

Learning with Others: Working and learning in groups

Chapter Contents

Introduction	153	Good questions for groups to ask themselves	156
Benefits of working in groups	154	A simple project plan	157
Learning to work together: understanding the phases of group development	154	Leadership and group work	157
Different people, different roles	155	Suggested further reading	158

Chapter Overview

- Analysing your approach to operating in groups
- Exploring behavioural balances and consequences in groups
- Understanding project management skills and group work
- Developing a group project plan
- Learning about group leadership

Introduction

Studying and learning at college or university can sometimes feel like an isolated, individual, lonely process. But learning is deeply social. From the very beginning of our lives, we learn better by interacting with other people, at least some of the time. This chapter will focus on some of the important things that are worth considering when you are learning, working or studying in groups. Group work can be really good fun, and very motivating, but it can also pose a few challenges.

As well as helping you to learn new knowledge about your subjects, group projects also provide good opportunities for you to develop a range of other skills: communication, negotiation, listening, persuasion, cooperation, leadership and conflict management can all be put to the test when you're trying to achieve something as a member of a group (Biggs 2003: 187).

Working as part of a group can feel more complicated and difficult than working on your own. But there are also lots of reasons why it is worthwhile and in any case, you will probably find



that you will be required to work in teams or groups for at least some portion of your time at college – so it is useful to consider some advice about how best to orientate yourself towards working effectively, productively and happily in groups.

Benefits of working in groups

There are three main benefits of working in groups:

- Working in groups can **sharpen your critical and creative thinking skills**, can help you to **become a more versatile communicator** and **can enhance your knowledge** in a range of different ways.
- In group work you can **draw on each group member's knowledge and perspectives**, which can frequently provide you with a clearer understanding of what you are studying.
- Groups are great for keeping you **motivated and on target** to complete the task at hand as it is harder to procrastinate when working with others.

Learning to work together: understanding the phases of group development

One of the most useful things to keep in mind when you have been assigned a group task is that any newly formed-group of individuals takes a while to learn how to work well together. That can be frustrating if you are someone who is very task focused. Have patience, particularly at the beginning. You need to create time and space for you to get to know each other a bit, to learn about the skills and ideas that each person is bringing to the table and to find a way of getting the work done that everyone is prepared to sign up to. All of this takes time. There is a well-known theory of group work developed by Tuckman (1965), who says that it is useful to think about four different stages of group development: forming, storming, norming and performing.

- **Forming:** group members get to know each other, break the ice, become familiar with everyone's different perspectives and ideas.
- **Storming:** group members brainstorm, discuss, share and sometimes clash about what the best way forward is, who should take a leadership role and how particular jobs should be done.
- **Norming:** groups settle into a pattern of activity and develop habits and routines that allow them to become efficient and speedier in the completion of tasks.
- **Performing:** groups sharpen and develop their teamworking skills in the interests of achieving group objectives and delivering their assignment effectively.

Your group project is likely to benefit if you keep in mind that there are phases of group development and that you are not going to be able to pull the whole thing together very well unless you spend time getting to know each other, discussing different perspectives, getting into a rhythm of collaboration and learning how to develop your ideas and your skills in cooperation with one another.