How to Survive….. Working in groups

If you tell a class of students they’re going to do group work you can almost hear the collective moaning. But there are a range of reasons that group (or ‘team’) assignments are used at UWA:

- Improve ‘core skills’ of problem-solving and communication
- Promote active learning
- Expected by employers
- Boost productivity (get more done)
- Increase effectiveness

Successful group work also means successful group meetings (it’s no good splitting the work 6 ways and never seeing each other again!). You also need to:

- Set group aims and objectives
- Allocate roles
- Establish a timeframe & deadlines
- Agree on rules and future meetings

There’s always one…

A group of psych students were making reasonable progress with their assignment. However one person in the team was often late for meetings and contributed very jumbled bits of writing that weren’t much use. The other team members were getting more and more annoyed but no one wanted to say anything.

In the end they decided to ask him which part of the assignment he wanted to do. It turned out he’d never been very good at writing but he’d be much happier doing all of the statistics for the group (which no one else wanted to do anyway!).

The group didn’t let their project grind to a halt because of one person. They found out what everyone's strengths were and used them to the benefit of the group assignment.
Appreciating group dynamics and differences

Whether you are allocated a group or get together with your friends – the key to good group work is remembering that everyone is different and that a mix of personalities and talents makes a more successful team! Most groups need:

- **A leader or chair** – not the ‘boss’ but coordinates the group and gathers everyone’s ideas about what needs to be done
- **A timekeeper** – sets deadlines, schedules meetings and monitors progress of the group
- **A note-taker** – keeps track of group meetings, records what everyone has agreed to do, collates contributions and keeps all team members informed
- **A finisher** – edits the final draft, fills in any gaps and tidies presentation

Roles may be split or combined. These people should also be involved in aspects of the research and writing, depending on the number of people in your group.

Understanding and appreciating cultural differences is also crucial in surviving group work. Remember that not everyone may have the same first language or background as you.

Other useful resources:

- BOOK – Rabow, J. et al. (1994) Learning through discussion (LL&RS Resource Area CS400)
- UWA Learning Skills Workshop – ‘More talk more fun: Surviving Group Work’ in Week 7

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