**Collaborative working**

**Some people work better through group work and discussion. Good interpersonal skills are an essential part of most jobs. Universities have increased the emphasis on combining independent study with group or team work. The general principles of group work include taking care to be constructive, supportive and non-discriminatory. Talking and listening are essential communication skills for group participation.**

**Working co-operatively creates opportunities to share ideas, benefit from additional perspectives, tap a wider pool of expertise, stimulate one another’s thinking, clarify your own thinking, learn to deal with challenge and criticism, and appreciate that there are many dimensions to a question than you can discover on your own.**

**Study support networks can be led by a student mentor or peer, or set up by students informally. Study groups can be useful to review and fill gaps in lecture notes, solve problems, brainstorm ideas, share ideas from and discuss background readings, and listen to one another’s research ideas.**

**Working within a group**

Ask opinions. Contribute to discussion. Provide suggestions for reading. Review lecture notes cooperatively. Review one another’s essays. Offer precise, constructive criticism if asked to do so, and suggest ways to make improvements. Receive criticism attentively. Ask questions for clarity.

**Avoid pitfalls**: Share work equitably. Be mindful of copying. Encourage group members but don’t be pulled down by negativity. Don’t chat or whisper while others are speaking. Adhere to the meeting schedule time. Failure to prepare what was agreed.

Non-verbal communication indicates how we are responding and listening. Some of these can be encouraging or discouraging. Be mindful of non-verbal responses too. These include smiling, facial expressions, eye contact, reassuring nods and gestures, fidgeting, posture (sitting and standing), silences.

**Active listening is a skill worth honing. To improve listening skills:**

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| * Consider the speakers’ feelings. | * Devise ways to encourage the speaker. |
| * Focus on the content- what is valuable to you? | * Connect what’s said to something you know. |
| * Jot down key words. Take notes. | * Think of a question you could ask. |

**Speaking within a group can cause anxiety**. You can be proactive by deciding to contribute or speak once at each group meeting. Sit beside someone that you find reassuring. It might be reassuring to write down what you’d like to say, and illustrate your point with an example or by providing evidence. Take your time, speak slowly and make eye contact with at least one other person.

***Be brief, be clear and speak up so everyone can hear!***

**To benefit from collaborative work, create a supportive, effective environment.** Hold an open discussion as to how the group can turn individual concerns about group work into opportunities.Set ground rules for group meetings early on for personal conduct, working practices and consequences. Practice active listening. Share responsibilities by creating a group rota for chairing a meeting, setting the agenda for the next meeting a circulating it pre-meeting, time keeping, and taking meeting minutes and circulating them post- meeting.

**Best practice group dynamics suggestions:**

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| * **Be encouraging** | * **Listen actively to others** |
| * **Build on one another’s ideas** | * **Make suggestions** * **Monitor unfair discrimination** |
| * **Share your knowledge** | * **Indicate when you agree** |
| * **Be inclusive** | * **Admit mistakes** |
| * **Contribute, but don’t dominate** | * **Use body language- nod, smile, raise hands to contribute** |
| * **Summarise for the group** | * **Disagree respectfully** |

Difficult moments in the group can occur if strong emotions, silences or dominating personalities are present. Strong emotions can arise from strong opinions, group problems, or even from forces outside of the group. Take a brainstorming break to help overcome silences. Ground rules about challenging personal opinions rather than persons should be incorporated from the start. Unfair discrimination can create stress within a group whether it is intentional or unintentional. Monitoring discrimination and the inclusion of everyone in the group are important for all students to achieve his or her potential. Speak out, show support and be proactive so that discrimination is addressed.

