WHY DO WE ASK STUDENTS TO WORK IN GROUPS?

Group work has much to offer, such as:

- providing opportunities to work with people with different perspectives, values, experience, training, cultures, priorities etc.
- enabling larger, more challenging tasks to be tackled because of the ‘more hands, less work’ principle
- enabling the pooling of a greater number of ideas for consideration on any given project preparing students for professional life. Employers value group skills and the ability to work with others is often listed in selection criteria for positions.

Although it is often more complicated working with others than working by oneself, when a group works well together, the results can be very impressive and satisfying. However, when groups do not work well, the experience can be distressing.

TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL GROUP WORK

- Devote time to getting to know your group members first. People who know each other are more likely to be comfortable enough with each other to express their ideas and opinions freely, to compromise and to find common meeting times etc.
- Each meeting, rotate minute taking and chairing roles so that everyone gets practice at these skills.
- Decide on and sign off on some group rules. Often students think this is not necessary but when groups fall apart, having some rules in writing helps to point out to errant group members that they have not kept to their agreement.

Some examples of useful rules are:

- All members are to attend group meetings as scheduled or to contact other members in advance to make alternative arrangements for participation.
- All individuals have the right to speak and suggest ideas.
- Decisions will be made based on majority decision with a minimum number of people required to make the decision ...(or other criteria, as your group sees fit).
- Minutes of the meetings should be distributed to all members within 3 days of the meeting to ensure everyone knows what has been decided on and what they must do.
- Any student who is experiencing difficulty with their task must inform other group members well in advance of deadlines to discuss solutions.

Keep records of who attends each meeting and who doesn’t. Also, agree on the time and place for the next meeting, which tasks needs doing and who will do them (see Figure 1 overleaf).

Estimate time and effort required for each task and adjust later if necessary. Commit yourselves to group decisions and tasks - record them and follow through with them.

Problems can occur if one or more group members do not:

- do what they said they would do
- turn up for meetings
- stay on task at meetings
- care much about their grades, whilst others want high distinctions
- value the input of other members
- participate in discussions (or they dominate the group)
- agree or reach a compromise
- work cooperatively
- remain in the course (i.e. withdraw before the project is complete) - you will need to work out a contingency plan.
AVOIDING GROUP PROBLEMS

Many of the possible problems of group work can be avoided or minimised by:
• spending some time to get to know and be comfortable with each other
• setting up group rules at the first meeting
• ensuring that all members get their ideas heard and considered
• breaking the project up into roughly equal tasks
• encouraging group members to volunteer for tasks that they would like to do, rather than be allocated tasks they do not want
• ensuring that all tasks are allocated to somebody
• rotating leadership and recording responsibilities
• giving each member copies of meeting logs which record promises, decisions, tasks etc. so that everyone is informed.

DEALING WITH GROUP PROBLEMS

Try to resolve problems as a group. If there are difficulties in the group, records of meetings help to establish where the difficulties lie, and make sorting them out clearer. They also act as proof of participation.

It can also be useful to make your tutor aware of serious problems, so that s/he can give advice, and so that the situation can be taken into account when the group project is being assessed. Your tutor may need to see records of group meetings to decide how to assess your group members fairly.

FIGURE 1: SUGGESTED MINIMUM INFORMATION TO BE RECORDED AT EACH MEETING.

| • Date                           |
| • Who attended                  |
| • Apologies                     |
| • Business from last meeting    |
| Today's agenda                  |
| Decisions made                  |
| • Task for each group member to go on with |
| • Any other business            |
| • Next meeting                  |
| Date, time, venue?             |
| Who will chair and take minutes?|

SOME REFERENCES ON GROUP WORK:

Collaborative learning (video recording) 1996, Gripping Films for Murdoch University, WA, produced by Judy MacCallum and Jim Macbeth.