

## **Case Method and Group Work**

This handout was developed for use with the “Case Method and Group Work” handout at New Faculty Orientation.

### ***Case Method***

Case method is a powerful student-centered teaching strategy that can impart students with critical thinking, communication, and interpersonal skills.

Having students work through complex, ambiguous, real world problems engages students with the course material, encouraging them to “see it from an action perspective, rather than analyze it from a distance” (Angelo & Boehrer). Case studies are, by their nature, multidisciplinary, and “allow the application of theoretical concepts...bridging the gap between theory and practice” (Davis & Wilcock). Working on cases requires students to research and evaluate multiple sources of data, fostering information literacy.

Case method is also effective at developing real world, professional skills. Working on case studies requires good organizational and time management skills. Case method increases student proficiency with written and oral communication, as well as collaboration and team-work. “Case studies force students into real-life situations,” training them in managerial skills such as “holding a meeting, negotiating a contract, giving a presentation, etc” (Daly, 2002).

### ***Case Method and Groups***

Students may be unfamiliar with the case method or may be predisposed to distrust group work. They need to know exactly what is expected of them in order to be successful in class. To avoid causing frustration, consider the following tips:

1. Start with a simple case first
2. Discuss the purpose and suggested methods for doing a case assignment
3. If cases are done in a team, introduce students to resources for team dynamics
4. Allow sufficient class time for students to meet with their teams
5. Establish discussion etiquette guidelines
6. Take sufficient time to introduce the narrative and establish the case facts
7. Reassure students that “messiness” is normal for this type of assignment
8. Make sure you give students an opportunity to provide their reactions and feedback (Pyatt, 2006)

If there are specialized skills or knowledge needed to complete the case analysis, go over this with the class. “Provide background resources for the case study, including supplementary readings and the necessary data to form an opinion” (University of Calgary). Spend some time at the beginning familiarizing students with specialized terminology or the expected formats for professional documents (Daly, 2002).

A basic framework for a case-based discussion can be broken down into six steps:

1. *Give students ample time to read and think about the case.* If the case is long, assign it as homework with a set of questions for students to consider.
2. *Introduce the case briefly and provide some guidelines for how to approach it.* Clarify how you want students to think about the case. Break down the steps you want students to take in analyzing the case. If you would like students to disregard or focus on certain information, specify that as well.
3. *Create groups and monitor them to make sure everyone is involved.* Small groups can drift off track if you do not provide structure. You may want to designate roles within each group. Alternatively, group members could be assigned broad perspectives to represent, or asked to speak for the various stake-holders in the case study.
4. *Have groups present their solutions/reasoning*
5. *Ask questions for clarification* and to move the discussion to another level
6. *Synthesize issues raised* (Carnegie Mellon)

## **Forming Groups**

There are three general types of student groups.

- In-class Groups
- Study Groups
- Project Groups:

These groups can be either student-formed or instructor-assigned. Students often prefer forming their own groups, while as instructors often want more control. When deciding which method to use, keep in mind that “although students-selected groups perceived they produced higher-quality work, the actual grades assigned to the group projects did not differ between group formation conditions” (Hilton and Phillips, 2010). What’s more important is that the groups, no matter what their makeup, are taught how to communicate with each other.

## **Project Charters**

All projects should begin with a **project charter**. The project charter “is a statement of the scope, objectives and participants in a project. It provides a preliminary delineation of roles and responsibilities, outlines the project objectives, identifies the main stakeholders, and defines the authority of the project manager. It serves as a reference of authority for the future of the project” (Lehmann)

“The purpose of the project charter is to document:

- Reasons for undertaking the project
- Objectives and constraints of the project
- Directions concerning the solution
- Identities of the main stakeholders”  
(Lehmann)

To help students get off to a good start, provide them with a project charter template to fill out before beginning work with their group. Having a project charter reduces the possibility of conflict. A good charter also helps set the groundwork for successful conflict resolution.

**See the end of this document for a sample Project Charter.**

## ***Group Conflict***

The most common problems for students using group work in the classroom are an absence of leadership and coordination, an inability to communicate effectively, difficulty defining and assigning tasks, trouble maintaining equal participation, and frustration with setting and achieving group goals. Instructors have expressed frustration with dividing students into groups, and dealing with student conflicts or disruptive group members.

The most common causes of conflict within groups are:

- **Faulty communication:** criticism is given inappropriately, and group members' feelings are hurt and they feel devalued
- **Attribution errors:** members make errors in determining the causes of the behavior of other members. This can occur, for example, when one member doesn't complete his or her work and the other members jump to the conclusion that the reason for this was nothing more than irresponsibility. Maybe there was a good reason why that one member fell behind.
- **Mistrust:** members do not trust each other due to poor communication, faulty attributions, or someone's lack of follow through on obligations
- **Grudges:** members hold grudges when they feel they have been treated unfairly, when criticism has been given inappropriately, when there have been faulty attributions, or for other reasons; people become angry with each other and they sometimes nurse their anger and remain hostile rather than working through and resolving their anger and moving on.
- **Personality clashes:** this can occur when groups are put together randomly in particular. The styles of working differ with each member and in some cases, there may be a lack of fit among the members" (Hadad & Reed, p. 267).

## ***Conflict Resolution***

"Conflict in a group doesn't have to mean that the group cannot function. In fact, if the conflict is handled well, it may actually help the group to function. People can grow and learn from conflict, especially if it can be resolved in a way that makes the group a winner, not in a way that makes one individual the loser. If the resolution involves all members of the group, regarding the conflict as a group problem, rather than as one person's problem, the group cohesiveness may even be increased. Group conflicts should be dealt with because they can become destructive and divide the group" (Hadad & Reed, p. 268).

Here are some conflict resolution methods that you can present to your students when dealing with group conflict:

1. **Deal with each conflict as it arises.** Do not try to ignore it, hoping it will go away—it will probably fester and become worse if not dealt with. Let's use the example of one person in a group working at a very slow pace that is holding up the work of other group members.
2. **Present the conflict as evidence that people are involved and excited about their work, and that they are showing a passionate commitment to what they are doing.** This may involve a little situational reconstruction to enable everyone to view what has been a negative situation as an opportunity for positive outcomes. For example, note that while the group may be frustrated with one member's slow work, the frustration reflects the enthusiasm of the group and the slowness may indicate the painstaking effort and care of the slow group member.
3. **Confront the issue as a problem to be solved.** Focus on working together to solve the problem. In the example noted above, the issue would be how to enable the slow worker to be faster, providing what the rest of the group needs without losing the care that he or she has been taking.
4. **Do not engage in blaming or character assassination.** In the above example, blaming the slow worker or calling the slow worker derogatory names is strictly prohibited.
5. **Be open-minded and fair, listening to all sides of the issue.** Why does the slow worker say he or she is slow?
6. **Insist on criticism being given appropriately and constructively.** Explain the problems that slowness has been causing and how it is making the group members feel.
7. **Make sure everyone in the group understands all sides of the issue by having them repeat or write down what they believe the arguments to be.** Then check to make sure that everyone is correct in their understanding. Does the slow worker realize why the group is having problems with his or her slowness? Does the group understand why the slow worker is taking so much time?
8. **Brainstorm to find solutions or compromises.** Perhaps the slow worker's job is actually bigger than it seems and could be broken into sub-parts with another member helping. Perhaps the slow worker could filter parts of his or her work to the group as each part is ready, rather than waiting for the entire task to be done (Hadad & Reed, 2007, p. 270).

Excerpted from: *The Post-Secondary Learning Experience*, Marilyn Hadad and Maureen J. Reed, 2007.

**For sample scripts for managing difficult situations in groups, see the end of this document.**

**This handout was compiled from the following LTO documents:**

Teaching Methods for Case Studies:

<http://ryerson.ca/content/dam/lt/resources/handouts/CaseMethodBestPractices.pdf>

Using Project Management Concepts in the Facilitation of Group Work

<http://ryerson.ca/content/dam/lt/resources/handouts/ProjectManagementGroupWork.pdf>

**Group Charter: Determining group direction  
Handout 1**

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**What is/are the goal(s) of our group?**

*(Remember, goals should be SMART: Simple, Measurable, Attainable, Results oriented, Time bound)*

**What are our pressures? (ex: Money? Time?)**

**How will we deal with/compensate for our pressures?**

**What are the strengths of our group and its members?**

| <b>Group member</b> | <b>Strength(s)</b> |
|---------------------|--------------------|
|                     |                    |
|                     |                    |
|                     |                    |
|                     |                    |
|                     |                    |
|                     |                    |

**How will we capitalize on the strengths of each member?**

*(Hint: Think about your group goals. How might each person contribute to achieving them?)*

**What communication strategies will we use to communicate?**  
*(Email? Facebook? What is the maximum expected response time?)*

**What process will we follow if someone does not live up to the responsibilities? Be specific.**

**Are there any other commitments, responsibilities, roles, goals, etc that your group has agreed upon?**

**Signatures**

|          |          |          |          |          |
|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
|          |          |          |          |          |
| Member 1 | Member 2 | Member 3 | Member 4 | Member 5 |

## Scripts for Managing Difficult Situations in Groups

## Handout 2

## Page 1

**Introduction**

Conflict is a normal and healthy part of all group development. In fact, studies have shown that when groups lack conflict, they can develop ‘groupthink’, whereby group members are so cohesive that they make quick, unanimous decisions and ignore alternative information.

Groupthink reduces creativity.

While conflict *is* normal, it must be addressed when it arises and handled in a healthy way.

Below are examples of conflict situations you may encounter in your groups and some suggested phrases you can use to address them.

| Situation  | Phrase   |
|--|--|
| A strong view is expressed but no supporting evidence or logic is given to support it.       | “ <i>You may have a good point, but I want to understand your view a little better. Why do you believe...</i> ”  |
| You’re at a meeting and discussion becomes unfocused.  | “ <i>That’s an interesting point. Can we talk about how it relates to [insert relevant topic]</i> ”  |
| More than one view is presented at the same time.  | “ <i>OK, so we’ve just heard three unique ideas. [If you can summarize the ideas in a few seconds, do so.] Can we discuss them one at a time before we move on?</i> ”  |
| You sense that someone else is unhappy with an idea you’ve presented.                        | “ <i>It seems that you aren’t completely satisfied with the approach I’m proposing. What would be your suggestion?</i> ”   |
| Someone is being stubborn and refuses to change their position.                              | “ <i>I see you feel strongly about your position. What would it take to change your mind?</i> ”  |
| One person does most of the talking, possibly drowning out the views of other group members. | “ <i>So Sue, it’s clear that your view is [insert summary]. I’m wondering what John and Mary think about this issue.</i> ”   |
| One person is particularly shy and doesn’t usually offer their opinion.                      | “ <i>We’ve heard a few ideas on this subject, but I’m wondering if you had any other ideas Sue? The more input we can get, the better.</i> ”   |
| Someone is continually not fulfilling their responsibilities to the group.                   | “ <i>Bobby, I know you’re busy, but the rest of the group is counting on you to achieve our goals. If you can’t contribute, perhaps we need to... [insert the consequence your group agreed upon in their charter]</i> ” |