

Typology - Organising group work

The organisation of group work remains one of the most complex tasks in curriculum design. This typology outlines possibilities for grouping and the implications for assessable outcomes, as well as some pros and cons of each approach. The group types presented have been differentiated for ease of selection and application. In practice, many or all of them may be combined in a single learning experience depending on the learning outcomes desired. However, the choice and communication of assessment is crucial in maintaining the behaviours expected by the models chosen – or students may shift spontaneously into modes of organization with which they are more familiar, and as a result will fail to achieve the desired outcomes.

	Description	Pros	Cons
Collaborative	<p>Students work in their teams to achieve a common goal where decisions, tasks and outcomes are achieved through consensus and shared responsibility and workload is negotiated throughout.</p> <p>Depending on the curriculum structure, work may be divided by function (eg manager, accountant, marketer), cognitive focus (eg application, synthesis, evaluation), resource focus (eg academic papers, practice accounts, visual, textual, multimedia) or perspective (disciplinary, ethical, social, economic), or simply by ongoing negotiation of shared workload as the needs of the tasks or project emerge.</p> <p>Outcomes are likely to be presented as a single group product, although strategies such as peer and self-evaluation or activity logs may be used to improve individual accountability.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Actively promotes positive interdependence – all students have a stake in outcomes of group • Requires students to develop skills in negotiation, communication and cooperation • Allows replication of real world group processes with attendant complexity and ambiguity • Significant opportunities for peer and self-assessment, reflective practice and deep learning • Builds personal confidence in contributing to a community of practice • A single outcome is assessed, reducing both types and numbers of assessable items 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Danger of social loafing, group breakdown and student frustration with outcomes • Students may not have requisite group work skills, requiring significant early training to proceed effectively • Requires constant communication between students, meeting times and places that can be difficult to arrange with varied schedules • Reduction in individual accountability can be difficult to overcome • Incorporating self and peer assessment meaningfully can be difficult to achieve and process needs ongoing review

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Cooperative	<p>Students operate in teams but the work is divided into clearly defined sub-projects or tasks, usually negotiated early on. Individual students take responsibility for sections, which are then collated and presented as a group product. The division of labour differs from collaborative work in that effort is not combined during the process. Instead there is usually a whole-of-group summary, conclusion or synthesis of findings presented.</p> <p>Assessment is likely to combine individual grades against individual report/contributed sections, and a group grade related to working methods, or synthesis of the results into a coherent whole, effectively summarised.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Combines individual accountability with inter-group reliance • Allows for individual learning to be identified and assessed • Still requires some negotiation and shared decision-making to define the goals and create a coherent whole • Replicates real world work experiences where team roles are well-differentiated • Builds respect for others' expertise and understanding of limitations of own knowledge • Peer and self assessment can be used along with group and individual grades 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduction in interdependence and need for negotiation and consensus • Can create functional learning situations with less depth of thinking than is required in collaboration • Students can struggle to see the topic or project holistically, and need clear direction to ensure common goals – they may not see the need for ongoing communication to check group progress • Assessment load can be high and complex in weighting, with several kinds of assessment required to cover all aspects of the learning experience

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Consultative	<p>Students undertake individual or group work/activities, with formalised consultations with peers as 'experts' who are contracted to provide specific kinds of information. With groups, the consultant may then re-use their learning and their experience of another group's progress to inform their own. This may also be a group to group or individual to individual process.</p> <p>Consultancy contributions by each student or group and any impact on the outcomes may to be recorded and assessed, depending on the model used.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develops personal confidence and respect for each others' capabilities and limitations • Students practice authentic consultant/client relationships and can report from both perspectives • Can be ongoing process or a periodic activity attached to a collaborative model • Encourages constant interaction and a community of practice learning environment • Allows for a range of learning experiences and assessment models, including peer and self assessment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Little interdependence, does not require students to engage in real world group processes nor necessarily to work towards common goals • Failure of a student/group to perform can be detrimental to the experience for both consultant and client • Requires detailed curriculum development - roles and process must be very clearly defined and consistent from the start • Assessment must take account of these weaknesses and be carefully aligned to the behaviours and benefits expected

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Supportive	<p>Groups are set up to provide peer support and mentoring, much like study groups but with formal structures embedded in the curriculum. Students may take on roles as formal mentors for each other, working from areas of strength identified early on, or each may be required to develop expertise in a particular aspect of the topic or a transferable skill, which is then shared with others during class time. They may also be required to supply resources for general class use. The major difference from consultancy is that there is no defined relationship between parties, and knowledge resources are open to all on a needs basis.</p> <p>Assessment may take account of the particular expertise or contribution of individuals or groups of students to the class group as a whole or to individuals, but the outcomes are not significantly reliant on students sharing knowledge.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has all the benefits of study groups and can be used with any other model of delivery • Students have opportunities to discuss and share learning that informs their own development • Creates an informal community of practice and understanding of required standards through sharing of knowledge and visibility of the work of others • Provides a formal structure that students can then take into informal support networks for other studies • Assessment replicates common approaches, is individual and straightforward against topic criteria 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not necessarily reinforce the positive characteristics of group work such as interdependence, negotiation and ownership of learning • Engagement can be variable, with little motivation to contribute equally or constantly with the perspectives of others • Students can take superficial approaches and become quantity focussed – plagiarism is a strong temptation • Assessment largely rests on the contribution of resources or participation

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Discursive	Situated in classroom practice as a learning process, this category is unlikely to be formalised in assessment. Opportunities are provided to students to share and compare learning, and to debate perspectives. This may manifest throughout the unit – as a method of reinforcing given information, or at the conclusion of stages – requiring students to articulate and test their ideas with an audience of peers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunities are given to clarify and correct misunderstandings in lecturer's presence • Students practice discursive and critical skills, test understanding and compare achievement • Large variety of activities can be used to engage students with one-another in small or large groups • Individual accountability for learning is not reliant on group outcomes • Works with any kind of delivery/outcome 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not engage students in most of the characteristics of group work such as interdependence, negotiation and ownership of learning • Potentially restricted to a few students in the group who volunteer or are called on repeatedly (in tutor-driven approaches) • Activities can be superficially addressed and perceived as irrelevant • Requires significant facilitation skill to avoid tutor dominance and encourage active participation