

Group Work Relationships

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Group Work – Why Bother?

Studying alone is less effective than studying with others. When you study with others, you can reinforce your learning by discussing topics, sharing ideas, questioning each other, presenting to each other and practising exam questions together. Through working in a group, each person can achieve far more than an individual could achieve alone.

Many courses at university use group work as part of the everyday class teaching. It is therefore important to develop group work skills, which include planning, negotiation, conflict resolution and evaluation. These skills also make a valuable contribution to your personal life and to your CV, therefore enhancing your employment prospects. Many groups find it helpful to study this Self Help Document and use it as a basis for developing the rules of the group.

What is a Group?

Forsyth's (2006) definition of a group is '*two or more individuals who are connected to one another by social relationships*'.

As human beings, our model for a group is the home, family or social group that cared for us since we were born. We could grow, develop and prosper but might also have found it

lackadaisical, oppressive or stifling. Many of our group skills are learned in our home environment and might even be affected by the size and composition of your family.



Group Work Concerns

In a group or a team, we can develop our ability to depend on each other, listen to each other, notice and accept differences, plan shared goals and share tasks, whilst working towards the same target. We are all in the same boat. At university, much of the everyday work and learning takes place in groups. In addition, some courses require an assessed group work project, which feels quite different to the regular experience of working in a group. The key factor is in the element of 'assessment'. It introduces anxiety to what otherwise could feel like 'play'. Many students worry that their group is not achieving enough, that they may let their peers down or that they will end up doing all the work alone. Rest assured, if you are feeling anxious about working in a group, there will be many others who feel the same way. You may not know it because people can be good at putting on a confident front.

It Helps To Know

Having some understanding of group processes can help us manage groups better. We can therefore understand what might be going on and having this understanding may enable us to do something. For example, it is common for people to experience groups as being a bit like a power struggle and it may surprise you to know that this is 'normal'.

Knowing what's taking place in the group can help reduce anxiety, because we can think better about our group. Knowledge and understanding of assertiveness and social anxiety can come in handy too, because we can then better imagine what might be in the mind of the others.



Skills

To work well in a group, we need specific interpersonal skills. It can be motivating to share ideas and work together. The necessary skills include: active listening, not interrupting, taking turns, planning, sharing, explaining, encouraging and evaluating. You will probably possess many of these skills already and even if you do, you can use the group and other experiences to develop them.

Attitudes

There are some important attitudes which help us to work well in groups: being warm and friendly; being encouraging; respecting the thoughts and feelings of others; respecting our own thoughts and feelings. Rogers (1951) specified three core conditions for effective communication: congruence, acceptance and empathy.

- Congruence has to do with authenticity, truthfulness and sincerity. It means expressing yourself and speaking about your experience. Your experience matters as much as the experience of others.
- Acceptance is accepting a situation and other people without trying to change things. It means trying to be non-judgemental about other people, though this does not mean putting up with inappropriate behaviour.
- Empathy is about understanding, an ability to experience emotions that match another person's emotions, or to try to imagine sensitively, as if you were in the other person's shoes and coming from their reference point.

Task Focus

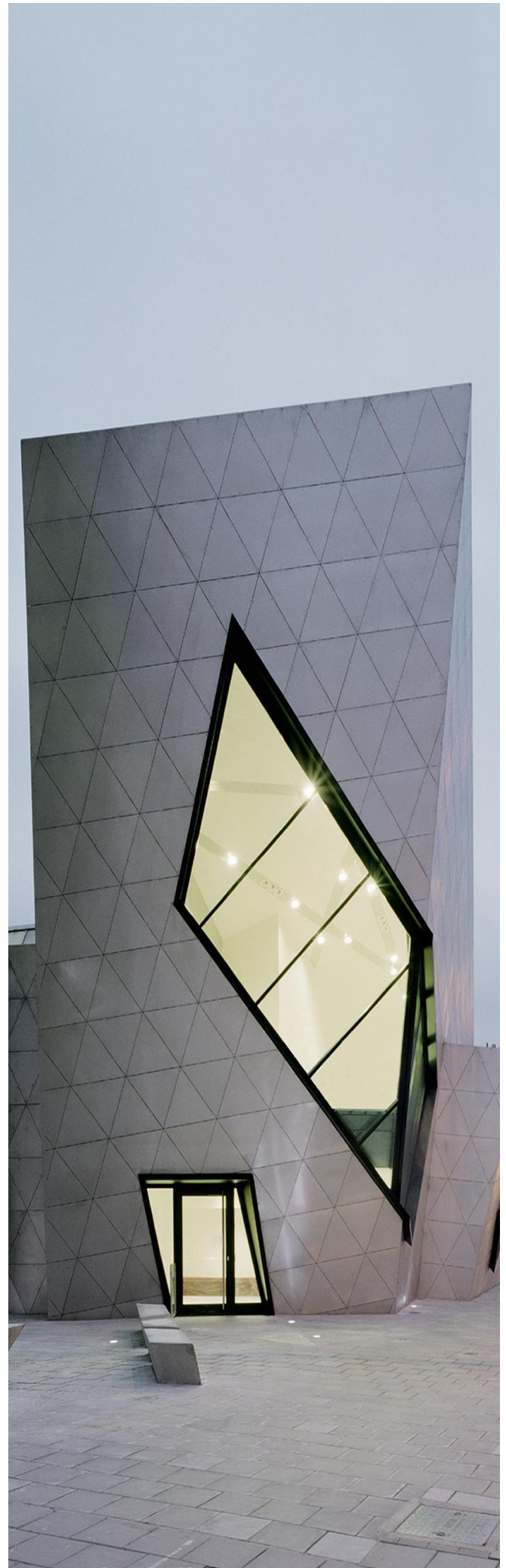
The psychologist Wilfred Bion (1961) described two distinct types of groups that he called the Work Group and the Basic Assumption Group.

In a **Work Group**, the group works individually and together towards a shared goal. The group and its members keep working on a task, which is focused on the goal, e.g. the team and the players in the football game; the rescue team. The study groups has a task to get on with. This is what the group needs to focus on and the group will be more successful if its members stay on task. It is not a social occasion and it's not an opportunity for gossip.

In the **Basic Assumption Group**, the work goal has changed to 'anti-work' – stopping the group from working towards the original shared goal. This can happen early or late in the group's life; it can also be automatic and created without the group's understanding. This is worth remembering, because if things are not happening as planned, there might be deeper forces at work.

Bion believed that the 'basic assumptions' generated in a group were of three types:

- **Dependence** - Where the group members hope that someone else, e.g. the group leader, will solve all the problems.
- **Fight or Flight** - The 'fight' occurs when group members spend too much time and effort in negative and unfocussed conflict. While disagreement about ideas is no bad thing, there can be personal disagreements, which get in the way of ideas. The 'flight' occurs when a member feels unable to cope with the group and either withdraws or leaves.
- **Pairing** - This might be noted when waiting for a "rescue" to take place or a "miracle" to happen. It might also be noted when members hope that a couple of people will get together to do the work, to complete the task or reach the goal for us. Pairing also takes place when some group members 'gang up' against others. The battle doesn't have to be major but such pairing will undermine the efforts of the group to complete its task.



It is important to have a clear understanding of the task and the final goal for the group project. This is usually the first issue for the group to resolve and; if things are not clear; it may need involvement from your tutors. Never assume that what's clear to you is the same for others and be willing to share your understanding so that the discussion can help others in your group.

Reflection

For the group to be at its best, it is essential to create opportunities for reflection, in a positive manner and with the group's goal in mind. Every meeting should begin with a statement of what has to be achieved and end with a statement about:

- What has been achieved in the meeting and, if appropriate, give encouraging comments to each other.
- What preparation is needed for the next meeting.
- Deciding follow-up tasks for the group members.

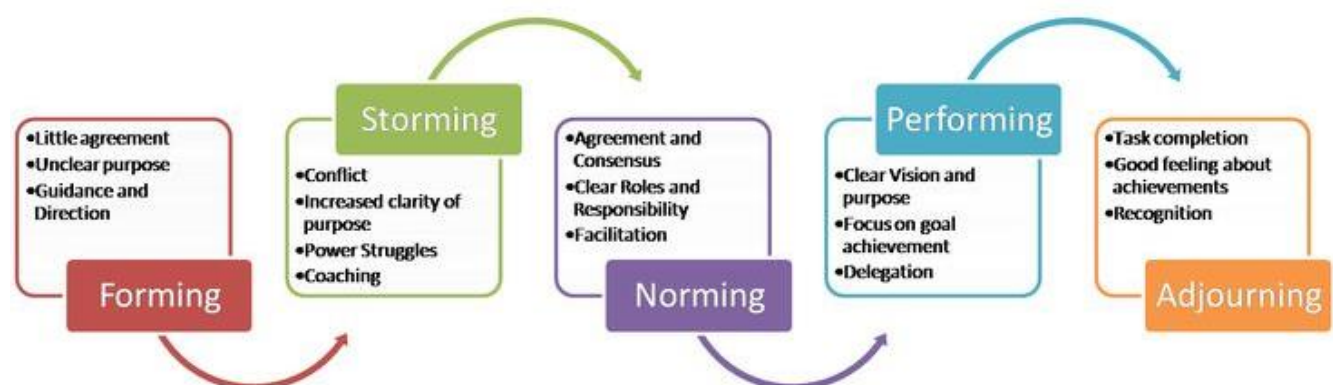
During reflection, the group considers what is going well and what can be improved (and how). Such reflection increases motivation and helps the group to stay focussed. Reflection also creates time for the 'problems' to be named and addressed.

If a conflict or an impasse is created, it is helpful to remember that the group should work to bring about change. One way of doing this is to return to the goal and purpose of the group and to name all the things which are obstructing these. This is scary but essential and the process can be aided by behaving in line with the attitudes described above.

How Does A Group Develop?

In the reflection referred to above, it is useful to reflect periodically on how the group is getting on. If you compare the group's situation to the following model, it may help you get an idea about what is taking place in the group, what needs to change and what might happen next.

Bruce Tuckman (1965) developed this model as a way of explaining the development of a group. He speaks of four stages: (a) Forming, (b) Storming, (c) Norming and (d) Performing.



Forming is the stage when the group first comes together. Everybody is very polite and possibly uptight. Conflict is seldom voiced directly. It might get expressed in an underhand and personal way. Since the group is new, the individuals will be guarded in their opinions and

generally reserved. This is particularly so in terms of the more nervous and/or subordinate members who may never recover. The group tends to defer to a large extent to those who emerge as 'leaders'.

Storming is the next stage. I will describe this at its most extreme and it is important to say, that many groups which follow the principles of this document, may not experience this. During the 'storming' stage, all hell can break loose and the leaders are lynched. *Not literally*. Factions form, personalities clash, no-one concedes a single point without first fighting tooth and nail. Most importantly, very little communication occurs since no one is listening and some are still unwilling to talk openly. True, this battle ground may seem a little extreme for the groups to which you belong, but if you look beneath the veil of civility at the seething sarcasm, invective and innuendo, perhaps the picture comes more into focus.

Then comes the **Norming**. At this stage the sub-groups begin to recognize the merits of working together and the in-fighting subsides. Since a new spirit of co-operation is evident, every member begins to feel secure in expressing their own view points and these are discussed openly with the whole group. The most significant improvement is that people start to listen to each other. Work methods become established and recognized by the group as a whole.

And finally, **Performing**. This is the culmination of hard work and endurance. The group has settled on a system which allows for a free and frank exchange of views. There is a high degree of support by the group for each other and its own decisions.

Having thought about the theory of groups, let's now think how to make the most of your opportunity of group work. Please click on the link here to the 10 Top Tips For Group work.

Helpful Tips For Group Work

1. **Read** - Read and discuss this document in your group. It pays to take time to plan at the start. Read your shared group task and goal and set time aside in the meeting to discuss it with each other.
2. **Task** - Clarify the shared task and final goal, and check that you have a common understanding of it. It would create chaos on a football pitch if the players didn't know they were playing football and where to aim the ball.
3. **Plan** – Draft a skeleton plan for the individual tasks which need to be done to reach the shared goal. Clarify even the smallest tasks. Look at the strengths of the people in the group. Allocate responsibility for the tasks, using people's strengths and discuss what help is needed for the other tasks which nobody wants to do. The unpopular tasks must also be achieved. Have "A PIE"
 - Assess what's needed.
 - Plan who will do what.
 - Implement your plan.
 - Evaluate how it's going.

Allocate the tasks and remember to plan when, how and by whom the presentation will be made.

4. **Leadership** - Consider what might be the leader's tasks and responsibilities, for example, to be the person who checks that the venue is available for the meetings, deals with apologies from those who cannot attend, plans the 'agenda' and keeps time in each meeting. Vote for or elect a leader who wants the role and who will be good in the role.
5. **Meetings** - Set a regular time, place and length of meeting (no more than 2 hours) and make clear what will be done if someone cannot attend. Agree a 'Code of Conduct' for the group that is agreeable to all. Reflect what you want from the meeting. Ensure that the quietest people have a say too, and if you are a quiet person, remember to work on coming out more!
6. **Deadlines** - Set agreed deadlines for the individual tasks. And an overall deadline for the whole project!
7. **Conflict** - Plan in advance how the group will resolve conflict. Often it's best to agree that we talk with the person we have the conflict with as soon as possible (and not with everyone else). Agree to use the word "I", e.g. making statements such as: "When you do this, I feel". Name calling is not helpful, e.g. "You are a *** something unpleasant". Apologise if you have upset someone and agree to disagree if need be. It is good to own up to your mistakes.
8. **Impasse** - Check common understanding, don't assume. Focus on the task and clarify it, and then try to see it from each other's viewpoints. Debate. Emphasise commonality, respect difference, value opinions. Decide how long you want to debate and then if no compromise is reached, agree to toss a coin!
9. **Evaluate** - Set time in each meeting to monitor the progress. Avoid gossip, bitching etc. but offer your help if someone has not achieved their task. Review the final plan by whom, how, when the project is handed in and or presented.
10. **Complete** - Arrange a last meeting, perhaps after the presentation of your work, where you share success. Evaluate the whole experience giving everyone a turn to say two positives and two negatives about their own experience of working in the group. These comments are not personal about each other.

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