

FOCUS ON: TEACHING AND LEARNING

EFFECTIVE GROUP WORK



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Group work is a collaborative learning approach where students work together to achieve shared learning objectives. This allows students to learn from each other, share their perspectives, and develop key skills in communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and critical thinking.

Strategically incorporating group work into programmes has the potential to provide students with an exceptional and inclusive learning experience, whilst also enhancing their employability through exposure to team-working practices.

TAKING A STRATEGIC APPROACH

To ensure the effectiveness of group work, proper planning supported by resources like 'Making the most of group work' (CQSD, 2022) is crucial.

However, for it to be strategic, the focus should be on creating an inclusive learning community, which requires intentional group formation rather than leaving it to chance or students' choice.

Do students perceive assessed group work as unfair or too challenging?

- It depends on learning preferences, but there are ways to help students feel positive about group work, such as communicating its importance for skills development, and modelling and scaffolding processes and expectations.
- Careful design of summative assessments can prevent dissatisfaction among students, particularly in cases where they receive the same grade as a group member who contributed less. For example, you could assess individual reflective documents. See the [Assessing Group Work](#) guide for more information.

How will students cover enough content if scheduled learning time is devoted to group work?

- Content is applied, discussed and learned through groupwork approaches.
- Flipped learning, where content is covered during independent study, also offers a solution here. To increase student engagement, it is important to link flipped learning with summative assessment and use knowledge checks (e.g. online quizzes) to evaluate their engagement.

Will students do the independent study?

- Clearly communicating the necessity of independent work in benefitting the whole group will increase the chance of students completing it.
- Emphasising the benefits of peer tutoring, where students can both learn from and teach each other can motivate independent learning too.

Why shouldn't we let students form their own groups?

- Strategic group formation develops employability skills like working with and thriving in unfamiliar, diverse groups.
- Marginalised students will continue to be left on the margins if students are allowed to form friendship groups. Effective group work approaches emphasise the importance of allocating students to mixed ability groups.

Effective group work is inclusive

Strategic group work can effectively close continuation and awarding gaps, as evidenced by a large-scale initiative that reduced the BAME continuation gap from 12.9% to 1.2% and the awarding gap from 15.7% to 1.7%, while also improving success rates for other 'Success for All' target groups (McNeil et al., 2019).

This finding is supported by numerous smaller studies in higher education and an evidence toolkit created by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), which highlights the positive impact of collaborative learning, which has greater impact than higher cost initiatives such as reducing class sizes and one-to-one tuition.

PLANNING GROUP WORK TASKS

The table below outlines a range of group work activities that draw on the work of Beichner et al. (2007) and student co-creation research by Collis and Moonen (2006). Beichner et al. (2007) describes activities, or tasks, as ranging from those which are tangible with predictable outcomes and limited student agency through to ponderable tasks with unpredictable outcomes and significant student agency.

These task hierarchies can be used to develop increasingly challenging group activities that are suitable for the course level and the depth of engagement with the topic. In addition, to maximise student engagement with group work tasks, activities need to be relevant to assessment – either directly (assessing the output of the group work) or indirectly (enabling students to prepare for their assessment).

When planning group work tasks, how we support our students and build their confidence in working together effectively (also known as scaffolding) is important.

Scaffolding can take many forms, including:

1. Providing clear instructions and guidelines for the task
2. Breaking down complex tasks into smaller, more manageable parts
3. Offering resources or tools to help students complete the task, such as templates to learn from
4. Building in time for feedback and guidance, encouraging students to reflect on their progress and adjust their approach as needed
5. Modelling expected behaviours or strategies for working collaboratively

Making the most of group work



This UoR staff resource ([CQSD 2022](#)) includes:

- Getting started with group work.
- Student-facing resources / How else may they need support? / Be aware of complications.
- Getting the most out of group work / Take time.
- Assessing group work & addressing the issue of fairness / Check list – what to consider when selecting group work for assessment / Collaboration vs. collusion.
- Group size & composition / Monitoring & supporting groups.
- Group work & digital tools / Diversity & inclusivity.
- Final words / Useful links.

EXAMPLES OF TASKS FOR STRATEGIC GROUP WORK

GROUP TASK	DESCRIPTION	ASSESSMENT	SCAFFOLDING	EVALUATION
Searching for and sharing information	Groups search for library and / or online resources on part of the topic covered.	A good early formative and/or summative assessment.	Library can provide support for information searches.	A tangible task involving remembering and understanding.
Creating and sharing a learning resource	Having researched a topic, groups can develop a resource in a format suitable for use by other students. This can extend and apply information from the textbook (and the “Searching...” task above).	Resource assessed or prepares students for another assessment.	Digital media support could help create shareable resources.	A visible task ranging from applying to creating.
Developing multiple-choice questions (MCQ)	Groups test their insight into a topic by creating several multiple-choice questions. These should include appropriate	Questions assessed and/or used in summative MCQ test.	Students will need support in writing good MCQs.	A visible task ranging from applying to creating.

GROUP TASK	DESCRIPTION	ASSESSMENT	SCAFFOLDING	EVALUATION
	feedback and, once checked, can be made available to other students.			
Reusing task-directed discussions	Groups use an online discussion tool to explore an issue, taking it in turn to act as moderator and summariser. Their discussions should be collated and shared with the wider cohort.	Collated notes assessed or they prepare students for assessment.	Guidance may be needed on student roles or on using tools.	A visible or ponderable task which applies, analyses & evaluates.
Peer-support activities	Students participate in a networked peer-support system involving rounds of peer feedback on course projects during their development.	Formative or summative assessment (e.g. structured reflection).	Guidance needed on peer support and reflection.	A ponderable task which analyses and evaluates.
Being a peer-mentor	Building on “Peer support...” tasks (above), students provide support and guidance (possibly across levels) via posting questions and sharing experiences with wider cohort online.	Formative or summative assessment (e.g. structured reflection).	Guidance needed on peer support and reflection.	A ponderable task which analyses and evaluates.
Contributing via roleplay games	Students are given a role in a scenario, developing “new stories” from the perspective of their roles, rating ideas from an anonymous list, and voting on critical issues.	Direct assessment of outputs or of reflective accounts of process.	Support needed on stakeholders’ roles and representing them.	A visible or ponderable task ranging from applying to creating.
Co-creation	Collaborative knowledge construction in which learning groups share a document repository to discuss and support each other during each phase of a communal problem-solving activity.	Direct assessment of outputs or of reflective accounts of process.	Support needed in appropriate problem-solving approach.	A ponderable task ranging from applying to creating.

SUMMARY AND NEXT STEPS

In summary, incorporating effective group work into our teaching and learning toolkit can foster collaborative learning, enhancing skills like communication and critical thinking. Strategically integrating group work promotes inclusivity, narrows achievement gaps, and boosts employability. For our group work plans to succeed in the long term, it is important to prioritise planning, inclusive design, and scaffolded support. Group tasks such as information sharing, peer support, and roleplay engage students, align with both formative and summative assessments, and can be supported and scaffolded in a variety of ways. For help in implementing effective group work strategies in your teaching, please contact the ADE (Academic Development and Enhancement) team.

To contact us and explore other guides in our Focus On: series, please visit <https://www.reading.ac.uk/cqsd/teaching-resources>



References and Further Reading

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- McNeil, J., Borg, M., Kerrigan, M., Waller, S., Richter, U.M., Berkson, R., Tweddell, S., & McCarter, R. (2019). Scaling up active collaborative learning for student success. Final report. Office for Students (OfS). <https://aclproject.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/NTU-ABSS-final-report-Jan-21.pdf>

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