A Mini-guide to Group Assessment in BEL
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Introduction

This Mini-guide to Group Assessment in BEL summarises some of the key ideas and practices that can help make designing and assessing groupwork successful. It includes ideas from research and experience that can help avoid well known pitfalls while enhancing students' learning and the satisfaction of students and academics alike.

Group assessment is problematic, but there are known solutions to many group work problems and countless examples of successful group assessments, including many in Business, Economics and Law (BEL) and other schools at The University of Queensland (UQ) – the work of Lydia Kavanagh and her UQ colleagues cited below is particularly useful. The ideas in this guide are presented to prompt your thinking – some will be more useful than others, and most will need to be adapted to your particular needs. Some ideas are simple and straightforward. For other ideas, further information is available in the references at the end of the guide, from experienced colleagues, and from staff of the Teaching and Educational Development Institute (TEDI).

Why group assessment?

There are many good reasons for including group assessment tasks or projects in a course:

• Students need to work in teams in their chosen field of practice. Group tasks can help them develop the ability to do this.

• Group assessment can promote active learning. Students learn to express their ideas and to give and receive feedback as they engage with complex problems, leading to deeper understanding.

• Professional or other standards or course learning objectives frequently require group or team skills. For example, threshold learning outcomes in law include being able to "collaborate effectively" and accounting graduates need to be able to work in "collaborative contexts".

• Group work puts students in touch with each other, helps overcome a sense of isolation in a large class, and provides them with a context for discussing a range of academic and other issues.

"Learning to be a functioning, effective and contributing member of a team means that students graduate with enhanced personal and professional skills.” (Kavanagh et al. p. 9)

Designing group tasks

By definition, a group assessment task should require some collaboration. It should also involve work that can be done by individuals. A task that is done in stages, with feedback from the lecturer or from another group at each stage, can keep the group on track, promote learning, and lead to higher quality work. Some reward (marks) for the group output should be included.

Tasks that can be completed by an individual, such as an essay or discussion paper, are unlikely to be satisfactory for group work.

“The challenge is to find an important question or problem and then … to create an assignment around that problem that will simultaneously foster group cohesiveness and promote higher-order learning.” (Michaelsen et al., p. 51)

Kavanagh et al. believe that a good group assessment task is "a project that increases knowledge and understanding … but which also encourages critical and creative independent thinking, and enhances communication skills, ethical and social understanding and, in particular, team work skills” (p. 16). They propose that the task includes:

• different delivery formats

• sub-tasks for individuals or pairs

• sections done by individuals for an individual mark
• a final section that integrates sub-sections, with analysis and discussion by the team
• milestones.

Depending on your context, you might find Michaelsen et al.’s “3 S’s” helpful:

• **Same problem.** All groups work on the same problem, case study, or question. This allows for discussion across groups or in the whole class, and for comparing responses.

• **Specific choice.** Construct the task so that the group must make and justify a specific choice or make a clear recommendation. This forces them to go beyond collecting information to critically analysing ideas and practices, and requires group members to argue for their preferred outcome. “Specific choice” leads to higher order thinking, more discussion within the group, and deeper engagement with course content.

• **Simultaneous reporting.** Group assessment tasks often culminate in a “public” presentation of the group’s outcome. Knowing that the work will be displayed to fellow students can encourage groups to do their best work and to assess, and improve, the quality of their work as they produce it. When groups present their work in class as a sequence of short presentations, or when such presentations are spread over several weeks, other students typically have difficulty engaging with the presentations. With “simultaneous reporting” all groups report at the same time through, for example, poster presentations, and then defend their findings to their peers and teachers. This creates an energising sense of competition and avoids the boredom that can occur with sequential presentations to a class.

### Allocating students to groups

• **Size matters.** Gibbs (2009) recommends groups of 4-6 and sees serious problems with 8 or more. Michaelsen et al. (2004) recommend 5-7. Small groups may not have enough experience or knowledge; large groups can be hard to manage and can increase the likelihood of ‘freeloading’.

• **Diversity matters.** Culturally homogeneous groups work well for short tasks; heterogenous groups perform equally well over longer term tasks if they can manage the group process well (Gibbs 2009). Mixed ability groups are often recommended.

• **Students forming their own groups can result in groups of widely ranging ability and groups of friends who do not challenge each other to do their best work.**

• **Teacher allocated groups** can ensure groups are mixed in terms of ability, culture, experience, or any other dimension considered important.

• “**Aspirational groups**” (Kavanagh et al.) consist of students with similar aspirations for their course grade. Students nominate the grade they are seeking and are allocated to groups based on similar grade aspirations.

• Kavanagh et al. (p. 22) recommend that each team should contain at least one student likely to provide leadership, a limited number of students who might be thought to be potential “social loafers”, a proportionate number of ESL students, and a gender balance.

### Helping groups to work effectively

Most students, and most groups, will benefit from explicit guidance on how groups function and how to optimise their performance as team members. This can reduce anxiety, improve the quality of learning and the final product, and help students develop group skills. Matters to consider include:

• team roles
• stages of group development
• how to organise the work and distribute tasks
• how to schedule and conduct productive meetings
• giving feedback
• what to do when things go wrong
• reporting.

Consider providing written guidelines or checklists, or both, on these matters and discuss them in class. Providing some time in class for groups to meet is always helpful.

A team contract can be an excellent starting point for group assessment. LAWS4113 (James) uses an eight part contract *pro forma* that includes allocation of work, meeting dates, dispute resolution, and how the team will deal with unequal contributions. An opportunity for students to debrief or reflect at the end of the process can reinforce their learning about working in groups.

For more information, visit the *Proactively Ensuring Success in Higher Education Student Teams* web site.
Here you can access *A Guide to Effective Project Teams* for a wealth of ideas and pro formas, and *Working in Teams: An online training module for students* which includes resources and activities for students to complete.

"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, but Nobody did it. Somebody got angry about that because it was Everybody’s job. Everybody thought Anybody could do it but Nobody realised that Everybody wouldn’t do it. It ended up that everybody blamed Somebody when Nobody did what Anybody could have done." (Gibbs, 1994)

**Allocating marks**

James et al. list 14 ways to allocate marks in group assessment, including:

- Mark the group product – all members get this mark.
- Each student completes a task within the project and is marked on that task alone.
- The lecturer/tutor awards a pool of marks which are then distributed by students following guidelines.
- A shared group mark is adjusted by peer assessment of contribution.
- A shared group mark is adjusted by lecturer/tutor assessment of contribution.

Visit their web site listed at the end of the guide for more suggestions and the pros and cons of each method. Other recommended means of allocating marks that can also serve to reduce freeloading are listed in the next section.

**Freeloading and social loafing**

Freeloading and social loafing may be more likely when individual contributions are not identified and rewarded and when tasks and sub-tasks are not clearly defined. Gibbs (2009) suggests:

- Reduce the group marks and increase the marks for individual contributions.
- Assess the outcomes of group work with an assignment or an exam – where the best or only way to prepare for the assessment is to be fully involved in the preceding group work.

- Allocate a group mark, but moderate this for individual students based on a project log or a brief viva.
- Give a group mark which is then moderated by students based on their perception of group members’ relative contributions. *WebPA* is a free UQ developed online tool that automates this process. See Kavanagh et al.

**Presenting the work**

Consider different formats for teams to deliver their work. Formats can include:

- written reports
- oral presentations
- posters
- vivas
- videos
- podcasts
- websites
  and combinations of these.
References and resources

  An excellent summary of the research on group assessment with many practical implications.

  A 30-page guide to group assessment published by TEDI. Copies available from TEDI.

  http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/assessinglearning/03/group.html
  An overview of group work in Australian universities, including 14 options for allocating marks for group work.

  http://ceit.uq.edu.au/content/pets
  This site includes a wealth of excellent resources for academics and students developed by a UQ team as part of a nationally funded ALTC project.

  Also see http://www.teambasedlearning.org/ for materials from the same perspective.

  http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/hlst/resources/detail/resources/critical-reviews/literature-review-to-practice
  Includes five case studies, a business school policy, and a report on staff and students’ views of group assessment.