

How To Guide:

Setting Group Work



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Context

Description:

Group projects are widely used in architectural education. As a teaching and learning activity group work can enhance learners collaboration, communication, negotiation and organisation skills – all necessary when working with the complex design challenges that sustainable architecture can pose. Whilst group work supports the development of these skills it is important to note that it will only benefit students if it is well planned and properly supported.

[ARCH4change Teaching Toolkit Glossary Reference: Active Learning, Experiential Learning, Applied Learning](#)

Relevance of method to climate change design teaching integration:

The research for the ARCH4CHANGE project in general, and in particular the contextual [Literature Review](#) and experience from [Case Studies](#) demonstrates the value of embedding collaborative, participatory and engagement exercises into projects to allow the [design themes](#) particularly [PEOPLE & COMMUNITY](#) to be addressed successfully. In architectural education, collaborative learning is important due to the skills required in design practice and due its benefits for formal and informal learning in which values and tacit knowledge can be shared.

Practical Considerations

Class Size:

Any medium to large class cohort can be organised into groups. The size of each group should be informed by pedagogical objectives and ideally the smallest number of students needed to achieve these objectives. It is generally accepted that three is the minimum and seven the maximum size for successful group working – five students would be optimum.

Learning Stage (Year Group):

Applicable to all learning stages, with different benefits at each stage. For Foundation students, peer to peer learning is an important part of group work whilst for Intermediate and Advanced students the focussed completion of a shared set of

objectives whilst negotiating different positions and values is a key benefit.

Educator Resourcing/skills

Educators will need to operate in a facilitator as well as educator role and have good organizational and communication skills. For group projects to be successful they must be planned in advance. Students must be advised of the rationale for a group-work assessment and time must be given to clarify expectations and identify where support will be required by the educator.

Available teaching space & resources (tech etc)

An assessed group project is ideally undertaken in a classroom or hybrid context online. However, with access to online collaboration spaces and virtual meeting rooms, group work can be successfully completed online. These tools can also be helpful for the educator in relation to planning assessment as the evidence of collaboration can be presented back by the students.

Dependent on the type of exercise the range of resources can range in complexity from no resources to digital resources, paper, pens etc.

Teaching & Learning Considerations

Themes:

This approach can be used alongside any of the ARCH4CHANGE curriculum themes.

Learning Outcomes/Objectives

- Students are enabled to tackle more complex problems than possible by an individual student
- Allows diverse cultural and personal experiences of the world to inform design processes
- Communication skills including the ability to negotiate and manage conflicts
- Develop new approaches to synthesizing different knowledge and expertise
- Students learn to articulate their own position and perspective relative to their peers
- Sharing of personal perspectives and insights enables students to connect to each other and improve team building skills
- Facilitates students to critically evaluate their own values, beliefs and assumption

Course Context (alignment with other subjects/modules)

Group projects can be used in any subject or learning but are particularly beneficial for complex design challenges.

Timeframe (length of learning activity):

Group projects can be incorporated as short formative learning activities within a specific timetabled session or longer-term activities which culminate in a summative assessment. Short focussed group projects can be particularly effective for cohorts who are just getting to know each other as in tackling a task together they are also getting to know their new peers. With longer group projects it is important that students are given a clear sense of the project programme with key deadlines and objectives identified from the outset.

Methods

In setting a group project an educator must plan carefully.

What stage are the learners at and what experience might they have in group work? What are the learning objectives of the specific project and how might group work support this? How can cohesiveness of the group be supported and encouraged? Is the work to be assessed and if so what form of assessment will be followed?

1. Setting up groups – Groups can be selected by the educator or self selected by the students. Whilst generally selection of groups by the educator is preferable it should be noted that students with additional learning or social needs may require the support of a classmate or friend that they trust. Educators can assign learners to groups on the basis of performance or known skills or use a random selection approach. Whichever approach is taken the rationale should be explained to the students.
2. Presentation of project - Present the objectives of the project, the timeline and key targets. Explain the mode of assessment. Support the members in allocating roles within the group, agreeing a communication process and mechanism for identifying and resolving problems.
3. During the project - Monitor and review the progress of each group at regular intervals. Encourage them to set their targets and allocate tasks fairly. If a problem or difficulty emerges with a group support the students in addressing this as quickly as possible.
4. Free-riding – In group projects there will sometimes be members who do not contribute equally to the work and this can be high source of student dissatisfaction. Educators have a responsibility to ensure that the group dynamics are permitting all students to engage equally by reviewing individual contributions, incorporating peer assessment, assigning specific tasks and managing attendance and participation.

Deliverables

From educator perspective: Resources to facilitate the group project including the identification of appropriate space for collaboration

From students perspective: Participation in achieving the shared project objectives. Completed group output. Evidence of collaboration and the project process.

Feedback

During the monitoring phase of any group project, educators should provide appropriate feedback at key stages individually and collectively to the group. Students should also provide the teaching team with feedback on the progress of the work and their reflections at the end of the project. This enables iterations of the project over time to ensure that it can be further refined.

Assessment:

Assessment can often be one of the most contentious elements of group work for both educators and learners. In setting up the project and identifying the assessment approach it is necessary to differentiate between the process and the output or product of the work and clarify whether both are being assessed and what the grade weighting will be. This approach should also be reflected in the assessment criteria for the task and linked to the learning objectives for the activity. Assessment strategies should ideally recognise individual contributions alongside the group processes and outcomes.

If the process is to be assessed, identify which elements will be evaluated – participation, collaboration, development of the work, communication – as these will need to be evidenced through meeting notes, journals, process sheets etc. Forms of Peer to Peer Assessment and self assessment can also be incorporated into the evaluation of group work. This can be through open dialogue amongst the group members or anonymous peer evaluation. Students can benefit greatly from peer and self assessment but they will require guidance and support on criteria and giving feedback. These forms of assessment do not need to contribute to the overall grade (although with careful planning and structure they can) and are often formative only.

If both the process and the project output are to be assessed then it is recommended that a mixed approach is taken. The overall group submission or project output can be given a single grade, whilst individual contributions can be graded separately. The educator should determine from the outset the optimum weighting of these elements and align the assessment criteria. Rubrics can be helpful in this regard.

Recommendations

Plan the group project carefully in advance. Consider the learner cohort, their experience and abilities, and structure the groups accordingly.

Remember that each student may have invisible challenges or obstacles (different learning abilities or personal commitments) in engaging with group work so aim for creating cohesion in the group through structure and clarity.

Explain to students why the group work is important to their learning and development of collaborative design skills.

Be clear from the outset how the work is to be assessed, the weighting of collaborative and individual inputs and outputs, the balance of process and product. If peer assessment is to be used explain the approach in advance.

References

Ryan, M. F. 'Groupwork in Higher Education: A Practitioners Guide' Technological University of the Shannon

Tucker, R and Abbasi, N. 'Conceptualising teamwork and group-work in architecture and design related disciplines'



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