

DEVELOP

Organizing group work

Group work is an activity that can form part of your blended learning environment. You can use this activity when you believe that your learners can better process and absorb the topic you are dealing with through mutual interaction and exchange, working either in pairs or in small groups.

What is the goal of group work?

Group work can have one or more of the following goals:

Educational goals (for learning):

- Deepening of the learning content
- Application of the learning content
- Active involvement of students in the learning content (e.g. running an experiment)
- Reflection and formulation on own learning / opinion
- Learning from others

Relational goals (social)

- Community building (face-to-face but also online –see below...)
- Widening of cultural horizons
- Learning to be a team player
- Negotiation and coping skills in a team

Advantages

- Empowers the learners –they are required to come up with their own schedule/strategies/solutions/content
- Makes them accountable towards the other team members
- Reduces teachers' involvement–no knowledge spoon feeding
- Increases time to formulate thoughts, internalise information and reflect on content
- Encourages sharing of knowledge, learning strategies, tools
- Prompts cultural exchange, new perspectives
- Develops time management skills

Disadvantages

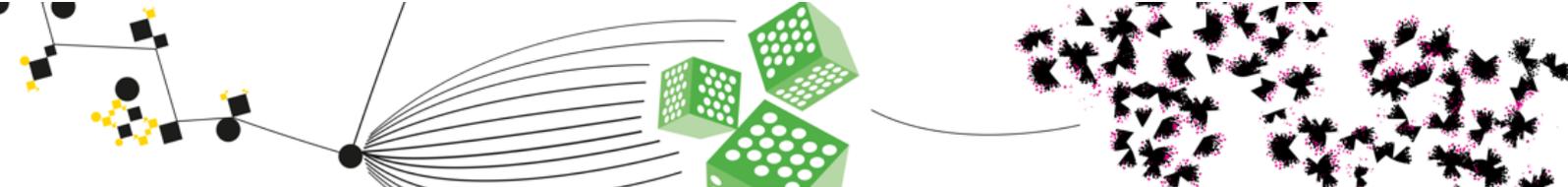
- Smaller degree of control on the teacher's part. Try to let go and trust your students' ability to direct their own learning. You can provide them with some guidance and/or facilitate a group contract (see "Steps" below).
- Some students might end up making a greater effort than others (free riders).

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Some differences between face-to-face and online group work

Group work is originally intended as a synchronous, face-to-face activity. Thanks to the availability of information and communication technology, it is also possible to work online. Below some of the characteristics of F2F and online group work are shown:

Face-to-face group work characteristics	Online group work characteristics
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Requires team members to physically meet • Promotes efficient turn taking, immediate feedback and confirmation of conceptual consensus • Increases communication: Allows for faster feedback through emotional, visual and audio contact. • Fosters a humanistic encouraging style, wherein members support and assist each other constructively • Fosters an affiliative style, wherein members are strongly committed to the group and are more prone to a constructive group style • Enhances social relations promoting team building/team spirit • High levels of communication and information sharing might positively impact creativity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increases flexibility • Operates in a twenty four hour cycle – favouring work life balance • Cooperation among different time zones • Reduces age / experience / cultural related inhibitions allowing team members to express themselves more freely • Allows for creativity, innovativeness, originality and the flow and application of new ideas as it provides an opportunity to link up more online resources. • Fosters the use of ICT and computer mediated communication systems that facilitate remote working, ensuring that members contribute seamlessly despite geographical dispersion

N.B. Real team building happens in social situations where the whole team does things together and where members can express their personality, have fun and get to know each other. A face-to-face team is going to make space for such activities more naturally. For a virtual team it is of paramount importance to meet at least once throughout the duration of the project or once a year in case of longer collaborations.

Steps

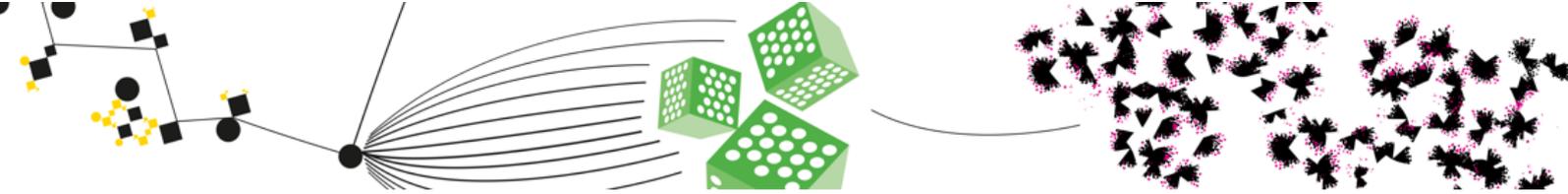
1. Decide on the goal you want to achieve through group work (see the goals)
2. Think about the practical circumstances:
 - Content adaptability to group work
 - Available time to run the activity
 - Tools available at University (Learning Management System –see below)
 - Students time zones
 - Involvement and availability of staff needed for the activity (lecturer, moderator, support staff, student)
 - Is there a dedicated space for learners to meet (e.g. library, study room)?
 - Can they actually meet (e.g. Do they live close by or do they travel from afar and meet only once a week/month in class)?

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3. Design the activity. Think about and make a decision on the following steps:

Aspect:	
1	Decide on the group work final product (e.g. Co-written article? Report? Video? Experiment? Presentation? Are you going to let them choose among pre-established options, such as the aforementioned or choose for them?)
2	Set a maximum number of participants per group
3	Decide how the work will be allocated among team members. Will it be the students' decision or yours (e.g. According to your instructions a paper's "introduction" is co-written while "discussion" and "conclusion" form an individual contribution)? If the decision is unsupervised students will need to notify you (for assessment purposes). How will they notify you (e.g. Email/LMS)? By when? Set a deadline.
4	Type of background knowledge you are going to provide your learners with for them to be able to continue the work independently (e.g. face-to-face session, video, reading material, etc.)
5	Whether to break the group work in subparts and allocate each of them a specific time frame.
6	Group work introduction session (e.g. instructions, grading, etc.)
7	Content of the following sessions -if the group work has a longer deadline
8	Type/amount of guidance you are going to provide your learners with as they work in groups. (e.g. Are you going to give them an initial rough idea of the final product or a fax simile to start from? For guidance, can they email you/see you in class only? Is there any support staff involved (for guidance/assessment)?
9	Set a deadline

4. In case of online group work consider the multiple digital collaborative tools available to you and choose the most suitable one for the achievement of your objective.
5. Check if your institution relies on a Learning Management System (e.g. Blackboard, Canvas, etc.). Such software offers simple features to facilitate the creation and management of groups both from teachers and learners side (e.g. Creates groups within a group set. Allows students to sign up for their own groups. Creates group collaborations etc.).
6. Do a test run with some of your colleagues.

Some elements to consider

- It is important to hold your learners responsible by letting them manage most aspects of their group work. However, teachers might want to impose the regular shuffling of groups/pairs. It is normal for people who work well together to stick together, yet this is not always possible in a more formal working context. Consequently they need to develop coping and negotiation mechanisms allowing them to be productive in most circumstances.
- It is also common for students to stick with colleagues from a similar cultural background. Prompting them to mix will enrich their personal and professional growth. Literature shows that mixed teams are the most successful ones, as each member brings in new problem-solving strategies. Moreover, as teamwork is more and more common in the workplace it is critical to train your learners to be successful in real working settings.

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