WORKING IN GROUPS?
Introduction
Increasingly students are expected to work in groups and learning in groups has been shown to be an effective and valuable strategy. Group working carries the added value of having peer support, sharing ideas, knowledge and workload and enabling students to learn co-operatively. Many employers consider group-working, group leading and collaborative skills to be important *transferrable skills*\(^1\) for graduates from all programmes and some professional bodies (such as Engineers Ireland) have included such skills as essential outcomes for all accredited programmes. Potential negative aspects of group working include issues around equitable sharing of work load, the problem of ‘carrying passengers’ i.e. group members who do not contribute, perceived issues with the allocation of a single group grade for a group assignment and the kinds of conflict which can arise with groups. While all of the above are valid concerns, many of them exist when any group or group forms including in the workplace and developing the skills required to manage them will be a valuable professional tool!

This unit will look at various aspects of group work both as a learning and as an assessment strategy. It will discuss the various stages of group existence, the advantages of, and problems with, group working, the various roles associated with group members and how to handle conflict in groups.

Learning Objectives
On completion of this unit you will understand:

- The value of group working
- The advantages and disadvantages of working in groups
- The different stages of development through which groups pass
- The issues which can cause conflict in groups and strategies to resolve it

\(^1\) Transferrable skills are those non-disciplinary skills such as team working, presentation, report writing among others which are considered to be essential for all graduates today.
Group Working

Learning in groups is known as co-operative or collaborative learning and it has been shown many times that students who get actively involved in what they are studying learn more than those who are passive (only taking information through lectures etc.). Indeed entire approaches to learning are being developed which rely almost entirely on small groups of students (8-10) learning all relevant material through collaboratively addressing a particular ‘problem’ or trigger, with the lecturer playing the role of a facilitator. Known as Problem Based Learning (or PBL), this approach and its many variations is becoming more popular as a strategy to facilitate deep learning. Students learning through PBL do not have formal lectures but progress through an entire module through collaboratively addressing a problem, deciding what needs to be researched to ‘solve’ that problem, conducting independent research and sharing their findings with the other group members.

It is likely that during your time in DCU you will experience many different group-based learning approaches. In some modules you will follow a model similar to PBL, in others you might occasionally form groups to discuss particular issues or ideas and sometimes you might be required to form groups solely to complete a continuous assessment assignment.

Advantages of Working in Groups

- Collaborative learning involves active learning. When students get actively involved in the material they are studying deeper learning and understanding usually result.
- Students feel less isolated and alone and, especially at the beginning, they have support at the ‘where do I start’ stage.
- Depending on the task it may be possible to divide out components and share work load.
• Peer learning (learning from each other) has been shown to be a highly effective learning strategy.

• Working successfully in groups assists in the development of transferable skills sought by most employers.

Disadvantages of Group Working

• Individual students will have less control over the overall task than if they were completing it alone.

• There is always a risk of group members who are overly dominant, who contribute too little, who fail to participate effectively.

• Individual students, especially high-achievers, often feel that they could have attained a higher mark had they worked alone.

• If only a group mark is used in group assignments there can be resentment if all members did not contribute equally.

• Students sometimes see group commitments such as meetings and agreeing deadlines, deliverables etc as an added burden on top of having to complete the task itself.

How Groups Are Formed

Frequently students are simply told that they must form a group of a certain size in order to complete a particular task. That task is usually (but not always) a piece of assessment which will be graded. In some instances lecturers will give you certain criteria to adhere to in forming your groups but often the group members are left up to you to decide. Below is depicted the difference between what usually happens when students choose their own groups and when lecturers use some criteria. When students form groups, especially early on, such as in 1st year, frequently they form groups with friends or people they get on with. This can lead to what is termed ‘Homogenous’
groups where there is a certain similarity among group members, for example all male, all female, all from a particular option subject etc. There may also be similar personality types which can lead to conflict (see later section). When some criteria are applied to group formation Heterogeneous Groups are more likely to result, with a greater level of variety or diversity present. This may mean a gender mix, a cultural mix, a mix of discipline or options etc.

Because it is often left to you to choose your own groups, there are some things you should consider:

- Your friends are not always the best people to work with. It may be easier to be distracted by each other and similar personality types may compound problems. It may also be more difficult to insist that friends deliver their fair share and when conflict arises the friendship may suffer for a long time after the group has ceased to be!
- It is useful to have a mix of personalities and perspectives and this will be important when roles and responsibilities are assigned.
- If possible you should look to the strengths which people bring to a group and try to ensure a mix.
In all groups it is important that you agree and adhere to ‘Rules of Engagement’ (see later section).

**Group Development**

All groups have been shown to go through recognised stages of development (shown below).

**Phases of group development**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Group Task</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Forming</td>
<td>Define purpose, Determine objectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Storming</td>
<td>Define task requirements, Determine &amp; accept roles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norming</td>
<td>Establish ground rules, Determine consequences, Agenda setting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performing</td>
<td>Monitor performance, Provide feedback, Apply consequences</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

1. **Forming**

The initial phase of development is known as ‘Forming’ and this is where a group will examine its reason for existing. During this early stage the group will focus on agreeing its purpose and what its key objectives are. When a group has been formed for the purpose of completing a particular task such as an assignment it is important that their purpose is understood. For example it is at this stage that the group should be clear on things such as marks allocation, deadlines, deliverables required, formats etc. If any ambiguity exists, or group members disagree at this stage, clarity should be sought from your lecturers.
2. Storming

The next phase is known as ‘Storming’ and is usually associated with actually addressing how the particular task will be tackled. This is where you will agree the requirements associates with the task or assignment, usually breaking it into sub-tasks or components. Again, should ambiguity exist or disagreement arise regarding the tasks, you should seek clarification. Issues which often arise at this point, especially with respect to graded assignments, include whether different group members can take responsibility for different sub-tasks or components with all components coming together to form the final piece (report, system, product etc) or whether each group member must contribute to all aspects of the task. At this point it is usual for group members to agree the roles and responsibilities associated with completing the task and who will carry out what. In addition to the roles associated directly with completing the task, groups usually need, at a minimum, a Chair and Scribe or Secretary. The Chair should agree to manage the group meetings so that all members have an equal say in contributions and decision-making. The Chair may also send out reminders before meetings and when deadlines are looming. The Scribe should keep notes of each meeting and distribute them for agreement to all group members. A fair distribution of work is to rotate the role of Chair and Scribe from one meeting to the next.

Some common roles and their associated responsibilities are defined below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACTIONS</th>
<th>WHAT IT SOUNDS LIKE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>DISCUSSION</strong></td>
<td>&quot;LET'S COME BACK TO THIS LATER IF WE HAVE TIME.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>LEADER/MANAGER/TIMEKEEPER/CHAIRPERSON</strong></td>
<td>&quot;WE NEED TO MOVE ON TO THE NEXT STEP.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• DIRECT THE SEQUENCE OF STEPS.</td>
<td>&quot;SÉAN, WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT THIS IDEA?&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• KEEP YOUR GROUP &quot;ON-TRACK.&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• MAKE SURE EVERYONE IN YOUR GROUP PARTICIPATES.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• WATCH THE TIME SPENT ON EACH STEP.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RECORDER/CHECKER/REPORTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• ACT AS A SCRIBE FOR YOUR GROUP.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING OF ALL MEMBERS.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• MAKE SURE ALL MEMBERS OF YOUR GROUP AGREE ON PLANS AND ACTIONS.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• MAKE SURE NAMES ARE ON GROUP PRODUCTS.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;DO WE ALL UNDERSTAND THIS DIAGRAM?&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;ARE WE IN AGREEMENT ON THIS?&quot;</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SCEPTIC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• HELP YOUR GROUP AVOID COMING TO AGREEMENT TOO QUICKLY.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• MAKE SURE ALL POSSIBILITIES ARE EXPLORED.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• SUGGEST ALTERNATIVE IDEAS.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;WHAT OTHER POSSIBILITIES ARE THERE?&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;LET'S TRY TO LOOK AT THIS ANOTHER WAY.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;I'M NOT SURE WE'RE ON THE RIGHT TRACK.&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ENERGISER/SUMMARISER/REFLECTOR/ACCURACY COACH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• ENERGISE YOUR GROUP WHEN MOTIVATION IS LOW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ SUGGEST A NEW IDEA;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ THROUGH HUMOUR; OR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ BEING ENTHUSIASTIC.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• SUMMARISE (RESTATE) YOUR GROUP'S DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;WE CAN DO THIS!&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;THAT'S A GREAT IDEA!&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;SO HERE'S WHAT WE'VE DECIDED&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If there are more than 4 members in each group you may want to split some of the functions e.g. Discussion Leader, Timekeeper, Accuracy Coach, Recorder, Reporter, Sceptic, Reflector/Summariser etc.
The piece below captures the problem which can arise where group roles are not agreed and carried out!

**Once upon a time...**

A team of students had four members called Everybody, Somebody, Anybody, and Nobody. There was an important job to be done. Everybody was sure that Somebody would do it. Anybody could have done it, but Nobody did it. Somebody got angry about that because it was Everybody’s job. Everybody thought Anybody could do it but Nobody realized that Everybody wouldn’t do it. It ended up that Everybody blamed Somebody when Nobody did what Anybody could have done.

- Graham Gibbs, “Learning in Teams”

3. Norming

Once the group is established and understands its purpose, aims and objectives and work schedule it tends to enter the phase known as ‘Norming’. During this phase ground rules are agreed and adhered to, helping to keep the group on track and avoid possible conflict. Below is an example of some ground rules you might find useful in your own groups

4. Performing

This stage reflects the ‘up and running’ process which most groups reach, where they are operating relatively smoothly and addressing the task at hand. It is important at this stage that the group monitors its progress, reflects on its performance and progress and addresses any issues which arise. With a short time-frame monitoring of deadlines is important and any slippage should be examined and corrected. It is during
this phase that any consequences for under performance or lack of contribution should be applied.

The table below might help you in thinking about the various aspects of group operation described above.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ground rules.</th>
<th>What rules could you operate by? Here are some examples:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agreeing rules by which to operate can help your group establish good ways of working and avoiding problems.</td>
<td>• Turn up to meetings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Start and end meetings on time.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Always have an agenda.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• No interrupting.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• No putting others down.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Encourage everyone to speak.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Everyone to do as they agree, to keep to deadlines.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

How can you, as a group, check that you are keeping to them?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Your goals.</th>
<th>What do you want to achieve as a group? What end-results do you want? It helps to discuss this openly at the start to avoid misunderstandings.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What do you as an individual want to achieve in the group (e.g. get a particular grade, learn to do something new, get on with the others)?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Planning actions and allocating tasks | • How can your group task be divided into smaller sub-tasks?  
• By when must each sub-task be completed?  
• Who will do which sub-task?  
• Does the workload look evenly distributed between members?  
• What will you do about sub-tasks nobody wants to do? (If you can’t agree, look at ‘Negotiating and Assertiveness’ in the menu to the left of this screen.)  
• Look at ‘Organising Yourself and Your Time’ in the ‘Improving Learning’ section in the menu to the left of the screen. |

**Conflict**

It is almost inevitable that conflict will arise in any group setting. Add to this that most student groups must complete a graded assignment and conflict is virtually guaranteed!

**Conflict Happens!**

Most members of a group have to learn two fundamentals:

1. Having different opinions is one of the **essential benefits** of group work.
2. Group members have strong feelings and emotions. A group cannot achieve its full potential if all that is allowed is logic or information. Fortunately, it is possible to take steps to minimise disagreement and conflict and to resolve those disagreements that may be dangerously escalating.

II. Clarify Expectations

Stating expectations clearly will give the group a common ground to begin any discussion. Some ways to clarifying expectations include:

1. Developing a clear statement of group mission or purpose
2. Ground rules governing participation, sharing of responsibilities
3. Agreement to depersonalise conflicts
4. Group recognition that group process, including discussion and brainstorming, is important to results and needs regular attention
5. Use of structured processes for problem solving and conflict resolution
6. Awareness of stages of project development and maintenance priorities of each stage
7. Clearly and appropriately defined individual responsibilities for real work for each other; clear linkage between individual responsibilities and the group mission
8. Clearly defined project standards and time lines

If conflict escalates, the following tips may help the group resolve disagreements in a step-by-step manner.

III. Identify the Type of Group Conflict

Internal conflict - An individual or group member is experiencing a personal conflict that may or may not be related to the group, but which is interfering with the person's ability to perform.

Individual conflict with one other group member - One group member is in conflict with another

Individual conflict with the entire group - One group member is experiencing conflict with the entire group

Conflict between several group members - The entire group is experiencing conflict with several other group members

Conflict between groups - The entire group is in conflict with another group
Group conflict with one person outside of the group (such as tutor/demonstrator)

IV. Identify Group Needs
Define the group's problem as a shared need. As a group:
1. Identify the causes.
2. Determine the criteria for a solution.
3. Generate options.
4. Determine possible solutions.
5. Develop implementation plans.
6. Review results later on a regular basis.
   At this step, it is especially critical that every member of the group provide his or her view.

V. Depersonalise Group-Internal Conflict
During the problem-solving phase focus on issues not personalities. Use these guidelines to help depersonalise conflicts.
1. Encourage each side to objectively explain his or her bottom line requirements. When the group is determining a solution, each person's criteria should be evaluated.
2. Remind the group of ground rules while generating options such as "no criticising statements by other people until all ideas are elicited."
3. Encourage everyone to listen to other points of view.
4. During the process keep encouraging points of agreement.
5. Don't stifle new anger, but also don't dwell on it.

Another set of steps to consider as a group are:
1. acknowledge that the conflict exists
2. gain common ground
3. seek to understand all angles
4. attack the issue not each other
5. develop an action plan.

VI. Structuring Discussion
Below is a structured way to handle conflicts.

1. Let each person state his or her view briefly.
2. Have neutral group members reflect on areas of agreement or disagreement.
3. Explore areas of disagreement for specific issues.
4. Have opponents suggest modifications to their own points of view as well as others.
5. If consensus is blocked, ask opponents if they can accept the group's decision.

VII. Key Questions

Questions that can help groups work through conflict.

1. What are we supposed to accomplish as a group?
2. What are each of our roles and responsibilities in accomplishing that goal?
3. Who and when do each of us need to get information from?
4. If we get into trouble, whom can we ask for help?
5. How will we arrive at decisions?
6. What strengths do each of us bring in accomplishing our goals?
7. How are we going to make ourselves more accessible to one another?
8. What are we doing that is blocking the resolution of this problem?
9. How can we express differences without blaming others?
10. Which behaviours are unproductive? How can we help individuals take ownership of their unproductive behaviour? Don't excuse a group member when he or she behaves badly.

Most members of a group have to learn two fundamentals:

3. Having different opinions is one of the essential benefits of groupwork.
4. Group members have strong feelings and emotions. A group cannot achieve its full potential if all that is allowed is logic or information.

Fortunately, it is possible to take steps to minimise disagreement and conflict and to resolve those disagreements that may be dangerously escalating.

End of Unit
Group working, group learning, collaborative and co-operative learning – whatever term is used, working as a group has become established as an effective learning and assessment strategy in most universities. Done effectively, students respond overwhelmingly positively to the experience of working in groups, citing the mutual support, active learning, engagement and participation as valuable aspects of collectively addressing a task or assignment. However there may be disadvantages of working in groups, especially when conflict arises, objectives are not agreed on and operational guidelines are not adhered to. Because conflict happens it is important to acknowledge this, try to avoid it and have a strategy to resolve it quickly when it occurs. This unit has endeavoured to assist you to better understand the value of working in groups, possible problems and how you might avoid and/or resolve them.