
GROUP WORK PROCESS

GROUP WORK CONTRACT

Before you start discussing the topics of interest in your project or assignment, you must prepare the ground for a fruitful group work. It is imperative that you use the time to facilitate the group work before embarking on a project that is heavily relying on a functional group where all group members are aligned in terms of workflow, ambitions, competencies, priority and so on.

A tool in this regard is the "group work contract". This contract will be the basis of your group work throughout the course and may be used as inspiration for future group work.

In the following a set of sections are described that should be included in the contract. For each section there is a brief description, which you may use as inspiration. Finally, you must print and sign the contract before uploading it to Absalon. Hereby you all commit to the framework of the group work mutually formulated by all the group members.

Before you start writing the contract, it is important that each group member is aware of and state what to expect from the group work process. Thus, you should all in turn reflect on the following questions:

1. What do we expect from each other in the group and from ourselves?
2. How do we balance the social aspects and the academic work in the group?
3. What is the special areas of interest in this project?
4. What is our level of ambition?
5. How is the project work prioritised in relation to other obligations and interests?
6. What do we hope to learn from the project in terms of work process, group work and academic competencies?

The overall learning outcome and framework of the project is already given in the course description, and in the description of the exercise. Be sure that you all understand this frame and know what is expected from you in terms of course deliverables. It is, however, equally important that you discuss the expectations and level of ambition of each group member and how these expectations and ambitions can be united in a single contract under a common goal given the framework of the course. In short: what can you agree on and what do you expect to gain from the group collaboration? The common goal is the declaration of the group and gives the group its identity throughout the course.

THE CONTENTS OF THE CONTRACT

Overall the contract must contain two sections: 1) objectives and 2) rules of procedure.

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the group work are defined by the group's level of ambition, expectations and responsibilities, and the competencies and skills needed.

AMBITIONS

Be sure to tune in on the level of ambition in the group. Ask yourself and the group members what you are aiming for. You will be individually graded on this course, but the grade is heavily influenced by the performance of the group. As individuals, you can only change the grade with one point. Thus, the grade will be based on the group performance

and will reflect the level of ambitions in the group. You can still, however, have difference individual levels of ambition in your disseminations. Be sure to be open about this and respect each other's approaches to this course. Please notice, that the amount and level of feedback from your supervisor will reflect the group's level of ambition.

Here are some points to reflect on:

- What is the level of our academic work?
- How is the work pace defined?
- How careful should we be (academically, language wise, presentation wise)

A factor which should not be forgotten is the social ambitions in the group. Is this a working group only or do you have ambitions on a social level? If you also want to prioritise the social aspects of the group process, then be explicit about it and include that in your group objective and the rules of procedure (see later) as well.

EXPECTATIONS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

From experience we know, that failing to meet the expectations from a group is the primary source of conflicts. You have probably experienced group work before and know from your own experience that expectations and responsibility can indeed spark a conflict. It is quite alright to have expectations to each other – in fact, it can be a driving force in a group that you take each other seriously and have expectations. Of course, you should respect each other's differences and different backgrounds. To discuss and agree on a set of expectations is, thus, pivotal for the group process and the first line of defence against unfruitful conflicts (use the tool described below).

It might be useful for each group member to reflect on the following questions:

1. What is the responsibility of each group member in relation to the group?
2. What is the responsibility of the group in relation to each group member?
3. Are there responsibilities between group members that should/could be addressed?

From these questions you should write down a set of expectations that is applicable for the group members and the group as a whole. Expectations should be understood both academically (e.g. homework) and socially (e.g. in terms of communication). Consider for example what each member should do if he/she cannot meet the expectations of the group. What is the groups reaction to this and role in this situation? How can you support each other in the group and help each meet the expectations? Remember that none of us are perfect! Help is often better than punishment.

Use the document on Absalon to clarify your individual objectives (ambitions, expectations, and responsibilities). Once you have done this, take turn briefly presenting your objectives to the other group members and, when you are not presenting, listen to the other's presentation. Once you have presented and listened, try to align the objectives and fill out the table for the whole group. You will discover, that you do not agree on all points – these are the points you have to allocate the most attention as those can be the source of conflicts. Negotiate those point and try to find common ground.

COMPETENCIES

For this course some specific competencies and skills are needed e.g. project management skills, academic writing, laboratory work, keeping deadlines, etc. As individuals you never have all the competencies and skills needed and never on a sufficient level. As a group, though, you might possess all the competencies and skills needed for this course. Thus, it is important to know which competencies and skills are needed and who can take lead on this and use his/her competencies. You are in fact encouraged to use each other's skills selectively to produce exactly the product you want to produce given the level of ambition. Also, you will be hard pressed for time so you will have to delegate

tasks. In other words, you do not have to be involved in all the details of your product, but of course you are responsible for all parts of the product. The same as any other project in the real world.

Use the simple competency mapping tool on Absalon to map the competencies and skills needed on the course (some examples are already mentioned but the list is not elaborative). Then map your own individual skills in relation to the course needs and put in any additional competencies and skills that you might think could contribute to the group – both academically and in terms of the group work process (e.g. being really good at baking cakes!). Finally, look at all the maps together and identify both strengths and weaknesses. Consult the map whenever you are facing a task and make sure to use the competencies within the group to drive the process forward.

RULES OF PROCEDURE

MEETING PROCEDURES

Most of the group work is planned, discussed, processed, and finalised at group meetings. Thus, setting up a framework for your group meetings will ensure the productiveness of the group when you meet.

Obviously, the framework of these meetings is essential in order to be productive. Many groups suffer from ineffective meetings as a consequence of poor organisation and planning. The result being unfocused discussions, poorly prioritised time, loss of a common thread in the portfolio, and ultimately frustration and a low academic performance.

How tight the structure of the meeting is, vary from group to group based on the composition of the group. As a rule of thumb, discussions resulting in important decision making requires a tighter organisation than brainstorming, creative processes, and having innovative discussions.

Each group member has his/her idea of how tightly the meetings should be structured. Some students prefer a loose organisation while others are not able to perform unless they have a tight framework. Settling on a common level of organisation is not easy but absolutely necessary. However, it is also necessary constantly to evaluate and reflect on this structure in order for all group members to feel comfortable in the group and to perform to the best of their ability.

To secure the group process and keep the group on track regarding your ambitions and expectations, the following bullets are effective ingredients in group meetings and should be considered when defining your meeting procedure:

1. Settle on a time frame for your meetings.
2. Have an agenda for each meeting – and adhere to this (see later).
3. Be sure that everybody is included in the work.
4. Decide who will be the moderator and who will take minutes from the meeting (see later).
5. Base your discussions whenever it is feasible on written material prepared beforehand.
6. Summarise and conclude on every discussion – also in writing.
7. Define your homework and be sure that everybody is clear on the task.
8. Evaluate your meetings and let all group members express their opinion (see later).
9. Use a proper digital tool (e.g. SquidHub, Google Classroom, or Trello) to support the workflow.

STARTING THE MEETING

When the group meets it is natural to start out with some small talk not related to academia. Someone may have a good story, a joke, or you read something exciting on the web. This is a good way to start but set up a time frame for this. Often, small talk takes up vital time. This is especially the case if the task at hand is a difficult one or if group members have not done their homework. In these situations, small talk might continue for longer than necessary

making it difficult to be productive. Instead, plan a larger break midway through the meeting where small talk is allowed and where you can get coffee or even take a walk outside to clear the head.

AGENDA

Having an agenda with time slots for every item is an important tool to keep the work flow on track and to be sure that no tasks are missed. It is also a tool for prioritising the tasks in the group. Bump up creative or difficult items to deal with those when you are fresh. Procedure related issues can be dealt with later on.

Use the agenda below as an inspiration for your own standard agenda included in your meeting procedure.

1. Start meeting (15 min.)
 - a. Small talk (5 min.)
 - b. Settle on the agenda and time frames
 - c. Delegate roles (moderator, rapporteur)
 - d. Update on unresolved items from last meeting
2. Homework status
3. ... (academic item #1 – the top item for the day) (x min.)
4. ... (academic item #2) (x min.)
5. *Break (15 min.)*
6. ... (academic item #3) (x min.)
7. ... (academic item #4) (x min.)
8. End meeting – status talk (15 min.)
 - a. Date, time, and location for the next meeting
 - b. Tentative agenda
 - c. Homework assignments
 - d. Evaluation
 - e. Update logbook

ROLES

MODERATOR

Before each meeting, you should choose who will act as moderator at the meeting. The moderator is of course leading the meeting, but the primary task is to keep track and keep focus – not making the decisions or doing the work. Keeping track means that adherence to the agenda and that decisions are made in the group in order for the group to be productive and meet the tasks of the course. Thus, the moderator has to sum up on discussions and highlight what has been concluded on each discussion. Keeping focus means that the framework of the meeting is kept in terms of ambitions, expectations, responsibility, and communication. Thus, if a member of the group is not adhering to the contract, the moderator must gently point that out in order to avoid conflicts.

Unfortunately, poor moderation of a meeting often results in a complete waste of everybody's time. Thus, this task is very important and should be taken seriously – and must be respected by the other group members! Whether you want to take turns being the moderator is up to you – some people are natural moderators and some people are not comfortable in that position. The important thing is that you *all* have a responsibility for the success of the moderator. Agree on your approach and include it in your contract.

After each meeting you should briefly evaluate the moderator. Was the moderator able to keep track and keep focus? If not, then discuss what should be changed and/or improved.

RAPPORTEUR

It might be a good idea to have one member in the group keeping track on the decisions made throughout the meeting. This should not be a long list of everything that has been said and done at the meeting, but only important decisions, items to follow up on, and who is doing what until the next meeting. Appointing a rapporteur will secure that no task falls between chairs and prevent the group from taking up discussions that have already been settled but where no one was able to remember what was concluded.

ENDING THE MEETING

Every meeting should be rounded off with a status talk. From experience we know that by the end of a meeting we do not necessarily have the same perception of what has been achieved. By giving time to round off, the group is laying the ground for a fruitful period between meetings and the next meeting. Often time pressure does not allow for any status talk and thus potential frustrations are carried over until the next meeting.

Ask yourself the following questions:

1. What did we achieve? Which tasks did we complete and which are still open?
2. How do we progress from here (e.g. homework)?
3. What is the agenda for the next meeting?
4. How was the meeting? Are there reasons for changing the framework (e.g. time, breaks, moderator, rapporteur, etc.)?

Having the opportunity for all group members to express their opinion on the meeting is vital for the cohesiveness in the group. Do not start a discussion at this time point – you do not all have to agree on how you think the meeting progressed. What is important is, that you each present your perception of the meeting and how you think the group should progress from here – and of course listen to the others, in respect. From these viewpoints the group should shortly analyse the meeting and agree on potential corrections. If necessary, include items where you strongly disagree on the agenda for the next meeting – it is important that you end the meeting on a positive note, not a new discussion.

Before splitting up, the rapporteur updates the group's logbook (GoogleDoc) based on his/her notes from the meeting (this is mandatory).

HOMEWORK

You may have to or want to delegate tasks to the members of the group or subgroups. The potential pitfall is that each group member or subgroup is working along a different path than the others. Using the contract may be a way of securing the common thread, but there is still a risk that coherency in your work is lost. Another potential pitfall is that each group member becomes a specialist on a part of your work without the possibility to receive sparring from the others. Moreover, each group member is responsible for the entire portfolio.

Nevertheless, delegating work is a feasible way to use the different competencies in the group. In addition, delegating tasks is an effective way to circumvent stagnation in the group. Adhering to the following rules can counteract the pitfalls:

- Rotate the delegated tasks within the group before completion. In this way, each member is elaborating on other group member's work.
- Discuss the progress of the delegated task. Propose critical questions to the other group members on the task that you are responsible of.
- Before the discussion, the responsible group member starts the discussion by relating the work to the overall academic problem. This should be done short and crisp.

DEADLINES

Deadlines are an unavoidable thing on a course with written assignments. These external deadlines have to be met, of course, in order to pass the course. When planning your group work, the external deadlines will serve as the overall map of your group work process. In addition to the external deadlines you can use internal deadlines or milestones to facilitate the process. This is often a very good idea. By setting numerous internal deadlines you are sure not to miss a part of the product and you are sure to be on time. Implement deadlines on all aspects of your group work and make sure to align them with both your meetings and the external deadlines.

Examples of internal deadline can be:

- Reading the exercise guidelines before... (all)
- Talking to Charlotte from the kitchen about food item x before ... (group member name)
- Setting up search terms for PubMed on ... before ... (group member name)
- Adding minutes to logbog from meeting #1 before ... (rapporteur)
- Settling date for supervision with ... before ... (group member name)

PROJECT MANAGEMENT TOOLS

To keep track on all the small details, files, communication, and decisions in a project it is vital to use a good (digital) tool. You are strongly recommended to use a tool that is designed for collaborative project management. Not only will it facilitate the group work process and ensure that you are all in the loop and have access to all information and files, it will also be a learning experience in using collaborative digital project management tools – something that can save a project (e.g. a master thesis project) from collapsing from ineffectiveness.

You are of course free to use any tool you find feasible, but SquidHub is recommended. It is a simple, intuitive, and free web based tool that entails just the three elements needed without any additional fuzz: to do list, files, and communication.