Supporting students’ engagement in group working

These materials might be used as supportive activities and resources, or they may be adapted to become more formally assessed components of a module (for example, as items to submit as evidence of a student group’s reflective participation in a project). Questions of equality, diversity and inclusivity (EDI) are very much implicit in all of these activities, but you may wish to adapt them so as to make them more explicit.

1) Reflecting on principles and on approaches to effective group working

Group Statement (suggested time: 20 mins)

For this exercise, project groups come up with a brief statement relating to the following (ask the group to begin their responses with the words ‘We will...’):

- The values that will underpin how the group will work together
- How often, and by what means, the group will communicate
- How decisions will be made

Follow-up (5-10 mins): Ask the groups to report back on their responses and/or join up with at least one other group to compare responses. Following discussions, give the groups a further 5-10 mins to make any amendments to their statements based on the insights and contributions of other groups.

Initial Project Planning (suggested time: 20-30 mins)

Provide groups with blank Gantt charts (www.le.ac.uk/succeedinyourstudies for examples) and ask them to map out key tasks against key deadline. In addition ask them to indicate which members of the group are chiefly responsible for each of the tasks.

Follow-up (10-15 mins): Ask the groups to report back on their Gantt charts and ensure they receive feedback/questions from at least one other group.

Anonymous scoring (suggested time: 30 mins)

Explain that the exercise is designed to facilitate honest reflection on how effectively the group is working together. They will be sharing a series of statements (A – E) relating to how their group is working. For each statement, group members allocate an anonymous score between 0 and 5, where 0 = “we’re not very effective at doing this” and 5 = “we’re brilliant this”.

The statements are:

A) Involving all group members in making key decisions about the project
B) Keeping all group members up to date with progress
C) Valuing and recognising the contribution of individual group members
D) Managing time effectively in order to make progress towards deadlines
E) Allocating tasks and responsibilities fairly and equitably
In response to each, ask the participants to do the following:

- Write the corresponding letter on the piece of card
- Write also the score of 0 – 5 each group member thinks should apply (emphasise that this is an anonymous and private exercise and results should not be shared at this stage)
- After all the statements have been scored, ask group members to put their responses into a box. Make sure they are properly mixed up inside the container and pour out the responses, asking one group member to gather together all the As, one the Bs, one the Cs etc. and to take responsibility for chairing that part of the discussion.

The next step is for the group to discuss the outcomes. Ask them to do the following:

- Where all scores are 4-5, discuss the concrete evidence they have for this
- Where all scores or 0-3, discuss how and why this might be and what they could do to improve matters
- Where there are a range of scores, discuss why differences of perception might exist (it may simply be that criteria for good and bad performance vary between group members, but even this is worth discussing) and what might be done to achieve greater levels of agreement as well as improvement.

Anticipating common problems (suggested time: 20 mins)

This exercise is designed to help anticipate some common problems during a group project and to focus on practical resolutions rather than recriminations. Cards/pieces of paper will be required, with the following common problems written on them:

- A group member has missed several meetings and is not responding to emails, texts etc. The rest of the group is unsure where they are up to with the tasks they had agreed on.
- A group member has been taking on most of the work, refusing to delegate tasks even for aspects of the project they are not directly responsible for.
- A group member tends to dominate discussions and decision-making – not necessarily in an aggressive way, but in a forceful way that the rest of the group are unsure about challenging.
- A group member is very quiet during meetings and tends not to speak unless they have to. It is difficult to tell if they are motivated and/or the project or motivated by it at all.

For each, ask the group to consider the following questions:

a) What reasons might the group member be acting in the way they are (this is designed to help avoid rushing to judgement and encourage people to view types of behaviours from different perspectives)

b) What action could the group take to deal with the problem
## Effective group-working checklist

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effective Group Working Statement</th>
<th>Y/N</th>
<th>If ‘Y’ what/where is the evidence?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We have a regular schedule of meetings in which to review progress, plan next steps. We also have an agreed means of regular communication between meetings.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We have a clear and transparent set of procedures about how we make decisions (including in instances where there are different views and perspectives).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our discussions are open, inclusive and respectful, and all group members are encouraged to contribute to the decisions made.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We have a clear set of values and principles outlining how we will communicate with each other and how we will manage differences and disagreements.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tasks and responsibilities are allocated fairly and transparently and all group members are clear on what they have agreed to do and by when.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We have clear and transparent procedures to help us manage problems and set-backs as and when these occur, with an emphasis on problem-solving rather than personal recrimination and criticism.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We have a clear project plan (which all group members have access to and which we regularly review) that identifies what tasks need to be completed, by when and by whom.</td>
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<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
3) Model agenda for project team meetings

It’s often helpful to have an agenda for the meetings as this can help you make sure you don’t miss anything and also make most effective use of precious time. There are two roles in this process which are of particular importance:

1) The Chair: this person is responsible for managing the meeting, making sure it keeps to time, keeps to the agenda and also making sure that decisions are reached according to agreed procedures (see ‘Group Working Check-list’). The group might wish to elect one chair (and maybe a Vice-Chair for times the Chair can’t make it) to chair all meetings or they might wish to take it in turns.

2) The minute/note-taker: this person is responsible for keeping brief and accurate notes of the meeting and, crucially(!), recording who is responsible for what (see ‘Suggested template for recording decisions and actions’)

Suggested Agenda

1) Apologies for absence (try to ensure you do let group members know if you can’t make a meeting)

2) Notes from previous meeting and matters arising (first agree that the notes are accurate and correct any mistakes, then report on any items recorded – especially if your initials are next to these)

3) Project plan review and update (refer to the project plan you have created and discuss if you’re on schedule and, if not, how you’re going ensure you make up for any lost time)

4) Individual updates (if not covered in item 3)

5) Review of agreed actions (the note-taker should summarise who has agreed to do what and by when)

6) Any Other Business

7) Date and time of next meeting
4) Recording notes and decisions

The following template is based on a very common format used in many organisations uses for recording decisions taken and the people responsible for carrying out these decisions (the ‘Initials’ column, below). This can be shared straight after the meeting and can provide a starting point for reviewing progress the next time the group meets.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agenda Item</th>
<th>Notes of decision taken</th>
<th>Initials</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

E.g.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agenda Item</th>
<th>Notes of decision taken</th>
<th>Initials</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>We agreed we needed to check if we would have access to sound for the group presentation as we wanted to show a video clip</td>
<td>MV</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>