

This handout is for instructors who are using group work in face to face and online teaching.



"Coming together is a beginning. Keeping together is progress. Working together is success."

--Henry Ford

Creating a Good Foundation

- **Clearly state the 'here and now' benefits of working in a group** (e.g., 'two heads are better than one') – Research shows that linking group work to the benefits for future employment is less effective than identifying the benefits for the current project.
- **Focus on relationship building from the outset of the course** – Groups are likely to work more effectively together if students feel comfortable with each other. Doing 'ice-breaker' activities (e.g., discussion questions on BBL, use Padlet for students to interact together, create quizzes and games using Kahoot) that focus also on engaging course content are good ways of getting students more comfortable interacting with each other while also moving on with the course curriculum.
- **Create incremental/low-stake tasks to build student engagement** – It can take time for people to 'warm up' to each other. Ensuring students engage in low-stake group activities during the earlier stages of the course (or cohort program), gives students the time to build relationships and feel safe together, reducing the chance of conflict when they work together on higher stake projects.
- **Time larger projects for later in the course** – Allows you time to figure out which students may/ may not work well together and gives students time to get to know each other with less pressure on 'task.'
- **Challenge any cultural stereotypes if they arise** – It's important that all students recognize if they are making assumptions about the behaviour of others based on generalizations.

- **Name the cultural norms of the Canadian lecture and create space for students to talk about any differing experiences they might have had** – This will help promote understanding of different approaches/expectations to working together and also help you understand where international students might be ‘confused’ by Canadian cultural academic norms. This is also a great opportunity for local students to challenge their own assumptions about ‘what is normal.’
- **Be intentional in how you create the groups** – Research indicates that group work is more effective when an instructor plays an active role in choosing group formation (this can include letting students choose their own groupings; the point is that the instructor needs to reflect on what is likely to work best for the given situation).
- **Be intentional in how you manage the group work** (e.g., help groups identify roles within the group, help students identify a timeline for their work, check in regularly to see how the groups are managing, build in time for students to actively reflect on the process of working together and creating the ‘end product’).

Helping Students work Effectively Together

- **Directly teach students about different communication styles** – For example, differences according to culture, personality, context, emotional state. Some people assume their way of communicating is the way others do (or should).
- **Directly teach students about group dynamics** (e.g., forming, storming, norming, performing). It’s important students understand that it takes time and effort to work effectively with others and that some conflict can be a natural part of the ‘getting to know each other’ process.
- **Give students tools for managing conflict** within the group. For example:
 - Before beginning a larger group project, ask students to identify the strengths they bring to group
 - Brainstorm with the whole class the ideal behaviors for working in a group (e.g., use Jamboard)
 - Ask each group to create a ‘contract’ they all agree on, in terms of how their group will be managed, and to set up a process for how conflict will be handled if the situation goes awry
 - If appropriate to the task, assign roles within each group, or get groups to decide themselves from the outset, who is responsible for what
 - Get students to create a timeline as a group, to help in planning
 - Give students regular opportunities to reflect on their group experiences
 - If a group *is* having problems, ensure that all the group participants have the opportunity to chat with you in private about their concerns, before bringing the group together to talk about how to move forward. Some students come from cultural backgrounds where you don’t address a problem with someone directly, rather you engage a third party to mediate
 - Mediation tip: if there is a conflict, request students to focus on *their* feelings and what outcome they are looking for, including what *they* can do to help the situation (i.e., avoiding blaming language and making ‘taking action’ someone else’s responsibility)

References / Resources

Dolan, M., & Macias, I. (2009). *Motivating international students: A practical guide to aspects of learning and teaching*. Higher Education Academy. Retrieved from <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/motivating-international-students-practical-guide-aspects-learning-and-teaching>

This is a useful general resource and delves into ways of motivating international students, along with suggestions regarding group work (p. 19) and how to help students feel included.

Faculty Focus. (2016). *Diversity and inclusion in the college classroom*. Retrieved from <https://provost.tufts.edu/celt/files/Diversity-and-Inclusion-Report.pdf>

This is a collection of articles that discuss the opportunities and challenges of creating a safe and inclusive classroom, across cultural differences.

University of Waterloo, Centre for Teaching Excellence. (n.d.). *Teamwork skills: Being an effective group member*. Retrieved from <https://uwaterloo.ca/centre-for-teaching-excellence/teaching-resources/teaching-tips/tips-students/being-part-team/teamwork-skills-being-effective-group-member>

This is a useful resource to share with students, to help them identify the skills and attributes that help create a positive group experience.