

## Group work

Successful group work is dependent on good collaboration, good project and time management and an inclusive and welcoming group culture where it is safe to make your contributions and voice your opinion. These are no small demands for a group of students with different educational, social and cultural backgrounds, who may not have engaged in collaborative group processes with an educational purpose before. Often the students do not know each other and will need to learn and communicate by means of a foreign language. To deal with such daunting prospects some tools can be used to facilitate and scaffold the process.

### Who are we?

First of all it is helpful to get to know each other's individual ambitions and expectations as well as resources for the project work. The following questions can help elicit the individual group member's tacit or explicit thoughts:

- What is particularly interesting in this project for me?
- What do I expect or wish to learn from this project? – in terms of working processes, collaboration, and discipline-related knowledge and skills?
- What is my level of ambition in terms of grades?
- What do I expect from the group?
- What do I offer to the group?

These issues are important to discuss in the group from the very start in order to create a mutual understanding and define a common, realistic framework for the group's work. Based on the discussions and conclusions the group can make a first draft of their agreement on the group's goals and objectives. The next step is to go into more detail about how the group will work and interact together – in what is often termed *code of conduct*, or *social codex*.

### Code of conduct

Groups may draw up a contract determining the framework for group behaviour, dealing with what is acceptable behaviour for group members, and how conflicts and disagreements are dealt with in the group. Such a 'contract' may be termed a *code of conduct* and can be seen as a dynamic document, which means that it may be revised and supplemented with amendments if the need arises. Typically the document may deal with topics, such as:

- Group meetings (e.g. how often, duration)
- Expected degree of participation
- Acceptable reasons for absence (e.g. own or child's illness)
- Keeping deadlines
- Workload

Again it is important that the agreement is in fact the outcome of a joint discussion and as such states the shared values of the group. In this way the group will be explicit about group culture and rules of behaviour. The document will evolve over time as the group finds the need to address issues not included in the original 'contract'. When drawing up the code of

conduct it is also important to discuss the consequences of a breach of the agreement. In this connection it is important to understand that having such an agreement means that it is easier to address issues such as a member's lack of participation or repeated failure to meet at the appointed time, which might otherwise be difficult or embarrassing to confront the perpetrator with face-to-face. Repeated, minor offences can influence the group climate, and it is therefore helpful to have a way to legitimately address the problem. With the code of conduct at hand the behaviour can be discussed and dealt with in relation to the agreement which all members took part in formulating.

A code of conduct can therefore help in several ways by regulating behaviour, stating the cultural values of the specific group and making transparent mutual expectations regarding collaboration.

### Effective communication

In multicultural groups an important point of awareness is the use of language. The polite and inclusive way is always to speak in the *shared language*, often English. During breaks, it might be tempting to speak in your mother tongue but it is essential to keep the conversation in the common language. Firstly, so that no one might feel that they are the subject of a conversation they do not understand, and secondly, to keep the conversational 'room' open for others to join.

Some problems in group work arise because of an unwillingness to listen to what another person has to say when issues are discussed. Good ideas, important details and arguments may be overlooked because the group do not practice *active listening*. Active listening means:

- Letting the speaker speak
- Communicating on the other's premises
- Withholding judgment until all ideas/contributions are on the table
- Asking relevant and clarifying questions
- Avoiding leading questions
- Showing understanding and respect for the other's opinion

Only after you have actively listened and understood the speaker's message, can you start the discussion.

Another aspect of effective communication in relation to group work relates to *writing processes* and how they may benefit group processes. During group meetings a 5 minutes break for reflective writing on the issue at hand can facilitate brainstorming processes. This allows all group members a short preparation time before a joint process and may thus bring more voices and ideas forth. Furthermore, it is a good idea to start group discussions from a written presentation submitted by a group member prior to the meeting. The result of discussions (and meetings) should always be summarised and documented in the group's minutes and thus be the product of a shared negotiation of meaning.

### Avoid Group think

Doing PBL project work involves wide range of decision-making processes and, as indicated above, the modes of interaction, communicative behaviour and group culture as a whole create a foundation for decision-making processes. If the group culture is not inclusive and does not welcome critical reflection and considerations there is a risk that the phenomenon of 'group think' may occur.

Group think is "a mode of thinking that people engage in when they were deeply involved in a cohesive group, when members striving for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraised alternative courses of action." (Janis, 1982, cited in Riccobono et al, 2015).

So, if the members of a group are so concerned with keeping the good social climate in the group that they hesitate to bring forward their alternative ideas or interpretations, we talk about group think, which research has shown impact group performance negatively (Ibid). Therefore, it is important to be conscious of the risk of group think when you seek to establish a well-functioning group with a good social climate. What is important is to build a group culture that actively seeks constructive critical reflection as part of the work process. This means welcoming all contributions as they can help to discover e.g. flaws in the line of argumentation, misunderstandings, or indicate new ways of understanding the problem. Such an approach may be described in terms of 'a critical friend', who is to be considered as exactly that, a friend who seeks to ensure the quality of the project by asking constructive, critical questions.

### Reference

Riccobono, F., Bruccoleri, M., Grössler, A. (2015) Groupthink and Project Performance: The Influence of Personal Traits and Interpersonal Ties. *Production and Operations Management*. 2015, pp. 1-21. ISSN 1059-1478

@ 2017 Annie Aarup Jensen, Kirsten Jæger, Lone Krogh og Hanne Tange