

Challenges of group work

Just as with any teaching methodology, there are potential drawbacks during group work that academics need to be aware of and attempt to mitigate through careful planning, monitoring, and support. Some of these potential issues that might be encountered include:

1. students are often reluctant to work in groups and have a proportion of their marks in the hands of others.
2. poor group dynamics, especially if one or more students do not contribute or feel marginalised or isolated by other group members.
3. issues of how students with extenuating circumstances can make up group work.
4. cultural issues: some students may not have experience working in groups and therefore need extra support and guidance.
5. students may focus too narrowly on their individual contributions to the detriment of the group outcome.
6. group work can be hard to assess, and individual student contributions are challenging to tease out, especially if conducted outside formal teaching hours.
7. the task might not be appropriate for group work.
8. the likelihood of these issues arising can be mediated by careful planning of the assessment or task, group selection strategies and effective monitoring of groups.

Freeloading

Social loafing is a phenomenon where individuals working within a group are prone to exert less effort than if they were working as individuals, as others within the group may "pick up the slack". Several strategies can be discussed with students to minimise the likelihood of freeloading and social loafing, including:

1. group rules/contracts of contribution to specific tasks
2. rewarding individual contributions linked to the group and task goals
3. penalties for inadequate participation – student or academic judgement
4. review of individual contributions through a diary, meeting log or reflective blog
5. peer assessment of contribution.

The most appropriate approach or combination of approaches will depend on the specific task being carried out, but it is clear that students will appreciate efforts to minimise any occurrences of freeloading. Ideally, groups should be able to self-regulate and attempt to resolve these issues, but it may be necessary for academic intervention in extreme cases.

(Francis, Allen and Thomas 2022)