A SHORT GUIDE TO GROUPS AND GROUP WORK
at UOW

Some ideas for group work developed from the literature, from participants in UOW workshops, and from my own practice.

For information about assessment of group work please refer to the UOW Good Practice Assessment Guidelines


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groups and group work

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WHAT IS GROUP WORK?

A range of activities in which students work together could be described as "group work", from "buzz groups" where students have a quick discussion within a lecture or tutorial, to project teams in which students work together over a semester. The table overleaf illustrates the range of group work activities, and provides tips on their use. Whilst the processes and outcomes of group work will vary, all students have one thing in common – they need a task, a purpose and an outcome so that the learning experience will be satisfying for them. Group work relies on:

- a clear task
- effective process
- communication between members
- feedback on process and task completion
- student responsibility and accountability.

The keys to group work
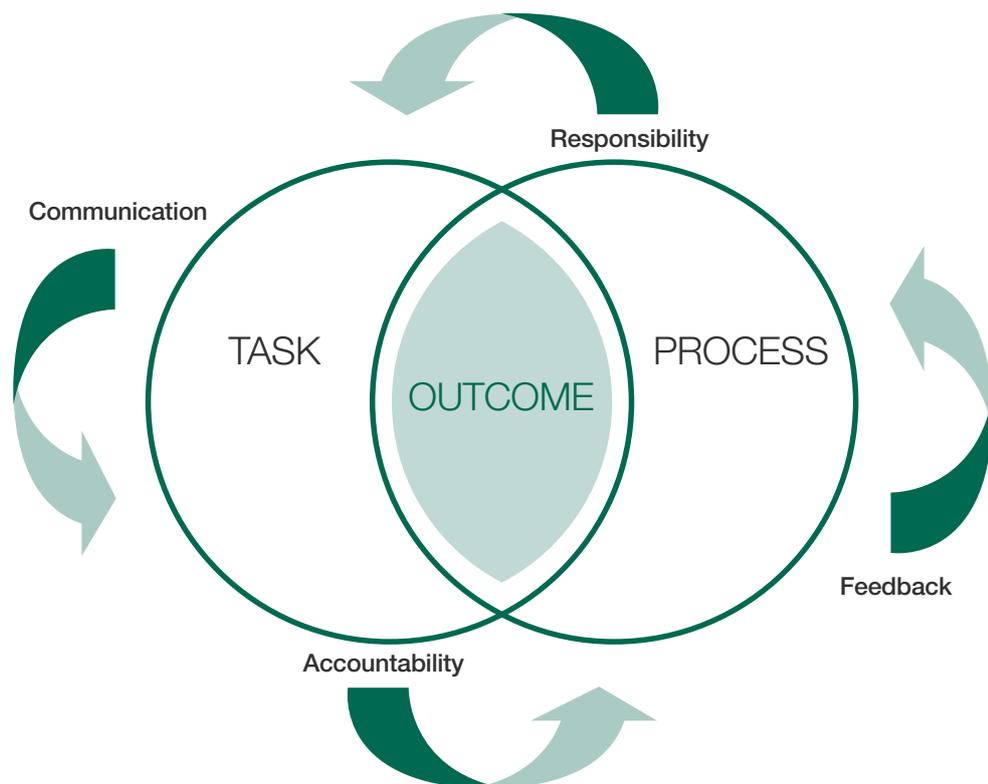
So there are some common principles that apply to all kinds of groups. I leave it to your good judgement to decide which of the suggestions offered in this resource make more sense for the type of group work you are using.

group work – a range of activities
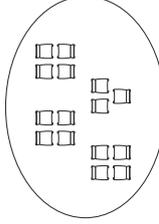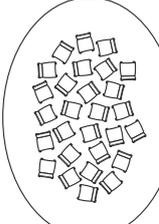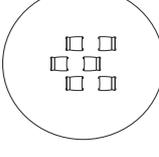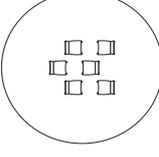
	Buzz group	Discussion group	Tutorial group	Project group	Problem-based learning
Configuration					
Where participants meet	"In class" only.	"In class" only.	"In class" only.	"In" and "out" of class.	"In" and "out" of class.
How long	2–5 minutes.	20–40 minutes.	10–50 minutes.	Semester, or part of semester. Various meetings.	Semester, or part of semester. Various meetings.
How many students	2 or 3	3–4	4–30	4–6	4–6
What	Quick discussion, sharing, on one issue.	Seeking a solution, idea, response to a significant issue.	Exploring ideas, solving problems.	Team works on one significant project with a significant outcome.	Team works on various learning outcomes over the semester.
Example	Mathematics: students explain their working of a problem to partner.	Economics: syndicate groups resolve case studies.	History: students share their analysis of out-of-class reading.	Engineering design: design a device to solve a day-to-day problem.	Clinical education: work as a team to solve problems as they arise in the curriculum.
Responsibility	Equal participation.	Members may/may not take various roles and tasks.	Tutor or student-led. Facilitator needs to control so no student dominates.	Members take various roles and tasks.	Members take various roles and tasks.
Online or web-based option		Yes.	Yes.	Yes.	Yes.
Assessment		Possibly for class participation.	Possibly for class participation.	Process and product, individual or group.	Process and product, individual or group.
Comment	Gathers lots of ideas, students get used to activity & interaction, focus on one topic, uses student experience.	Short-term activity for in-depth focus. Share knowledge, give feedback, critical thinking, creativity.	Difficult for all students to participate so use buzz group before or discussion group after. Possible to combine groups or rotate students around groups.	Time allocated for meeting in class. Monitoring of group process, milestones, roles etc.	Time allocated for meeting in class. Monitoring of group process, milestones, roles etc.

WHY GROUPS?

Group work relies on students expressing their ideas and interpretations, which requires thinking and the structuring of ideas. It is by nature active and interactive and can provide a strong motivational context if the activity is purposeful and/or experiential. Effective longer-term group work involves self-monitoring by students. So at least three of the four key principles for effective learning outlined by Biggs (2008) are supported by group work.

short-term group work:

- helps students get the idea that learning is active involvement;
- gets them thinking and expressing their ideas and listening to others; and
- eases them into more comfortable participation in larger groups.

Longer-term group work may support students in developing:

- disciplinary skills, by undertaking meaningful professional projects;
- learning skills and professional skills and attitudes;
- the capacity to give and recieve professional feedback through formative self and peer assessment; and
- higher order attributes such as empathy, decision-making, problem-solving, leadership, and conflict resolution.

"Off you go into your groups and discuss that"

Most of us have been victims of poor teaching practice at some time in our student years. Poor practice in group work includes groups with no sense of purpose or no direction, which is very frustrating. Where student groups fail, it is usually because they have not been effectively planned, structured, monitored and assessed. The responsibility to ensure groups have every chance of success lies first with the teacher.

Once the teacher has arranged the learning environment, the students' responsibilities begin – but students may have personal concerns or even fears about working in groups, and these may manifest themselves in a variety of ways. Some may not have developed their social skills, appearing too shy to speak. Others may feel the need to prove their worth by dominating the discussion rather than listening to others. To work effectively in groups they need guidance and support. Some common concerns about group work include:

- how will they get on with the others
- what they need to do
- what to say and when to say it
- knowing enough to contribute
- who will take control
- how to deal with disagreements and conflict
- how to manage the work
- how the work will be assessed
- how working in a group work will affect their marks.

A common danger in longer-term groups is when students focus on the task without considering how they will work together, keep on task, achieve their targets, get things done properly and get on together. Ineffective groups may neglect the process issues and achieve less than they should, even when there are experts in the group, because they don't have a structure to work with.

successful long-term groups

Long-term groups will be more likely to succeed if students are given a structure to:

- get to know each other
- agree on roles, responsibilities and ways of working
- cooperate and respect each other
- take responsibility for their work and their behaviour
- monitor group progress
- early in the process, report on group performance and seek solutions to problems
- evaluate their efforts
- have access to an online discussion forum or email, particularly if they live and work at a distance.

WHO WORKS TOGETHER - WHO DECIDES?

Academics often say it is best to let students decide with whom they will work – students are adults after all. Others carefully sort students into groups according to their purposes. For example, mixing groups of students who have a variety of perspectives or differing cultures, or forming groups with students of similar characteristics such as those who are seeking similar grades.

The answer lies in the purposes you want to achieve. However, there is rarely only one purpose and they sometimes seem to compete. It's your decision. Some academics tell me they ask the students and they prefer friendship groups – but observe carefully - just how many, and which, of the students are involved in the discussion about group structure? What about the students who don't have any friends? What do they think?

random allocation

Advantages	Disadvantages
All students are in the same situation, there is no possibility of bias.	Some groups may comprise students who cannot get along, unmotivated students, low achieving students.

student self selection

Advantages	Disadvantages
Some students are able to choose with whom they will work.	Some students will not be "chosen". Friendship groups may not support students in developing various professional skills.

purposeful selection

Advantages	Disadvantages
Mixed groups may support students in developing various professional skills, inter-cultural understanding, low-achieving students can become highly motivated in a group of high achievers, high-achievers develop leadership skills. Groups with similar characteristics may be highly motivating for high achievers.	You may not have enough information about student characteristics. Mixed groups may be frustrating for high achievers. Groups with similar characteristics may lead lower achievers to achieve even less. Groups with similar characteristics may not support students in developing various professional skills.

Safety first

Students may be asked to share email addresses.

They should not be asked or required to share home addresses.

PREPARING STUDENTS

Introductions

All groups go through a process in order to get to an outcome. Even in short-term discussion groups many students will feel more comfortable if they are introduced to each other before discussing the topic.

Preparation

Before longer-term group work and/or if you are going to use in-class discussion groups, start off with shorter-term group work, for example, buzz groups in which 2-3 students sitting next to each other take 2 minutes to discuss, consider, find an answer to something before moving into discussion groups of 3-5 students for 10 – 20 minutes.

Big picture first

Students need to know why the topic is important, what it relates to, how will it help them; so start with the "big picture" either before they break into groups, or structure this into the first group work activity.

STARTING OFF

You and the students need to know what is to be done, by whom, how, and by when so provide an outline of the tasks.

- What will be expected of group members? (eg, 3 meetings outside of class time).
- What they can expect from you? (eg, available to talk through group problems, help if group isn't working).
- How will the students be able to make sure that the group is working effectively? (eg, guidelines/templates for students).
- Activities they need to work through (eg, 1. introduce yourselves to each other; 2. decide on a group leader, 3. etc).
- What their different roles will be, if any.
- How long they have to complete the task.
- What they should have produced by the end of the activity.
- What they will do with their outcomes after the activity.

Feedback and Assessment of Group Work
Please check the UOW Good Practice Assessment Guidelines.

STAGES OF GROUP WORK

Groups progress through identifiable phases (Tuckman & Jensen, 1997) and students need to know about these, so talk them through with the students.

Stage 1 Formation	Stage 2 Transition	Stage 3 Working	Stage 4 Ending
Getting to know each other, breaking the ice.	Deciding who will do what, defining roles & tasks, having lots of bright ideas.	Assuming responsibility, settling down to work, producing a result, evaluating achievements.	Share and showcase student work. Provide feedback.
Use "non-threatening" introductory activities.	They should decide on tasks and process, report on progress, discuss any problems.	They should monitor tasks and process, report on progress, discuss any problems. Use Group Stages template.	Activities that consolidate learning and debrief on the group process.
Use template 1	Use templates 2 & 3	Use templates 3 & 4	Use template 4

STAGES IN CREATIVITY

One structure that works well for creative tasks is to give a divergent thinking task (eg brainstorm all the applications you can think of for this principle) followed by convergent thinking task (eg, choose the most effective application and explain the theory behind it).

Divergent
Thinking

Convergent
Thinking

What are the possibilities?

What is the solution?
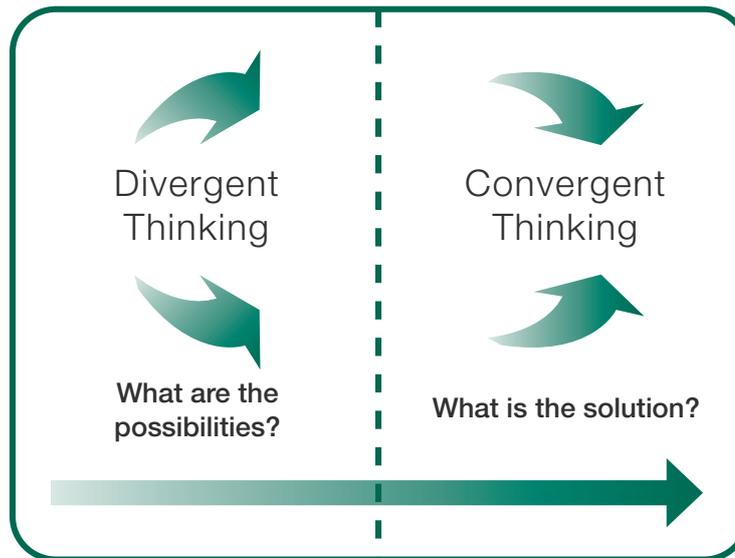
MONITORING AND COMMUNICATING

Do the students a favour and send out reminders. This is not the only activity in which students are involved and many have commitments beyond their studies. They may forget or overlook process requirements such as keeping notes of meetings.

CULTURAL ISSUES

I often think of mixed culture groups as having students from different countries, however, even students apparently from the same culture will have gender, age, socio-economic, educational, artistic, political, regional and other 'sub-cultural' differences. So it seems that good teaching practice for all group work includes teaching students to listen, respect, value and learn from their differences as much as to express their own views.

Most international students are learning in a language other than their first language and in a different context from their previous experiences. Many will have been educated in a system where learning is highly directed and structured by the teacher. For students to cross cultural boundaries, they need to be encouraged to make a deliberate effort and to see that the benefits outweigh the drawbacks. Again, discussing the purposes and advantages of group work, and structuring activities to ensure even participation, will help here.

IDEAS FOR GROUP ACTIVITIES

Introductions and icebreakers

Get the students talking to each other, introducing themselves, make sure they have all 'met' at least three other students in the class. Make introductions part of the task for the group.

Spark ideas

Use videos/DVDs, audio tapes, photographs, newspaper/magazine clippings as stimuli for discussion and to illustrate the profession in practice.

Pyramid

Students work on the first part of a problem in pairs, then the pairs form fours for the next part of the problem, then eights if it is appropriate.

Brainstorm

Students call out ideas with no discussion. Ideas are recorded on whiteboard/OHP. Follow that by using the brainstormed list, e.g., collate and list key ideas, decide on the best solution, most important problem, etc.

Share the board

Get students to use the whiteboard – to demonstrate, try things out, record group responses.

Use your imagination

You don't want to hear "not discussion groups again", so use your imagination and vary the in-class group activities. e.g., today we are looking for the fastest group, or most efficient group, most thorough group, most inventive group, most cooperative group.

Sharing group outcomes

- Get a reporter from each group to form a panel and you chair it.
- Ask for the most important point/s from each group.
- Poster plenary — they put their results on the wall and others walk around and read them.
- Ask them to give you their OHTs and you present the information fairly quickly asking for clarification.
- Ask the groups to call out the key findings and gather responses on the board.

Role play

Where relevant, ask students to role play situations, especially for professional skills practice.

Short-term regular in-class discussion groups

Keeping the same members over a period of weeks will build relationships within the groups. Varying members each week will prevent problems if students don't get on and help them get to know more people.

TEMPLATES

The following pages are copy free templates you may use for your own work.
If you would like to adapt them feel free to contact Catherine Layton for the word files.

Template 1: Lecturer resource - group work planning sheet

Template 2: Student resource - getting to know the diversity in your team

Template 3: Student record - group roles

Template 4: Student record - group tasks, timeline and agreement

Template 5: Student record - group evaluation

TEMPLATE 1

Lecturer resource - Group work planning sheet

- Describe a clear task for the groups
- What type of group? Buzz group Discussion group Tutorial group Project group
- How long will the group task take?
- How will the groups be formed?
- What will be the group process?
- How will group members communicate?
- How will group members get feedback on group process?
- How will group members get feedback on task completion?
- What are the levels of student responsibility and accountability?
- How will students be prepared?
  - » Introductions
  - » Preparation
  - » Starting off
  - » Stages of group work
- How will groups be monitored and how will communication take place?
- Which templates will be used?
- Are there any cultural issues?

TEMPLATE 2

Student resource - getting to know the diversity in your team

Imagine a team of actors trying to make a movie without a director, cinematographers, editors, makeup artists, stunt people, caterers, cleaners. A variety of skills and talents is needed for an effective team to produce a creative result. The best teams are not those in which everyone thinks the same way, works in the same way. In fact the most effective teams combine a variety of skills, attitudes and personal behaviours.

BUT - in group work this variety has the potential to drive you crazy. What about:

- people who want to get bogged down in detail when we want to get the task done?
- people who want to find out what you had for breakfast when you want to focus on the task?
- people who are totally blunt and don't seem to care about your feelings?
- people who can only see the end point when there are a million possibilities?

> **"Right, let's get this done"**
> **"No way – let's make sure everyone has had their say before we move on"**

One way to look at the advantages of variety is to talk about people's behavioural styles. For example a person in your group may always be focusing on the task ("right, let's get this done") while another might appear to be focussing on the people in the group ("let's make sure everyone has had their say before we move on").

Both have a key role to play in making sure the group works well and gets the job done. These are not people types – these people might act quite differently in a different situation. The important thing is to recognise the variety of the people in your group and make sure everyone has their say.

Another way to look at the advantages of variety is by considering two types of creative thinking:

- convergent thinking (e.g. brainstorm all the applications you can think of for this principle) and
- divergent thinking (e.g., choose the most effective application and explain the theory behind it).

Both kinds of thinking are needed in creative problem solving groups. Divergent thinking is a great asset when you are starting out - trying to work out what the possibilities are. Convergent thinking is great when you are trying to focus and come to a conclusion. Most people can do both, however, some people are stronger in one style. People who are good at divergent thinking are a great strength early on, and those who are good at convergent thinking are a great asset towards the end.

So have a chat with your group members about what kinds of skills, talents, personal approaches they bring to the group and consider the ways you will value them and deal with things that annoy you. Perhaps people can choose to take on group roles that they might enjoy. Try out a few useful phrases:

"Is this the right time for a brainstorm?"

"Let's try to focus on the issue now."

"How about we try to get as many ideas up as possible first?"

"It would be good to make sure everyone has had a chance to say something."

TEMPLATE 3

Student record - group roles

Your group will need someone in each of these roles in order to complete the project. Please identify the people to take on these roles at your first meeting.

Group name: _____Date _____

Someone to:

- follow up on our action and timeline _____
- edit our project report _____
- research the background issue _____
- develop the PowerPoint presentation _____
- make sure everyone is feeling ok about the group _____

The roles of chair and keeping a written record of meetings should be rotated.

Meeting 1   Chair _____   Recorder _____

Meeting 2   Chair _____   Recorder _____

Meeting 3   Chair _____   Recorder _____

Meeting 4   Chair _____   Recorder _____

Meeting 5   Chair _____   Recorder _____

TEMPLATE 4

Student record - group tasks, timeline and agreement

Time management is critical to success. Try to keep on task at meetings and set clear goals, actions and deadlines.

At each meeting you should:

- record progress
- review the timeline – is it still feasible?
- provide a brief progress report to tutor.

Week	Tasks and meetings	Who	By when

Group agreement

We agree to:

- contribute and share ideas and workload equally with the other group members.
- attend all group meetings.
- complete all our group tasks by the due date.
- support and encourage the other group members.
- be open to new ideas and different ways of working.
- keep the tutor informed of our progress and report any conflicts or problems.

Name _____ Signature_____ Date _____

Name _____ Signature_____ Date _____

Name _____ Signature_____ Date _____

Name _____ Signature_____ Date _____

TEMPLATE 5

Student record - group evaluation

Each team member should complete this evaluation report 3 times.
2 weeks after starting, half way through the project, and after completion.

Team member: _____

Team: _____

Date: _____

I am satisfied with the progress of our group   Yes / No

Members of the group are able to attend group meetings regularly   Yes / No

All members of the group share tasks equally   Yes / No

I am confident that we can meet our deadlines   Yes / No

Members of the group share information   Yes / No

We have a clear plan of how to complete the project   Yes / No

Our group needs assistance with the team project   Yes / No

A major strength of our group is _____

If our group has a weakness, it is _____

REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

Many of the ideas in this material have been suggested in different ways in a number of sources. In particular, I have referred to the following.

Biggs, J., & Tang, C. (2007). *Teaching for Quality Learning at University* (3rd edn.). Buckingham: Open University Press.

Brown, G., & Atkins, M. (1996). *Effective Teaching in Higher Education.* London: Routledge.

Caspersz, D., Skene, J., & Wu, M. (2006). *Managing Student Teams.* Milperra: Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia.

Exley, K., & Dennick, R. (2004). *Small Group Teaching: Tutorials, Seminars and Beyond. London:* Routledge Falmer.

Tuckman, B. W., & Jensen, M. A. C. (1997). Stages in small group development revisited. *Group and Organizational Studies*, 2, 419–427.

OTHER USEFUL MATERIALS

UOW Good Practice Assessment Guidelines
www.uow.edu.au/about/teaching/goodpractice/UOW008524.html

Safe place to be dangerous (DVD - available from Academic Development Unit collection).

Gibbs, G. (1995). *Learning in teams: a tutor guide*. Oxford: The Oxford Centre for Staff Development.

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Jaques, D., & Salmon, G. (2007). *Learning in Groups* (4th edn.). Abingdon: Routledge.