

# GROUP FORMATION

## Forming multicultural teams

Group formation is a key challenge in Problem-Based Learning. All students want to work with peers who share their academic ambition and capacity as this is a way to guarantee that you receive a grade for the joint project that reflects your contribution and competence satisfactorily. Not surprisingly, many students therefore choose to play it safe when forming teams, opting for project partnerships with peers who are similar in terms of culture, language, educational background and academic capability (cf. *Introduction*, p. 10).

Working with new people is generally regarded as 'risky business' in a PBL-group, particularly at MA level, where everyone wants to obtain a good grade and may worry about time spent explaining to newcomers from other programmes, institutions or countries how an 'Aalborg project' works. But did you ever consider that these 'strangers' possess valuable new insights that could enhance your team performance? That you may actually be losing out on something important because you always gang up with the people you know from your BA programme?

At Aalborg University students frequently assume responsibility for forming project groups, and this is a good thing if we want to adhere to the PBL principle of student-centered learning. However, what we also see when looking at the groups formed in AAU's international programmes is that many teams are relatively small and mono-cultural. We believe that this can be ascribed to the use of self-selection as the principal strategy for group formation.

Self-selection has advantages, enabling the formation of teams that can meet the requirements of work effectiveness and easy communication, but such autonomy comes at a price, causing many to neglect the opportunity that international programmes provide for cross-cultural relationship building and learning. In the remaining part of this document, we introduce four approaches to team formation, inviting you to reflect on the gains and pains associated with each of these.

## Team formation strategies

Most students have some experience with teamwork when they commence their studies at Aalborg. This means that you have already been involved in processes of team formation, whether this was for the purpose of creating discussion groups in class or engaging in collaborative assignments such as a project. Did you ever consider why teams were formed in a particular way? Who was responsible for team formation –the students or your teacher?

We have identified four approaches to team formation, which differ in terms of the degree of *autonomy* given to students as well as the importance attached to group *diversity*. For each of the four strategies, we have listed advantages and disadvantages characteristic of the teams formed.

1) *Self-selection* means that students can form their own teams. Often programme coordinators will set a deadline before which students should submit a form containing the names of group members. In some programmes, academic staff attempt to facilitate the process by inviting students to attend match-making seminars. But participation is voluntary, and there is no requirement that teams include peers from diverse cultural, linguistic or educational backgrounds.

Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students generally prefer to choose their own project partners</li> <li>• Students are able to seek out partners with a similar academic level and ambition</li> <li>• Group processes are often more effective when students know each other</li> <li>• Efficient communication, particularly when all have the same native language</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-selection tends to result in monocultural teams</li> <li>• De-selection of 'unattractive Others' (e.g. minorities, international students)</li> <li>• "Siloing" of workloads; group members can specialise in certain areas (e.g. Method or Theory sections)</li> <li>• Limited cross-cultural knowledge sharing and learning</li> </ul>

2) *Random groups* are formed by lecturers, who will allocate students on the basis of a simple principle such as counting (groups 1-2-3-4 etc.) or names. Many have tried this in class where it is a common way to quickly form discussion groups. But the strategy is also valuable in a cohort where students are new to an institution or a programme and therefore lack the knowledge to form their own teams (e.g. 1<sup>st</sup> semester or 7<sup>th</sup> semester MA). In such situations, the rationale behind random allocation is to further interaction and integration.

Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensures that students cannot handpick peers known from earlier projects</li> <li>• As long as there is a minimum of diversity in class, this will result in multicultural groups</li> <li>• Students develop their capacity in areas such as team building and development</li> <li>• Team processes are transparent, as no roles and routines can be taken for granted</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Many students dislike being allocated in groups at random</li> <li>• Random allocation challenges the idea of PBL as a student-centered process</li> <li>• Ambitious students may obtain lower grades, while less ambitious students can free-ride</li> <li>• Time-demanding as students will need to get to know one another + build their team</li> </ul>

3) *Demographic profiling* focuses on all groups achieving a diversity profile matching the variation found in a cohort in terms of nationality, age, language, gender, and ethnicity. Academic staff will define a set of criteria that all teams have to meet in order to be approved as work units. To do so, lecturers will need knowledge about the demographics of their cohort, which can be collected by using a diversity questionnaire. The responsibility for team formation can be assumed by staff or left to the students, who will be encouraged to explore the diversity found in their class.

Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• An element of self-selection can be maintained, enabling students to seek partners with a similar academic and level</li> <li>• A minimum of diversity is present in all groups, reflecting the make-up of the student cohort</li> <li>• All groups have to build a team culture inclusive of linguistic and cultural differences</li> <li>• Teams provide an opportunity to develop intercultural competence + understanding</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May consolidate stereotypes, foregrounding linguistic or cultural 'Otherness'</li> <li>• Difficult to use in a cohort with limited socio-cultural diversity</li> <li>• Might cause the neglect of other forms of diversity, e.g. previous education or academic discipline</li> <li>• Teambuilding will depart from 'cultural differences', not a shared interest or problem</li> </ul>

4) The *capabilities* approach shares with demographic profiling a concern that all teams contain a minimum of diversity. However, variation is here determined by task requirements, which means

that groups are looking for variation in terms of discipline, technical/IT skills, professional experience, communicative competence and methodological knowledge. Such processes of group formation imitate practices in the workplace where teams are established to perform specific job tasks. Groups may be formed on the initiative of either staff or students.

<b>Advantages</b>	<b>Disadvantages</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Group formation departs from the task, foregrounding important skills and resources</li> <li>• An element of self-selection is maintained as students can select partners with a similar academic and level</li> <li>• Develops teams' awareness of and ability to use group members' capabilities</li> <li>• Imitates workplace practices where technical and professional skills often determine team formation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Requires knowledge of tasks prior to team formation, which may compromise students' freedom to formulate their problem</li> <li>• Academic staff will need to play an active role, which could undermine the principle of student-centered learning.</li> <li>• Can reinforce a practice of "siloeing", encouraging students to specialise in certain areas</li> <li>• If no demographic diversity is required, students may choose to group with peers from the same cultural/linguistic background</li> </ul>

### **What was the experience in your team?**

Were you involved in deciding how teams were formed on your course? Probably not, as in most programmes a semester coordinator will determine what strategy should be employed, leaving students and supervisors with only limited influence on this aspect of multicultural teamwork. However, based on the experience now gained, you may want to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the strategy adopted in your programme, reflecting critically on the impact, good and bad, that this has had on your group work.

Some questions for you to consider:

- How were teams formed in your programme? How would you rate the approach chosen in terms of 1) student autonomy and 2) diversity within groups?
- What was the predominant type of team formed in your programme, monocultural or multicultural? To what extent can this be ascribed to the approach to team formation?
- Look at the advantages listed for the different types – do you recognise any of these from your group process? Did you see other advantages?
- Now look at the disadvantages – did you experience any of these? Did you encounter other challenges that you would like to add?
- Would you have liked a different approach, for instance one ensuring a greater degree of autonomy or more diversity in your group?
- Based on what you know now, would you recommend any changes to the team formation strategy used in your programme?