

# Group work in Environment Studies

## Why work in groups?

At university, learning occurs in many ways. Being able to work effectively in groups may not only be required for assessment but is a lifetime skill particularly when dealing professionally with colleagues and clients. See for example, advice on career options for Environments students:

<http://www.benvs.unimelb.edu.au/pathways/career-options.html>

Group projects and group learning in Environments subjects can also help you to:

- develop your problem-solving abilities
- apply critical thinking to other contexts and subjects
- improve your interpersonal and communication skills
- prepare effectively for exams

While some students will always prefer to work alone, many students learn material better when they can discuss it with others. You can benefit from someone else's strengths, and they can benefit from yours.

**What follows are some practical ideas about how you can study productively with your fellow students.**

## Group work is not . . .

Group work or collaborative study does not mean using the work of others to benefit individually, by copying their words or ideas. The University considers this to be *plagiarism*, and if done knowingly by two or more people, this is classified as *collusion*.



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The following table explains the differences between collaborative study and plagiarism/collusion:

COLLABORATIVE STUDY EXAMPLES	PLAGIARISM/COLLUSION EXAMPLES
Brainstorming or discussing an essay question.	Reading someone else's work and copying the ideas or the exact phrases. <i>(plagiarism)</i>
Talking with someone who is familiar with the subject area about his or her opinions, ideas or resources on a particular topic.	Getting a copy of the completed assignment from someone who did it last year, and copying the responses. <i>(collusion)</i>
Sharing approaches and ideas about problem solving so that all group members have the skills to attempt all questions on an assignment or problem sheet.	Halving the workload on an individual assignment or problem sheet by dividing up the questions and sharing the answers. <i>(collusion)</i>

## Finding someone to work with

Some faculties organize formal study groups or group projects as part of the study component in their subjects. If you need to form study or project groups on your own, try to be **pro-active** about it:

- talk to fellow students in your tutorials or practical classes

OR

- post notices on department lists, servers or bulletin boards.

## Working collaboratively

The following are time management and motivation strategies to help you and your group develop effective group work skills:

### Preparing for Group Work

- Make a commitment to the group process – this is a really important way of working more effectively. You can do this by staying in close contact, not cancelling at last minute, and by doing what you promised to do. This is essential practice in professional settings.
- It's a good idea to plan how you will approach group tasks - how long you will all stay at meetings, what you will achieve and when you will have a break. Consider sharing and swapping tasks; for

example, one person can photocopy, while another can look for useful articles.

- Stay motivated and on track by sharing your study plan with your group: *'Tonight, I am going to complete the tutorial questions for my lab class'*. Compare your progress afterwards.

### **Group Projects**

While you may feel too busy to engage in group work, remember that group projects may count toward your assessment. Your group can benefit by using clear communication and scheduling strategies both for meetings, and in formatting and editing written work. Some suggestions follow:

- use online collaboration as an alternative to meeting in person. You can schedule meetings online, put shared documents up on the web, and develop wikis for editing and comment. Appointing a group moderator can also be helpful, but don't expect him or her to do all the work.
- assign specific tasks to group members, and note responsibilities down. If necessary, appoint a group leader.
- anticipate and discuss problems with group members, e.g. *Has anybody found a good reference for ...?. Do we all agree to move the maps into the Appendices? Does this sentence sound right?* Again, you can do this kind of work online.
- To ensure a really smooth oral presentation, rehearse together all the way through at least once. Note timing, and keep it crisp and precise. Your best speakers should open and close the presentation.
- IMPORTANT: Ensure you all participate in the final editing process—your group report should not look or read like four individual pieces of work. Make sure the report is formatted in the same way throughout.

### Difficult Situations:

- If a group member is struggling with a task, help him/her with aspects of the work, or get the person to perform other tasks.
- So that no one tries to dominate the group, set ground rules from the start. For example, get everyone's agreement to:
  - Respect and acknowledge each other's contributions
  - Follow the agenda for the day
  - Restrict speaking time to 3 minutes each, if people have too much to say.
- If a member never comes to meetings, document (and date) their absences. Remember, however, if the group decides that a member should leave, you may all need to cover his/her part of the work. Consult your tutor in any case.

- In some faculties or subjects, you may all be asked to assess each other's participation in the group process. This can also act as a protection of the group's interests.

### **Study groups**

Research shows that studying in a group brings many benefits to members. The following collaborative learning strategies could be very useful:

- Ensure there are at least 3 people in your group. This is a good number as each person has to contribute, and the group can continue if one person is away.
- Schedule regular group study time with fellow students who have similar timetables. As a group you can focus on tasks such as answering tutorial questions, discussing course content, or practicing answers to exam questions.
- Arrange to meet with your group at the **same** place and time each week. Keeping to these routines will help you commit to the group process.
- Have a **specific** learning focus for each group meeting, for example: vocabulary review, difficult tutorial problems, or discussion of a particular case-study or contentious issue.
- Review and revise the week's work by discussing it in the group, or in pairs. This can be helpful for subjects where learning that builds from week to week is important.
- Practise active learning. For example, if your group is giving a presentation on a design project, anticipate the questions that are likely to be asked, and practise responses to these questions. The ability to critique each others' designs is a valuable tool both for study and professional purposes.

### **References:**

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Johnston, C.G., James, R.H., Lye, J.N. & McDonald, I.M. (2000). An evaluation of collaborative problem solving for learning economics. *Journal of Economic Education* 31(1): 13-29.

*Online collaborative learning*. Retrieved October 25, 2005, from the Central Queensland University Web site: <http://clp.cqu.edu.au/introduction.htm>