

# Inclusive group work for module designers

**Inclusive design is good design: it makes improvements that benefit the majority of students not just students with disabilities.**

Note: In this document, group work means any task on which a group of students are working together.

## Designing the task

Firstly, you should ask yourself whether you really need to have group work. The real barriers to group work for some students, so be clear in your own mind what is the purpose of the group work in your module/qualification, so that you can be clear with the students. You need to be clear how this group work task is authentic within the context of your discipline (for example it might be an example of the type of task done in the workplace by professionals in your discipline). You should also be clear what students will gain from participating in the task (what skills they will develop etc.). Students with disabilities may face significant challenges in completing the task so they need to be clear about the benefits to participating.

As always when designing a task, try to make the task something the group will *want* to do. Bear in mind the academic level of the students and their experience of group work to decide how much support you need to design into the task. Make sure that the dates for the group work don't clash with other important elements of the module or times of high student workload, as this may disproportionately increase the burden on students with disabilities who need additional time to complete tasks.

The group work task should be designed for everyone, so think about how students the differing needs of students while you are in the design stage rather than as an add on later. Some points to consider in your design:

- Allow extra time for reading (this may be needs for students with dyslexia, fatigue/pain or 'brain-fog' due to medication or poor mental health).
- Allow extra time for thinking (this may be needs for students with dyslexia, dyspraxia etc.).
- Allow student groups a choice of modes of communication, both synchronous and asynchronous, for a particular task. The best choice for a group will depend on the individual needs of the students in that group (different things may suit students with hearing impairment, visual impairment, dyslexia). There lots of different tools for sharing: dropbox, google docs, forums, Adobe Connect, email, FaceBook, wiki, VLE moodle workshop tool. Allow plenty of choices wherever possible.
- Make the time frame for the task long enough to enable groups to choose different modes/times of interaction.
- If the group will be creating/sharing content, they may need some basic training on making something accessible e.g. writing figure descriptions, colour redundancy/colour contrast, size of text, copying and pasting in a graph rather than putting in as a screenshot or an image. For example, if the group is creating a video, they may need to learn how to use the Youtube subtitles.
- Order the tasks such that one person isn't held up by waiting for someone else to produce their output, as far as possible. Knowing others are waiting for you can be anxiety-inducing for some students, whilst waiting for others may be anxiety inducing for other students
- Design tasks so that if one student chooses not to participate then it doesn't disadvantage the rest of the group

- If the task includes a presentation element allow students to choose who does it (or to choose not to do it).

Finally, consider in advance what a student who is unable to complete the group work may do as an alternative task to make up marks within their assessment.

You should aim to design for inclusivity as far as possible to maximise the number of students who can participate without individual adjustments and to improve the experience for all. However, even with the best design you will still need to have individual conversations with students with complex needs to discuss their requirements.

### Engineering flexibility within the group

Design the group work so that it includes different roles and/or tasks and give a choice of roles to the students (an example of a successful environmental task has one student being a data gatherer and other students interpreting the data from a choice of perspectives). You will need more roles/tasks than individuals in the group so that everyone has a choice. In the group materials, encourage students to choose a role or complete a task where they can use their individual skills/strengths. A design that can include a variety of roles is also likely to be more flexible if a student drops out from the group work. This is one way to design in redundancy so that a group can still produce what is needed when one aspect is missing.

Design a plan for when things go wrong (e.g. when a student in an important group role chooses not to participate) and make that plan clear in advance to facilitators (and if appropriate to students with particular needs such as anxious students). For example, you may have a set of canned data which can be used if the data collector drops out.

### Assessment

Generally, UG students will value tasks that carry a significant percentage of the module score, so consider carefully how the group work task counts to the grade (whether it is formative/summative and the weight). If you don't give it enough weight in terms of marks, then why would students participate when you are implying it has no value? However, giving a group task a large weighting may significantly increase anxiety for some students. Ideally students should get feedback rather than marks the first time they are asked to work with others ahead of any summative group work. For example, you might build in a small (formative) forum discussion ahead of the main (summative) group work.

Consider *how* the group work is going to be assessed as this can also add additional pressure on students. If one student is unable to participate or doesn't take part fully, it should still be possible for other members of the group to achieve full marks (so this needs to be carefully considered in the design of the mark scheme). Students should generally be graded for their own work or their reflection on the group work. However, you might want to avoid using the word 'reflection', as this has negative connotations for some students. If you choose to assess via reflection, then consider writing alternatively worded versions of the questions for use by neuro-diverse students (e.g. students who are autistic). For example, if your question says something like 'Reflect on your part in the group work...' it might be reworded as 'Write down the steps you took to help the group complete the task.'

Peer feedback is generally more appropriate than peer marking, so if you choose to use peer marking then do so very carefully and realise this may cause problems for some students!

In general, the assessment should be designed so that students are able to gain full marks for the activity regardless of disability; any adjustment must not result in them being disadvantaged in terms of marks and feedback. If you are considering a reasonable adjust for a disabled student but are concerned that it conflicts with accreditation requirements, then check the documentation or contact your accrediting body (most are extremely open to adjustments for students with disabilities).

### Designing to reduce anxiety before the group work

Many students can be anxious in advance of group work (not just those students with a diagnosed anxiety disorders). Anxiety can be reduced for some students by giving them information in advance. Clear communication with students is needed. Let them know the purpose, timing, group size and what's involved in the group work; framing it with a positive emphasis. For example, you might start a conversation with 'Group work is a good way of developing your communication skills. We've got a group work activity coming up in February about xxx. Last year we had some great feedback from students on the exercise, who felt they had really learnt a lot from it...' Students with extreme anxiety may still feel unable to participate, so this gives an early opportunity to discuss possible adjustments that could be made (see the section on possible reasonable adjustments below.)

Preparing students for group work in advance can also mitigate anxiety issues. Consider whether there are ways to help students get to know each other before the main group work begins (e.g. working in pairs and meeting in small groups etc). Although useful ideas include pointing students to where they can access support (Student Association's peer support network, study buddies etc.) You could also ensure that students have something to bring into group (e.g. data collected for a previous assessment or generated in paired interactions could be brought into the group work, to allow all students to contribute something at the start).

Finally, remember that staff facilitating group work can also be anxious, so make sure you give your them information and training around the group work requirements, in good time and a clear manner.

### Designing how the group starts

If it is not possible to prepare the students for group work in advance, then using a 'getting-to-know-you' exercise may help. This activity should be inclusive, interactive and positive in nature, but the type of activity also depends on the nature of the group work. A simple example is 'If you could have any superpower, what would it be?' This example allows the student either to give very little personal information or to disclose something about themselves within their answer.

Suggest that group work facilitators carefully consider how they set the tone for the group. It is important that they are respectful, considerate, and that they listen to each student. They should help the group to discuss and recognise their individual strengths and to plan accordingly. They should encourage the group to consider their means of communication; focusing on what is most appropriate and inclusive for their group within the tools available. Students with some disabilities may need to invest significant time and effort to learn new software, so using a familiar tool may be appropriate.

## Examples of possible mitigating strategies / reasonable adjustments during group work

Even within group work that is well designed and inclusive, some students may still need individual adjustments in order to meet specific learning outcomes. Facilitators can make reasonable adjustments on behalf of the individual or changes made to the way that the group is supported. These adaptations may be needed for only one part or the whole task. For example, facilitators may need to adjust the communication tools used or adjust the schedule for the group work. The facilitator may also need to create alternative formats for part of the task e.g. if students produce an output, such as a set of slides, this may need to be re-versioned to make it accessible for all in the group.

As a designer of group work you may want to offer your facilitator examples of possible reasonable adjustments that you think are appropriate to your task. Some reasonable adjustments that have been used to enable students to meet learning outcomes include:

- an anxious student working in a small group for presentations rather than taking individual roles;
- a student with a speech impediment preparing written statements for others to read aloud during group work sessions;
- a student with Asperger's asking a family member to proof read forum posts to help with communication;
- a student emailing their forum posts to their facilitator for reassurance before posting to the group;
- a student emailing their forum posts to their facilitator for posting to the group on their behalf (i.e. students using screen readers or speech-to-text software may be familiar with email but need support posting to online forums);
- a student who was too anxious for direct participation in group work was offered the option to work with a facilitator role-playing a group member;
- a student unable to participate in forum-based group work was sent example posts from a previous group work to respond to for their assessment.

## Design in debriefing

As a final stage of your design for group work, you need to remind the facilitator to debrief the students. This gives a space for all involved to reflect on how the group work has gone, what can be learnt from their experience and how this can be used to develop their own group work skills for the future.

You should also debrief your facilitators. Ask them to reflect on what went well and what could be even better. This will enable them to improve their approach, and you to refine the design of the group work.