

Information sheet.

Managing groups

Group work is where learners work together in a group, and consider a pre-defined topic. This process needs careful management by the teacher or trainer.

Aims of this topic

- What managing groups means.
- Why group work is useful.
- Who benefits from group work.
- When to use group work.
- Techniques for managing groups.
- How to use group work.

What is group work?

Group work can be described as the art of helping all learners to engage and participate in group activities with a specific outcome in mind. These activities should draw on and develop the skills and knowledge of each member of the group, in order to reach clearly defined individual and group learning outcomes. To be successful, group work needs very careful management.

Why is group work important?

Working as part of a group (or team) is an essential skill in most work roles. Learners can also learn very effectively from one another when they have time to explore issues, ideas and theories in group work.

Importance to the teacher or trainer

Group work is important because it:

- enables the teacher or trainer to provide a range of activities to aid differentiation;
- can build the confidence of individuals when carefully planned to meet individual need;

- provides an interesting way of learning, covering a range of issues;
- helps to encourage learners to draw on their personal and work experience in order to explore a range of issues;
- can encourage learners to support each other effectively to complete a range of tasks;
- can encourage learner autonomy;
- enables learners to develop the skills for working as a team member in a care or early years setting;
- provides opportunities to acquire and develop a range of literacy, language and numeracy skills.

Importance to the learner

Group work is important because it:

- increases motivation;
- can broaden and deepen learning through interaction with peers;
- can develop a range of additional skills, for example, team work and problem solving;
- encourages shared practice;
- encourages reflective practice;
- can help quieter learners to have a 'voice' and gain in self-confidence;
- provides opportunities to acquire and develop a range of literacy, language and numeracy skills.

Using group work

There are many different situations when you can use group work.

Here are some suggestions:

- Encouraging positive group dynamics, for example, during induction.
- Encouraging particular learners to work together.
- Encouraging learners to share their experiences and work through a series of issues.
- Consolidating and extending learning.

Techniques for managing groups

Here is a selection of techniques for managing groups.

Snowball

Participants start by working in pairs to share their knowledge of a topic. They move on to share their knowledge and discuss it with another pair of participants. The groups of four can then feed back to the whole group.

Experiential/empathy

Learners share their personal experiences within groups in order to develop their learning. This technique should not be used with topics that might encourage disclosure.

Buzz groups

Learners work in small groups to answer a thought-provoking question. The teacher or trainer asks each group in turn to contribute part of the answer.

Circle time

Learners take it in turn to talk about a topic; each person is given equal time and consideration.

Other techniques include:

- Group discussion
- Debate
- Role-play
- Secret role-play
- Focused discussion
- Activity

The practicalities of group work

The use of group work can help increase the motivation, level of learning, activity and socialisation within sessions. It does, however, require careful planning.

1. Planning

Planning for group work is essential. Here are some tips:

- Take some time before the session to ensure that you are clear about the intended outcomes and about the practicalities of the session.
- Prepare the resources in advance.

- Do a dry run of the activity, and see if you can anticipate any potential problems before they occur.
- Ensure that you have a range of questions or alternative activities, prior to the session.
- Think about the layout of the room and rearrange it in advance if necessary.

2. Differentiation

To differentiate within group activities, you should identify and address the different needs, interests, and abilities of all learners.

- _ Think about your learners and consider how you can support them to move on to the next level.
- _ Before the session, formulate questions and activities at different levels to promote deeper learning.
- If the activity requires the learners to take a role, consider in advance which roles would be most suitable for which learners.
- _ Think about each learner in turn. Do you have strategies to support each of them?
- _ Should any of your resources be adapted for specific learners (for example, large print, coloured paper, coloured filters)?
- _ You may decide to structure the groups so that learners are working with people at similar, or you could structure the groups to include learners working at different levels.

New groups

If this is the first time that you have worked with the group:

- Talk to somebody who knows the individuals within the group.
- Find out their background. For example, are they in placement/work?
- What experiences might they have had?
- Do any learners have particular learning needs? How are these be addressed?

- Collect as much information as you can, but be careful not to formulate negative preconceptions.

3. Clarity of objectives

Before the group work activity begins, it is important to be clear about the purpose and practicalities of the activity along with the intended outcomes for the learners.

- It is a good idea to formulate a task sheet for each part of the activity so that learners will know exactly what they should do.
- Ensure that learners understand the aim of the activity and the learning outcomes to be achieved.
- Remember that learning outcomes may be set by the awarding body.
- Encourage learners to identify what they wish to achieve during the session. This could be part of the individual targets set during tutorial.

4. Participation strategies

Before the session, try to devise strategies for participation/contribution in the groups by:

- giving all learners a role that best matches their learning needs;
- utilising questioning strategies to extend the learners' understanding;
- looking at the learners' roles in the group work and ensuring equal participation;
- showing all learners that their contributions are valued.

If one learner dominates a group, you could give them a role as observer or scribe. You could ask them to encourage all learners to participate, ensuring that each is heard and is included in the activity.

If a learner is not participating in the group work, you could ask them to describe their own experience, or how they have felt about a topic area, or what they have found most difficult.

What other methods can you use to encourage participation? You will find more ideas within the Differentiation and Questioning topics.

5. Monitoring

It is important to monitor the progress of the group work:

- Throughout the session you should move between the groups, acting as a sounding board and a facilitator, and asking questions.
- For each group, try and get an understanding of the contributions that have been made by each member, and encourage all learners to participate by using the techniques already discussed.
- Make sure that you visit each group as often as you can.

6. Setting ground rules

Ask the learners to identify their own ground rules when working in groups. This can help to create a secure environment and promote participation. This is really important if the activity asks the learners to look at their own experiences or talk about their feelings or emotions.

7. Learner autonomy

As long as you have planned well, you can encourage the learners to take responsibility for the activity as a group (the learners may well surprise you):

- Ask the learners to identify the learning outcomes for the group work.
- Ask the learners to define what they would like to learn about a particular topic.
- If you have not tried this before, then use a simple activity at first and monitor how it goes.
- Remember that you can always 'top up' the learning later on in the session if you need to.

8. Feed back

- Always plan time within the session for each group to feed back to the whole group.
- Reinforce learners' points linking the work to their personal and work experience.
- Check learning and fill any gaps.

- Review the aim of the session, checking with learners that they have achieved all the learning outcomes.
- Make links to the work for the next session.

Here are some top tips to help you manage groups.

1. Think about the layout of the room; make sure that learners in group are able to face each other.
2. Plan for extension questions; have a list of questions prepared before the session.
2. Be creative; do not follow the crowd. If you have an idea for a different way of doing something, try it out. If it does not work change it and try again.
4. Do not be scared of handing over the reins to the learners. You may be surprised at the level of learning that can be achieved in this way.
5. Reflect. After the session, think back on the group work. What went well and why? How could you repeat your success? What did not go so well? Why and how could you improve this for next time?
6. Break the group work into different roles and fit these roles to the strengths and needs of the learners.
7. Ask the group to set clear ground rules either before or at the beginning of the session.
8. Take an activity that you enjoy and adapt it for your learners, for example your favourite board game.
9. Have a dry run of an activity. Try it out with your colleagues or friends. They may be able to help you to spot any problems before you take the activity into a session.
10. Have fun; if you are enjoying the activities, it is likely the learners will be as well.