



Tips for students: getting the most from small-group learning

- 1 *Use small-group contexts to find out more about how tutors think.* Expect to find that different tutors think quite differently – that’s human nature. The more you can tune in to the general ethos and academic climate of your institution, the better prepared you can become for showing yourself at your best, for example in assessments.
- 2 *Try not to miss small-group events.* When you miss a lecture you may be able to catch up on quite a lot of it from downloadable resources and from fellow students’ notes and comments, but with a small group there’s little chance of really catching up on the processes involved in what those present actually achieved. It can also be a real headache if you miss group activity that leads to assessed tasks, as is increasingly the case in universities and colleges nowadays.
- 3 *The purpose and nature of lectures has changed.* Much information is now available online. Therefore tasks and activities you do in group work, and the interactions you have with tutors, and the learning opportunities you get from working with your peers (including peer assessment) are increasingly valuable as a means of helping you to feel part of your programme, and help you combat feelings of isolation or alienation.
- 4 *Group activities can be your best opportunities to develop skills and competences which evidence your employability.* Keep good records of capabilities you develop and practise, such as creative problem solving, leadership, team work, handling conflict, and so on. Collect together evidence of these skills, perhaps through an ePortfolio or a personal blog. This can give you extra things to talk about at job interviews, especially when they ask you for examples of how you have developed expertise in areas such as working in teams.
- 5 *When participating in group work, don’t just be passive and go along with what others say and do.* Look for opportunities to offer ideas to solve problems and seek innovative solutions. There can be much more chance in group work for you to shine than there often is in formal contexts or assignments.
- 6 *Play fair with fellow students in terms of letting others contribute and taking turns at leading the group.* Don’t regard the TV programme *The Apprentice* as providing a blueprint for good group behaviour in assessed tasks! The kinds of selfishness, self-aggrandisement and bragging as championed by the programme are not valued skills in the everyday world of employment.
- 7 *Use group work as a continuous monitor to find out how you’re doing.* It’s great to know when you’re ahead of the game by comparing your thinking and achievements with fellow students, but equally useful to identify when you may need to do a bit of catching up. It’s never as long as you think it will be until exams or other assessments test how well you’re doing.
- 8 *Take care of colleagues who haven’t really got to grips with the programme and may be feeling out of their depth.* Any help you can give them in terms of building confidence and skills development

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won't detract from the benefits you gain, indeed they will enhance what you get out of group work yourself. There's nothing like explaining something to someone to help you get your own head around it all the better.

- 9 *When staff ask you to reflect on your individual contribution to group activities, don't regard this as a tiresome chore.* Research shows that it's actually an excellent means of making sure that you benefit from these learning opportunities. Being caused to take stock of your learning and thinking helps to deepen your grasp of things, and skill in self-evaluation is regarded by many employers as a key capability.
- 10 *Make good use of all the technologies available to you, including the VLE or other media platforms used in your institution.* Don't just do what you're asked, for example recording outputs and outcomes on shared space in the VLE, but take opportunities to provide discussion space for you and your fellow students. Don't forget, however, that some media platforms may not be available to you once you've left the institution, so back up things such as e-portfolio or blogging space, to other locations, which you can access after you've left and no longer have an institutional sign-in.
- 11 *Use Twitter productively.* Social media can enhance your experience of small-group work. For example, hashtags on Twitter can help you keep in contact with the students who are present at particular group work sessions as well as those who couldn't be there, and often tutors will join in.
- 12 *When working in groups, keep channels of communication open with tutors.* Clarify uncertainties about what you're supposed to be doing, and regularly check assessment requirements. It's all too easy to go off at a tangent, and to fail an assignment even though your group project is good, because you haven't satisfied college requirements.
- 13 *Think of group work with fellow students as an opportunity rather than a problem, as it is sometimes regarded.* Some you'll get on with well – others will try your patience. However, the more mixed your group is, the more you'll learn about working with people in general – always useful for future employment contexts.
- 14 *Make the most of the diversity you will often find within groups.* People from different cultures will bring alternative perspectives and may help you think in different ways by bringing international perspectives to some of the tasks you are tackling together. It's also great for employability to have developed cross-cultural capability. You won't always have opportunities to learn so fast about different cultures and perspectives, and international understanding is priceless.
- 15 *If you have real problems within group work, either because the group is dysfunctional or because of your own special needs, don't just let it fester.* Let the tutor know what is going on thereby providing a space for issues to be resolved. In some cases you may be told that sorting out inter-group conflicts is part of the task in hand, but in other cases an intervention may help to put things right before too much time has passed.