively, how they feel the group is working. The chairperson should invite someone to start the discussion, and once someone has raised a sensitive issue, others will usually follow with their comments. The chairperson should ensure all group members get a chance to say what they think.</p> <p>This can lead to a difficult and tense meeting, particularly if a lot of resentment is below the surface. However, an honest discussion can clear the air and lead to a much more open and committed group. Some group members, for example, may be completely unaware that their opinions and actions have been causing problems.</p> |

| Problem  | Advice  |
|--|---|
|  | The meeting should try and close on a positive action point for the future.   |
| Silences: sometimes a group will not have much if anything to say on a particular topic or occasion.                               | <p>This can be embarrassing in a group situation, and often someone will jump in with a superfluous comment or joke to fill the silence.</p> <p>However, silence is often a good thing, when the group is considering an important point. The chairperson could, in fact, encourage group members to sit in silence for a minute or two to mentally weigh up important issues before commenting on them. The chairperson or other members of the group could suggest working in pairs to make it easier for individual group members to speak up.</p>   |
| Sexist, racist or other stereotyping or abusive remarks  | These should not be allowed, accepted or tolerated in the group, and there should be a ground rule to this effect. It should not be left to the chairperson to have to challenge these remarks, because all members have a moral responsibility to intervene.   |
| Not listening to others in the group.  | <p>It can take a lot of courage and encouragement before some members voice their opinions in a group. If these opinions are not listened to, the speaker may retreat emotionally from further group discussion.</p> <p>The group may wish to include a ground rule about the importance of listening to others and paying attention when others are talking.</p> <p>Group members should find ways of encouraging quiet members to contribute to the discussion, and the chairperson's role in ensuring everyone has a fair chance to speak is vital.</p>  |
| Someone allocated a group task does not complete it in a way that satisfies other group members, e.g. some information is missing. | <p>This is a problem best avoided in the first place by the group discussing who does what at an early stage of group formation, and what results are expected by the group (see 'Delegation &amp; Expectations' ).</p> <p>Individual group tasks should be:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(a) identified;</li> <li>(b) delegated; and</li> <li>(c) the expected outcome clarified.</li> </ul> <p>If all group members have entered into a contract on expectations, the group is then justified in asking the group member concerned to complete his or her part of the contract in the way previously agreed.</p> <p>It is always worth checking if the group member is encountering difficulties that s/he hasn't made known to other members of the team. In extreme and irresolvable cases, however, group members may wish to discuss this with the module leader, particularly if marks or grades are involved.</p> |

| Problem   | Advice   |
|---|--|
|   | <p>Tutors now are increasingly asking group members to identify and summarise their role and contribution in a group or using peer assessment to decide whether or not individual members are entitled to share a group mark or grade.</p> <p>Dealing with this kind of situation can be a worthwhile learning experience if you can develop strategies to channel your anger and frustration into positive action. Agree among yourselves how you will do the work if it is not forthcoming and have a contingency plan to ensure that you can meet your deadline.</p>  |
| <p>The leader or chairperson of the group is proving to be unsuitable and unacceptable to the majority of the group. S/he may, for example, be too directive, dogmatic or aggressive; or be contrast, indecisive and ineffective.</p> | <p>It is unusual in any group for the leader or chairperson to be completely isolated and without some partial support from one or two group members. If there is consensus among group members about the problem, it is best approached via those individuals who are most likely to be listened to by the leader.</p> <p>The leader should be given a chance to discuss the issues with all group members and make changes if necessary. Sometimes the leader simply does not understand that negative impact of his or her leadership style on others.</p> <p>Real problems can occur if the group divides into factions because of leadership related issues. Often in this situation the real problems are not aired and discussed and a general mood of disagreement, hostility and non-cooperation prevails. The answer is to discuss the problem, not matter how painful, awkward or difficult it is for the group. As stated earlier, a “storm” is necessary to clear the air.</p> <p>In extreme cases, the University counselling service will help by providing an independent mediator or facilitator to allow individuals, including the leader, to have their say and to make a fresh start.</p> |
| <p>The group has discussed a subject honestly and democratically, but no agreement or decision can be reached.</p>  | <p>There are likely to be two or more positions within the group and the role of the chairperson is to summarise these and then allow group members to vote on which option they prefer.</p> <p>This can be done publicly, but is often best done privately and in writing as the voting preferences of some members might be influenced by the dominant personalities of others in the group.</p> <p>One approach would be to briefly adjourn the meeting to give everyone a chance to think the issues over, but then ask group members to return after a break and to vote to reach a majority view.</p> <p>In the case of three options, an initial vote can identify the two strongest positions, which can then be voted on. If the three options all receive equal votes, the chairperson may have to decide which two options should be voted on. This may make him or her</p>   |

| Problem | Advice  |
|---------|---|
|         | temporarily unpopular with some, but at least not for being indecisive! |

## 11. Making group decisions

Making decisions in a group can sometimes be difficult, especially when individual members hold strong views on particular issues. This can lead to conflict in the group and can lead to an over-hasty decision being made, as other group members attempt to rapidly heal the breach. What can happen in this situation is that group factions form behind the main protagonists and arbitrary decisions are made on which faction has the loudest voice, or carries the majority vote. This can lead to a 'decision' being made, but one that leads to resentment among those whose ideas are rejected or ignored. This situation also results in a lack of exploration and analysis of the underlying issues, which can have repercussions later.

However, if group members always have a chance to express their ideas in a democratic way, these undercurrents can be prevented or reduced. There are a number of effective techniques for making group decisions, three of which are explained here.

### Six Thinking Hats

Edward De Bono developed the 'Six Thinking Hats' technique to help groups reach a decision by considering a problem or issue from six different perspectives. To apply the technique, you need to consider a decision wearing each of the following six hats. All group members can 'wear' these hats at the same time, or hats can be allocated to individual members of the group. It can be particularly helpful if a group member who holds a particular strong view wears a hat that represents an opposite perspective so they are required to think about a counter-view to their own.

**White hat:** the information hat. Look at the data and facts you have and consider past experiences. Make your decision based on what has previously happened in similar situations.

**Red hat:** the intuitive hat. What is your instinctive response? Make the decision based on your hunches and emotional responses to the issue. Note that this may differ between group members.

**Black hat:** the pessimistic hat. Think about all the bad points, flaws in arguments, and what could possibly go wrong. Challenge all aspects of the issue and make your decision based on the least-worst scenario. Even if not using the hats technique it is useful to think this way as you may spot a problem with your plan that would otherwise have been overlooked

**Yellow hat:** the optimistic hat. Look at all the positive issues and benefits of taking a particular decision. Yellow hat thinking can help the group keep going when everything looks gloomy and difficult.

**Green hat:** the creative hat. Consider every conceivable response no matter how ludicrous or wacky it may seem and explore the possibilities.

**Blue hat:** the big picture hat. The wearer(s) of the blue hat is/are a sort of referee who should ensure every other hat has been worn and that the decision making process has fully explored all the issues. Use the blue hat to make sure the final decision made has been made after the other five hats approach has been properly applied.

All group members can 'wear' the hats at the same time, or individual members can wear individual hats. It can be helpful, for example, for a group member who holds a particularly strong view to wear a hat that

represents an opposite view or perspective. The drawback of this technique is that it can take a long time to reach a decision, although the result can be a creative and original one. If you need to reach a decision in a hurry, the Nominal Decision-making or Balance Sheet Approach techniques may be the answer.

### Nominal Decision-Making Technique

Each of the options should be listed and then each individual in the group should rank order the options with 1 as the highest priority and 3 as the lowest (you can have several options rated 1, 2 or 3). Each member then shares their ranking for each option and the average ranking order is then worked out. The consensus of the group should quickly become apparent.

### Balance Sheet Approach

A variation on the Nominal Decision-Making Technique (above) is the Balance Sheet Approach. This is a technique taken from the business world where balance sheets are used to weigh up the assets, advantages and disadvantages of any venture. There are two stages to the process.

First, you take two or more options and list the advantages and disadvantages of each option in the space below.

| Option 1 |          |
|----------|----------|
| For:     | Against: |
| Option 2 |          |
| For:     | Against: |

Next, you go back over the 'fors' and 'againsts' and weight each item with a score out of 10 according to its importance to the group, or consequences for others, and then add up the total scores for each column. In the case of an equal score, the group can take a vote on the options.

For other useful group decision making techniques visit the Mind Tools website:  
[http://www.mindtools.com/pages/main/newMN\\_TED.htm](http://www.mindtools.com/pages/main/newMN_TED.htm)

If your group still cannot reach a decision or consensus you could invite an external and impartial person to the meeting. This might be the module tutor, learner development adviser or effective learning adviser from either within your School or from the central Learner Development Unit.