**Larbi Ben M’hidi University**

**Study Skills/ 2nd Year**

**S.AROUF**

**Collaborative Work**

Although 'people skills' may not seem to be an obvious study skill, on most courses you will be expected to interact with others as an integral part of the learning experience. This can be

true of both distance learning courses as well as those based on campus or in the workplace.

As academic work in Higher Education is developed within a learning community, you need to understand how to work alongside others, to give and receive support and share ideas whilst also maintaining the academic integrity of your own work. As a student, you will benefit from understanding how groups work, and how you can play an effective role as a team member.

Depending on your course, you may need to demonstrate good communication skills in listening and in making your point, to be able to give and receive criticism, and to take part in group tasks in class or for group projects. In some instances, your input to the group, or to group outcomes, may contribute to your overall marks and grades.

This section covers, in brief, a range of people skills that will help you as a student. These range from in-class participation through to skills needed for specific tasks such as making presentations and managing group projects.

**Working with others**

**Collaborative study**

Academic study at university level generally focuses on the achievements of individuals. In

part, this is to ensure that each person is awarded a qualification purely on the strength of his or her own work. Increasingly, however, courses require collaborative working in groups or teams. Such activities vary, but typically include: peer support groups, making presentations in seminars or group tutorials and contributing to the discussion, providing constructive feedback on other students' ideas or work, and undertaking and presenting group projects.

There are a number of reasons for encouraging students to undertake collaborative working.

• **Learning community:** to enable students to learn from each other, sharing knowledge as active members of a learning community.

• **Diverse viewpoints:** to encourage an appreciation of what can be gained through taking multiple perspectives on board.

• **Learning styles:** to provide varied teaching methods, in recognition that students learn in different ways, including through social learning, group work and discussion.

• **Cohort effect:** to provide opportunities for group bonding and mutual support; these tend to lead to whole groups achieving well.

**• Graduate skills**: to prepare students for life after their degree, whether in research teams or in employment; good interpersonal skills are essential to many graduate jobs and are highly

valued by employers.

**Making a group work**

Although there are many benefits to working in groups, it isn't always easy. Dealing with the challenge of the group develops a range of skills. The following guidelines are helpful for varied types of group work, from class and seminar groups to study groups and online project groups.

**Create a supportive group atmosphere**

***Be aware of people's feelings***

People are often more anxious than they seem, and worry about being criticised or found wanting. Be constructive in your comments. Aim to be kind, rather than to score points.

***Address anxieties directly***

Groups work best when members bond. In the first session, give time to checking how everybody feels about the group or the course. What were their concerns before arriving? Did others feel the same way? It helps to know that you are not the only person who has concerns. Discuss how the group could turn anxieties into opportunities.

***Make ground rules***

This is especially important if you are forming a study or project group. Ground rules should address directly the anxieties raised by the group. Also include:

• expected attendance, punctuality and commitment

• behaviour or comments that would be unacceptable

• what the group will do if someone dominates, does not pull their weight or ignores the ground rules.

***Set clear boundaries***

Be clear what the group will or won't do to support those in difficulty. Be supportive and encouraging, but avoid being drawn too deeply into others' personal difficulties or trying to

'rescue' them. Help them find the appropriate support services.

***Plan to prevent difficulties***

If you are going to work collaboratively with one or more people over a period of time, think through what you hope to gain from working together and what might go wrong. Write down your considerations under three sets of headings:

• 'Advantages'

• 'Potential difficulties'

• 'Ways we could deal with these difficulties'.

Go through all the advantages together. Consider each potential difficulty and brainstorm ways of dealing with it. Be creative in looking for strategies. If you are truly stuck, speak to a tutor.

**Create an effective group environment**

***Clarify the group's purpose***

Keep the group focused on its purpose and on what it was set up to achieve. This might be:

• a particular product or outcome such as a report, or research project results?

• to develop interpersonal skills?

• to gain personal insights?

• emotional support?

• social interaction?

• solidarity?

***Set clear agendas***

• Be clear about the purpose of each meeting.

• Set an agenda for meetings, decide how long to spend on each item, and stick to this.

• Meet in a suitable venue. If it isn't a social group, avoid social venues.

• Arrange meeting times and venues well in advance, so that everyone can attend.

***Check progress***

If the group does not seem to be working well, address this directly. Each person in turn should say what they think could be done to improve matters, including what they personally

could do differently. Consider:

• Does the group need to bond through a social activity, or meet earlier to socialise?

• Are tasks shared fairly?

• Is somebody dominating?

• Are you considerate enough about each other's feelings and ideas?

Aim to avoid negative criticism or allocating blame.

**Taking responsibility**

The responsibility for the group lieswith each member. Everyone needs to play an active part. If a problem arises, even if it seems to be the fault of one person, everyone has responsibility for sorting it out so that the group can function.

**Investigate group strengths**

Find out the range of skills and experience in the group. Who prefers to organise, run meetings, write? State clearly what you would like to do. If several people want to do the same thing, rotate roles or share tasks out. Ensure everyone has a role.

**Task allocation and group roles**

For each session, decide who will take which role.

• Be clear who will do what.

• Set clear deadlines for completion.

***Chairperson***

Although everybody should help, the chair helps the group to draw up an agenda and keep to it, ensures that everyone gets to speak and that their views are heard, keeps the group focused on the point being discussed and sums up the main points.

***Timekeeper***

The timekeeper ensures the group keeps to time schedules. Sometimes, in meetings, they allocate each person a set time for contributions.

***Record-keeper or secretary***

The record-keeper notes who is going to do what and when, and any other decisions made.

***Task or project manager***

The task manager checks, between meetings, that everyone is doing what was agreed.

***Sharing groupwork fairly***

If a key aim is to learn to work collaboratively, consider rotating roles so that everyone has a chance to develop a range of skills and experience.

**Manage potential 'saboteurs'**

Be alert to individuals or groups that seem to want to divert time and attention by complaining about the nature of the group or shortcomings of the task set. Avoid being drawn into this. Keep bringing the group back to task. Consider what next step the group can take towards achieving its purpose. Focus on potential solutions rather than problems.

**Reflection: Sabotage**

How might you sabotage a group unintentionally – for example, by being late, not preparing, whispering or chatting? What could you do differently

**References**

Cottrell, S. (2013). *The study skills handbook* (4th ed.). New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan.