# Considering approaches to supporting student ~~group work~~ teamwork for Aston’s blended approach

This is an Education Team discussion document focused on peer-based learning, teaching and/or assessment, in the context of Aston’s blended approach. The document also presents a series of proposals for consideration based on analysis of staff and student feedback through TP1 2020.

Peer-based group learning is widely recognised as active learning method capable of positively developing a range of transferable social and academic skills. Valued by employers and accrediting bodies because of work-relevant focus on communication, collaboration, negotiation, and problem-solving, group work can also provide valuable opportunities for students to develop social interaction in their learning. Collaborative learning is also demonstrated to lead to better grades (Burke, 2011).

Group work can also be challenging and is demonstrated to inhibit academic performance if not implemented or managed effectively (Cooper et al, 2018). Whilst increased anxiety is inherent in any positive challenge in learning, perceptions of unfairness, fear of negative evaluation, and uncertainty about expectations, are common themes when anxieties prove counterproductive. The development of effective collaboration is further challenged with reduced opportunity for face-to-face activities.

## General guidance notes

There is general value in supporting peer-learning activity in order to foster and develop a sense of academic community for students and staff. This is particularly relevant where opportunities for integrated social activity is reduced.

Group work is valued because it supports development of teamworking skills. ‘Group’ implies a collection or assemblage, ‘team’ has perhaps more dynamic and diverse associations. Let’s call it what it is - it’s **teamwork.**

If you want to assess students involving teamwork activities, you will need to include this in the indicative content of the module specification in the UMD. **If you want students to work in teams, you will need to teach them how to work in teams**.

If you want teams to work effectively and avoid ‘group-hate’ (Sorenson in Burke, 2011), you will need to think carefully about:

* Task/assessment design in terms of fostering integration and collaboration (HEA, 2014), such as incorporation of clear structures and approaches including possible ice-breaking activities.
* Assessment criteria and the link to learning outcomes in terms of assessment of process, product, or both.
* Assessment methodology (peer-evaluation can be effective but can also be divisive).
* Team selection (noting that random approaches can support greater heterogeneity and that allocation is best managed by the Tutor).
* Team size (smaller groups tend to work more effectively).
* Team training (considering the guidance provided and supporting learning and teaching activities)[[1]](#footnote-1)
* Monitoring and supporting team progress (mitigating for issues with group dynamics and including clear progress measures and formative support activity).
* Team activity duration (noting that the more diverse the team, the longer it takes to work well).

Note that a significant range of information related to teamwork is available for students in the [Get Ahead module](https://vle.aston.ac.uk/ultra/courses/_28302_1/cl/outline) (Units: Communicate Well/Ways of Communicating). The following provides an outline approach applicable to most teamwork contexts:

1. When planning teamwork activity, set up project teams early in the term. Consider getting students to work in their teams during regular group activities throughout the module, for example during break-out activities in your webinars. This will give students the opportunity to get to know each other, build trust and working relationships.
2. Consider introducing students to frameworks and models of teamwork, for example Belbin’s Roles or Tuckman’s Stages of Team Formation, or any other model you consider suitable. While such models can appear somewhat simplistic and they have their limitations, they can also be a useful platform for discussion of the complexities of teamwork and how they can be harnessed.
3. Set up ‘check-in points’ throughout the module during which students will report on how their team project is progressing and any challenges they have encountered so far – particularly if related to assessment activities.
4. Integrate regular reflection activities, linked with stages of working on the team project.

## Tools for supporting teamwork

It is also important to consider the tools used to support peer-to-peer learning, particularly when learning and teaching activities are online, or when associated with more substantive projects for formative and/or summative assessment. The following table highlights relevant learning technology systems and tools available at Aston including details of key areas of use and limitations:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| System | Strengths | Limitations | Information |
| Blackboard Collaborate Breakout Groups | Useful for in-webinar group activities. | Limited functionality in whiteboard and chat in breakout rooms. | <http://collaborate.tlc.aston.ac.uk/help-support/moderators/working-with-breakout-groups/> |
| Blackboard Group Journals | Collaborative space for group work and group-tutor communication. | Not directly integrated with other communication tools. Limited functionality. | <http://students.tlc.aston.ac.uk/blackboard/tools/journals/> |
| Blackboard Wikis | Rubrics and grading can be integrated. | Less feature rich than other online text-based collaboration tools. | <https://help.blackboard.com/Learn/Student/Interact/Wikis> |
| Blackboard Groups | Can integrate a range of wider collaborative tools including Collaborate, blogs, wikis, file exchange, task creation, and email. | Limited transferability of related digital capabilities. | <https://help.blackboard.com/Learn/Student/Interact/Groups> |
| Blackboard Discussion Boards (including Forums) | Rubrics and grading can be integrated. | Potentially unusual to have group/team discussions or reflections managed under supervised conditions. | <https://help.blackboard.com/Learn/Student/Interact/Discussions/Group_Discussions>  <https://help.blackboard.com/Learn/Student/Interact/Discussions/Forums> |
| Microsoft Office 365 | Transferability of related digital capabilities; Integrated tools (Class OneNote Notebooks, Teams, Student Email). | Not currently integrated directly with Blackboard Learn or some tools (Teams) still under evaluation and without defined institutional support. | <https://www2.aston.ac.uk/ict/services/software/teaching-software/home-software> |
| TEAMMATES – a peer feedback tool for groups | Automates peer-to-peer feedback in groups that can identify both good and poor engagement and contributions. Can be used for formative and summative feedback. | Not integrated with Blackboard. Students need clear guidance about how their feedback will be used. | http://telsupport.tlc.aston.ac.uk/tel-pilot-projects/teammates-for-peer-feedback-on-student-group-work/ |

## Considerations and proposals

Whilst Blackboard superficially provides tools that once supported teamwork, current expectations have moved on significantly leading to a growing number of requests being made regarding more active and integrated use of Microsoft products. Office365 is already provided to students and wrapping their use in the communication and collaboration platform that is Teams provides more sophisticated and additional functionality. From a learning and teaching perspective, greater use of these Microsoft tools will help drive competence and ability in their effective use improving digital capabilities which remain valuable transferable employability skills. Noting that there is scope for more active integration of Office 365 and Teams with Blackboard, key proposals and considerations are therefore as follows:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Proposal | Considerations |
| Work to integrate Microsoft Teams with Blackboard to enable more integrated approach. | LTI Advantage Tool available from Blackboard for Microsoft Teams integration[[2]](#footnote-2).  ‘Which system for what’ guidance required to avoid inconsistent approaches or to compromise integrity of learner analytics (MyEngagement data feeds could be revised). |
| Review and refresh student induction and support for Office 365. | Some support is currently provided by LDC as a secondary factor related to academic writing, presentations, and Maths support.  Scope for more detailed and coordinated approach to student induction with Microsoft tools – including how they can use these for private study and social purposes. |
| Review and refresh guidance for staff and related QA/E processes. | Relevant and related digital capabilities are not commonly included in the indicative content of module specifications in the UMD. |
| Review student experience for potential areas of systems integration and refinement | For example: Appointment bookings, timetable and calendars, communication channels. |

## Bibliography

Burke, A. (2011) Groupwork: How to use groups effectively. The Journal of Effective Teaching, Vol. 11, No. 2, 87-95: <https://uncw.edu/jet/articles/vol11_2/burke.pdf>

Cooper, K.M., Downing, V.R. & Brownell, S.E. (2018) The influence of active learning practices on student anxiety in large-enrollment college science classrooms. *IJ STEM Ed* **5,** 23. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40594-018-0123-6>

HEA/Higher Education Academy. (2014) Group Work: teaching international students series, AdvanceHE Knowledge Hub: <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/group-work>

1. Note useful guidance regarding online ‘netiquette’: <http://telsupport.tlc.aston.ac.uk/2018/11/30/digital-etiquette-netiquette-discussion-boards/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://help.blackboard.com/Learn/Instructor/Interact/Microsoft_Teams> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)