

Student SkillPack

Group Work

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STARTER LEVEL

Gower



GROUP WORK Starter Level

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Group work can cover any activity involving working with others (eg *group projects, lab work, seminars, tutorials*). Your course may assess your skills in this area.

Group work means being able to share resources, ideas and abilities. Students can learn from and help each other.

Group work effectiveness depends not on luck and who is in your group, but on individual member's skills in dealing with each other. These skills can be improved by practice. The key to success is to focus not only on end results but on how to get there.

Courses include group work because employers see evidence of group work skills as very important when recruiting graduates or higher diplomates. All jobs involve working with others.

We suggest you use this SkillPack:

- right at the start of any group work
- as you continue, to help improve your work and avoid problems.

When you have completed it, you should be able to:

Plan work

- agree realistic aims and targets in working with others on various tasks, including complex ones
- agree responsibilities and working arrangements (eg *roles appropriate for the individuals involved and the context*)
- agree resources, timescales and actions needed.

Work towards agreed objectives

- meet your responsibilities (eg *in meeting agreed outcomes, working safely*)
- obtain and effectively use resources
- work co-operatively with others (eg *exchange information to help in meeting targets, agree how to overcome difficulties*)
- agree and carry out amendments to plans.

Review work

- evaluate the effectiveness of the outcomes and the process, identifying factors which influenced both
- identify ways of improving work with others.

(Based on QCA Key Skill specifications, QCA 2000)

NOTES

1 Introduction

What sort of groups have you operated in up to now? Sporting? Social? Family? Work? Identifying what you liked or disliked about them may give you clues about areas you will enjoy (and may do well) or find difficult (and may need to improve) in course group work.



Type of group	Likes	Dislikes

2 Setting up the group

2.1 Ground rules

It is very helpful to have a set of rules ('ground rules') for how your group will operate, to set up good ways of working and to avoid problems. Following ground rules can make activities (eg *meetings*) run smoothly, and gives you some control if group members are difficult. You could use the following ground rules as they are, or agree as a group to change, add or remove items.

You could put your ground rules on the wall where all can see them, or take it in turns to monitor them.



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Suggested ground rules. amend or remove items, or add new ones

Turn up to meetings

Agree an agenda for meetings

Nobody to speak for longer than 3 minutes at a time

No interrupting

No putting others down. Criticise the ideas not the person

Encourage everyone to speak

Start and end meetings on time

Set deadlines and stick to them

Everyone to do what they agree

3 Planning

Look at 3.1 and 3.2 below before completing the plan in 3.3.

3.1 Group goals

Being clear about group goals (results or outcomes of your work) is essential. You can prevent later problems by asking each member what they think the group is supposed to be doing and achieving (eg *look carefully at any instructions you have been given*). You may need to ask your tutor to clarify what is expected.

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What do you need/want to achieve as a group (goals, results, outcomes)?	What do you personally need/want to achieve?
(eg related to the task or to how you work together)	(eg learning something, a good grade)

3.2 Planning actions and allocating tasks

On university/college courses, you may need to handle complex matters, with many elements. Planning how to manage this and how to meet your goals will avoid wasted effort and problems, and make the most of your resources. The following questions may help:

- What tasks do you need to complete to meet your goals? Where you are dealing with a complex issue (eg with several strands or a difficult problem to solve), have you identified all the possible tasks?
- How can the main tasks be sub-divided into smaller manageable tasks?
- By when must each sub-task be completed?
- Who will do which sub-tasks?
- What will you do about the sub-tasks nobody wants to do (eg negotiate, draw lots)? If you can't agree, see the Starter Level SkillPack 'Negotiating and Assertiveness'.
- Is the workload evenly distributed between group members?
- What resources do you need to carry out the sub-tasks and will you be able to find and use them in the time available (eg sources of information, computers)?
- Can you carry out the tasks in the time you have? If not, how could you amend your plans?
- If you carry out all the sub-tasks by the time agreed, will your goals be met?

To plan work, see also the Starter Level SkillPacks 'Organising Yourself and Your Time', and 'Solving Problems'.



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You could note here how you will handle meetings (eg *where you will meet, how often, how you will organise the meetings*).



4.2 Listening skills

Listening effectively to others means you can benefit from their ideas and expertise and makes them feel valued, important if you are to work as a team. You could:

- make notes on what they say to help you concentrate on what they are saying
- check with them if you have understood what they meant, or summarise what you think they meant
- look at their 'body language' for clues on how they are feeling
- avoid interrupting them
- focus on what they are saying rather than on what you are going to say next.

4.3 How you behave in groups

The following list, from Turner (1983), describes how people may behave in groups. You could use it to make notes on how you behaved in a particular group situation (eg *a group meeting*).



		Notes
Task roles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • initiates • seeks opinions • gives opinions • elaborates • co-ordinates • summarises 	
Maintenance roles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • encourages • 'gate-keeps' (keeps the group to the task) • sets standards • expresses group feelings/reactions 	
Task and maintenance roles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • evaluates • diagnoses • tests for consensus/agreement • mediates • compromises • relieves tension • jokes 	

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5.2 Dealing with difficulties

Identifying the cause of a difficulty can often help the group solve it. The following are examples of typical problems and suggested ways of dealing with them – they are suggestions only and you may have other ideas.

Problem	Possible Solutions
Uneven workload, 'passengers', people not pulling their weight	Agree who does what at the start, and write it down to avoid confusion. Ask those not doing their work why not – they may have a good reason. Tell them the effect it is having on the group. Use the Starter Level SkillPack on 'Negotiating and Assertiveness'.
Too much work involved	Look again at the project brief together – have you misunderstood? Are there more efficient ways of doing it? Use the Starter Level SkillPack 'Organising Yourself and Your Time'.
Resources not available	Plan for this right at the start. Use 'Organising Yourself and Your Time' the Starter Level SkillPack. Identify other resources or ways of doing things. Ask for help from resource providers (eg learning centre, library, computer support services). Amend your goals and plans.
Confusion	Discuss your goals as a group and keep referring back to them. Use the Starter Level SkillPack 'Solving Problems'.
Quiet group members	Ask for their views, encourage them to speak, be positive about their comments.
Disruptive group members <i>eg clowning around, negativeness, over talkative, aggression</i>	Possibilities include ignoring jokes; asking 'talkatives' to let somebody else have a say; pointing out when somebody is negative and asking for positives. Use the Starter Level SkillPack 'Negotiating and Assertiveness'.

Many difficulties can be solved by good communications between you. If you or your group tries to deal with a problem but is unable to do so you may need to seek help from your tutor. Your tutor needs to be know if things are not going well.

6 Identifying your skills and improving what you do

This chapter focuses not on other people's behaviour but on how you work with others. Your behaviour influences their behaviour and you have a better chance of changing what you do.

6.1 Evaluating what went on in the group

What is going or went well or less well in your group? This could be in terms of the results/outcomes of your work or your processes (how you are/were doing things).



What is going/went well	What is not going/did not go well	What affected this? What is/was my part in this?

NOTES

6.2 Your behaviour

Does or did your behaviour help the group be effective? Score yourself using the following scale of 1-4 where 1 is 'very helpful' and 4 is 'very unhelpful'. You can use it again after a time lapse, to see if you have changed what you do.



	1	2	3	4	
Listening to others, asking for clarification <i>(eg did you mean...?)</i>					Interrupting, putting others down
Expressing relevant views positively					Being negative, disrupting, being irrelevant
Contributing equally					Keeping quiet, dominating
Asking what others think about your contributions					Unconcerned about others' views
Pulling your weight, doing an equal part of the work					Letting others do the work, not turning up
Meeting deadlines					Missing deadlines

NOTES

6.3 Improving what you do

You could ask other group members or your tutors what they think about how you did the work and about how you behaved in the group.



Aspects I enjoy, things I'm good at in groups and want to repeat

Look at the references at the end of this SkillPack for some resources you could use to help you improve.



Aspects I find difficult, things I need to improve in groups	Actions I need to take	Resources or help I need	By (deadline)

7 References and bibliography

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- Hartley, P. (1997), *Group Communication*, Routledge
- Johnson, D. W. and Johnson, F. P. (1991), *Joining Together: Group Theory and Group Skills*, Prentice-Hall
- Rackham, N. and Morgan, T. (1977), *Behaviour Analysis in Training*, McGraw-Hill
- Turner, C. (1983), *Developing Interpersonal Skills*, The Further Education Staff College

7.1 Student skills product list

Having worked through this SkillPack you might like to know that similar structured, straightforward guidance is also available on the following topics:

- Identifying Strengths and Improving Skills
- Organising Yourself and Your Time
- Note Taking
- Gathering and Using Information
- Critical Analysis
- Essay Writing
- Report Writing
- Oral Presentation
- Visual Communication
- Solving Problems
- Seminars, Group Tutorials and Meetings
- Negotiating and Assertiveness
- Coping with Pressure
- Revising and Examination Techniques
- Improving Your Learning
- Reflecting on Your Experience
- Action Planning

The Student Skills Guide Second Edition

All of the SkillPacks listed above are gathered together and are available as a paperback workbook (0 566 08430 9).

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