

Learning in Groups

A handbook for face-to-face and online environments

Fourth edition

David Jaques and Gilly Salmon

LEARNING IN GROUPS

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ENVIRONMENTS

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DAVID JAKUES AND GILLY SALMON

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PREFACE TO THE 4TH EDITION

Since the first edition of this book appeared some 20 years ago a vast number of changes have taken place both in the principles of learning groups, in the techniques and technologies which support them, and in the many ways to lead them. So for this edition Gilly Salmon, whose books *E-Tivities* and *E-Moderating* have a strong focus on online group learning, has joined me as co-author. We have chosen not to write separate chapters about on and offline group work but rather to demonstrate how transferable so many of the principles and practice are by interweaving the two modalities and where appropriate, drawing comparisons.

This edition also includes several structural changes as well as updating, though it retains a similar basic structure and content to previous editions. Examples of more recent theory and practice in groups, both face-to-face and online, have been incorporated; exercises based on the text appear in the Appendix. New material on the fast-growing phenomenon of online learning groups, both synchronous and asynchronous and whether in its own right or as part of a blended course, has been incorporated where appropriate. However, since there is constant overlap between underlying theories and processes in such groups and in traditional face-to-face ones, it will serve little purpose constantly to remind readers that such and such applies equally to the online world, where, *mutatis mutandis*, it should be obvious with a little thought. The important difference, however, between the two modes is that the written word replaces speech and visual cues particularly in asynchronous online group interaction and leaves an audit trail or record of proceedings. And the time delay in asynchronous online group work which can sometimes run over a period of days or even weeks and across time zones is not usually conducive to instant feedback; but it does have the advantage of offering more time for reflection both in action and on action, particularly given the record of proceedings. (For a fuller treatment of working with groups online, see Salmon 2002 and 2004.)

We think of our intended readership as academics, teachers, instructors, tutors, trainers, moderators, student teachers, course designers, in fact anyone who is interested in the understanding and development of group learning and their own part in it.

David Jaques and Gilly Salmon
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INTRODUCTION

Increasingly over the last two decades, learning in small groups has become a regular part of student experience whether in the seminar room, the laboratory, in independent groups, in online form or even in the lecture theatre. Though not always given a central role, group discussion, whether face-to-face, purely electronic or a blend of the two, has a critical role to play in the all-round education of students. This is not merely on the grounds of economy with larger numbers but through a rapidly expanding recognition of the nature and levels of learning that take place through active participation in group processes. Group interaction allows students to negotiate meanings, to express themselves in the language of the subject and to establish a more intimate and dialectical contact with academic and teaching staff than more formal methods permit. It also develops the more instrumental skills of listening, careful reading, presenting ideas (both in speech or in writing), persuading, and teamwork, all qualities attractive to employers with their greater expectations of the graduates' ability to communicate; and this is further underlined by the high standards set by radio and television which make for more critical audiences. But perhaps most importantly, group discussion can or should give students the chance to monitor their own learning and thus gain a degree of self-direction and independence of the tutors in their studies. All these purposes are of excellent pedigree. Yet often they are not realised to a satisfactory level and both tutors and students may end up with a sense of frustration.

Leading a successful group discussion, on or offline, does not always come naturally to many otherwise gifted tutors who may too readily fall back on a reserve position of authority, expert and prime talker. Brown and Atkins (1999) report research evidence that the mean proportion of time tutors spent talking in discussion groups was 64 per cent and could reach 86 per cent. Ramsden (2003) describes the 'thoroughly predictable outcomes' of traditional group discussion as a theory of teaching which assumes the mode of telling and transmission as its basis.

The development of skills in group leadership, for both face-to-face and online situations are a constant theme throughout the book.

CONTENT, PROCESS AND STRUCTURE

In all human interactions there are three main ingredients – *content*, *process* and *structure*. Content relates to the subject matter or task on which people are working. Process refers to the dynamics (both emotional, intellectual and behavioural) of what is happening between those involved. Perhaps because content is more readily definable, or at least examinable, it commonly receives more attention from all concerned. Process, on the other hand, though rarely attended to, is usually what determines whether a group works effectively or not. Group members are often only half-aware of the ways in which factors like physical environment, size, cohesion, climate, norms, liaisons, organisational structure or group goals affect discussion an understanding of which should enhance a participant's worth to the group. For no one is this more true than the leader, e-convenor, e-moderator or tutor who has a crucial position in determining the 'success' or 'failure' of a discussion group.

Students too can benefit from training and consequent alertness, both in the group skills of discussion and project teams, much of which can be developed through the self and peer assessment of these skills. And assumptions that online groups, left to themselves, will naturally progress beyond the stages of low-level exchanges to achieve a level of knowledge development are unlikely to be realised. To achieve successful outcomes for students, tutors too need training in the arts of working online. Without such training, the sophisticated, off-the-shelf, integrated educational software packages nowadays provided in many universities will not in themselves achieve effective outcomes.

Our aim in this book is therefore not just to promote understanding of group methods but to develop group skills for tutors and students alike as well as widening the range of possible group experiences. The title 'Learning in Groups' is meant to suggest that groups are not merely a valuable vehicle for learning about the skills and concepts of a subject discipline, but are also a way of learning about groups: developing abilities in cooperative work for later life.

What you choose to accept and use from the book will reflect your own practice and philosophy of teaching. Therefore, as a starting point we shall state our own position on learning in groups.

Cooperation is a key word in learning groups: tutors need to develop a clear and coordinated strategy for teaching students how to work together and improve their cooperative skills. Cooperation also means each and every member of the group taking a part and sharing responsibility for its success and in some cases having a clear brief to support each other's learning. In sum, an effective group will have both common shared aims and differentiated individual aims.

Assessment too has an important part to play in drawing the attention of students to the importance of effective group work and their part in it and, where it is accompanied by self and peer assessment and team grades, provides strong motivation to take full part in, and learn about, peer learning and teamwork.

So much for the dynamics of groups; what of learning? Our approach to learning is based the following assumptions:

- We learn best when we are personally and actively involved in the learning experience.
- Knowledge of any kind has more significance when we learn it through our own initiative, insight and discovery.
- Learning is best when we are committed to aims that we have been involved in setting, when our participation with others is valued and when there is a supporting framework in which to learn.

Groups can provide a further level of experience, meta-learning, (Jackson 2004) as they view their own thinking and skills in relation to others, reflect on their own abilities and are thus motivated to regulate their actions and behaviour for mutual benefit. And given that interactive behaviour in groups is an inseparable aspect of the person's social repertoire there is potential for self learning for life in this (Priola and Smith 2004).

Other forms of group-centred learning have also become increasingly popular: Peer-Assisted Learning. Problem-Based Learning and Enquiry-Based Learning (PAL, PBL and EBL) have gained status and popularity, and the emergence of Team-Based Learning as a core strategy is emerging as yet another powerful challenge to the traditional design of courses. New and imaginative stratagems seem, quite rightly, to evolve every day, all in one way or another embodying principles of active and interactive learning.

We have tried to write a book that is both readable and practical; one which permits flexibility, yet covers most of the ingredients of this wondrous mix of human behaviours.

This edition includes several structural changes as well as updating, though it retains a similar basic structure and content. Examples of more recent theory and practice in groups both face-to-face and online have been incorporated; exercises based on the text appear in the Appendix; more exercises are accessible on the website www.learningingroups.com. New material on the fast-growing phenomenon of online learning groups, both synchronous and asynchronous and whether in its own right or as part of a blended course, has been incorporated where appropriate. We are also interested in the way that online communication has expanded and enriched opportunities in networking, both in and between groups, and consequently in the creation of communities for learning, practice and even therapy. The important difference, however, between the two modes is that the written word replaces speech and visual cues particularly in asynchronous online group interaction and leaves an audit trail or record of proceedings. And the time delay in asynchronous online group work which can sometimes run over a period of days or even weeks and across time zones is not usually conducive to instant feedback; but it does have the advantage of offering more time for reflection both in action and on action, particularly given the record of proceedings. (For a fuller treatment of working with groups online, see Salmon 2002b).

USING THE BOOK

Tutors and e-moderators

We hope that this book will be of use to practitioners working with groups in many fields, countries, domains both on and offline. In UK Higher Education, often the people in these role are called lecturers; in colleges of Further Education, they may be tutors, and in schools they are teachers. In the corporate domain, *trainer* is often the word. Worldwide there are other names – perhaps instructors, teaching assistants, professors and more. We don't mind at all what you call yourselves but on the whole we've chosen the word 'tutors' to mean those stalwart and talented humans working with face-to-face groups and the term 'e-moderator' to include both the familiar roles and newer skills that cover human intervention in the virtual world. We hope you'll consider yourself included.

Discussion and interaction

Discussion of some kind takes place in almost all groups; it is a form of interaction mainly, but not exclusively, located in education where the learning takes place mainly through talking about subject matter in order, among other things, to gain deeper levels of understanding. We use *interaction* as a more generic term for all sorts of group activity especially when we are looking at various communication behaviours.

Members, students, learners and participants

Where we are writing about interaction in a group in general terms we refer to those involved as *participants*; as *members* when considering composition and identity and as *students* when in an educational context engaging with learning with and through subject matter. When we focus on learning strategies we use the term *learners*. Confusing? We hope not: they all seem to fit in wherever they occur.

Groups and teams

We use the term *groups* for people who come together to share knowledge or to learn from each other through discussion. We use *team* when they are engaged in a task with a plan, product or decision as the end point.

Assessment and evaluation

When we refer to *assessment* we mean ways in which students' progress and achievement are measured and often graded. *Evaluation* refers to methods of monitoring and getting feedback on courses and teaching.

THEORY AND PRACTICE IN GROUP DYNAMICS

This chapter provides you with a background in the theory of learning in groups. We introduce a range of understandings of how groups work and their significance for learning. You can skip it if you wish, but we hope that if you move on, you'll come back later!

Group phenomena have been the focus of many interpretations and analyses through both research experiments and theoretical interpretations. While experimental evidence can produce and confirm the existence of many important aspects of group dynamics, the value of theories, especially where based on extensive observation and insight, is in their contribution to a richer understanding of some of the more complex phenomena evident in groups, and how to handle them. They can also help to illuminate and organise research evidence in a way which extends its meaning beyond the situations from which they were derived. So you will see that we try and weave them together. No doubt you will do your own testing and weaving too.

INDIVIDUAL AND GROUPS

In this book we consider the group from both individual and collective viewpoints, and most importantly, both together!

First we acknowledge that individual people are the raw material that go to make up groups; not all collections of individuals will have a sense of belonging to a group, though outsiders may perceive them as such; the collective identity, if it is to emerge, will require some form of recognition and response between the individuals who may have different perceptions of their situation vis-à-vis the group as a whole as well as their part in it.

As a group develops so they are likely to experience, and be affected by, whatever purposes, norms, roles and relationships are assumed alongside a shared identity. In that sense a group exists only in the minds of individuals functioning as a collection of people.

Groups

Here is our working definition of groups:

Groups exist as *more than* a collection of people when they possess all of the following qualities to a greater or lesser degree.

Collective perception: members are collectively conscious of their existence as a group.

Needs: people join a group because they believe it will satisfy some needs or give them some rewards such as recognition or self understanding through feedback.

Shared aims: members hold or quickly develop some shared aims or ideals which bind them together. The achievement of aims is may be one of the rewards.

Interdependence: members are interdependent insofar as they are affected by and respond to any event that affects any of the group's members.

Social organisation: it comprises a social unit with norms, roles, statuses, power and emotional relationships.

Interaction: members influence and respond to each other in the process of communicating. The sense of group exists even when members are not collected in the same place, such as when they are part of an online group.

Cohesiveness: members want to remain in the group, to contribute to its well-being and aims, and to join in its activities.

Membership: two or more people interacting explicitly or implicitly for longer than a few minutes constitute a group if there is recognition of mutual bonds.

We include the dyad or pair as a group in this book if it meets most of the characteristics above.

Teams and groups – do we regard them as the same? As we stated in the Preface, we use the term group for people who come together to share knowledge, for personal development or to learn from each other through discussion. We use team for groups that are engaged in a task or project geared towards an end product or decision. All teams can thus be viewed as groups, but not all groups as teams.

Now we introduce some key theories that we consider most important to explore to underpin our understanding and working with learning groups.

PSYCHODYNAMIC THEORY

Freud was the first to offer theoretical insights into group behaviour. In *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921) he claimed that people are drawn into, and remain in, groups because of emotional ties between members, and that one of the principal mechanisms in the effecting of such ties is identification – the process whereby a person wants to be like his or her parent(s). The Freudian school saw the basic processes in a group as outward manifestations of the inner lives of its members: the intrapersonal expressed as the interpersonal. The Tavistock model arose from this approach and has developed one of the most powerful interpretations of group interaction.

Bion (1961), one of the Tavistock's key figures, proposed that a group operates simultaneously at two levels: the work group and the basic assumption group. The work group meets to perform a specific and overt task. However, this is frequently obstructed, or diverted by the powerful emotional drives of the basic assumption activity. The basic group behaves as if it shared the following tacit assumptions or motives.

Obtaining security and protection from one individual on whom it can depend. Security and protection can derive from the designated leader or any member who is accepted in the role. The group unconsciously assumes that some sort of magic resides in the leader. In learning groups, students frequently direct attention to the tutor's remarks, as if he or she were the source of all wisdom, to the exclusion of their colleagues' contributions. Even if they lose respect for a particular tutor there is a sense in which the position is endowed with authority or some external power.

Preserving the group from annihilation by either attacking something (fight) or avoiding the task (flight). Fight would typically involve the group in scapegoating some other person or group in order to avoid a difficult problem. Flight may involve withdrawal, passivity, dwelling in the past or jesting, and the group may seem happy to distract itself from its task by focusing on some other harmless and irrelevant issue. In either case, the group uses its energy to defend itself from its own internal fears and anxieties, such that it neither develops nor achieves an effective output (de Board 1978).

Engaging in pairing. Pairing has as its basic assumption that the purpose of the group is to bring two people together who will somehow save the group from its current predicament. Two individuals form a bond in which warmth, closeness and affection are shown. Frequently this happens when the group is bored, lost or resentful in its discussion and is unable to express or otherwise cope with these feelings. In learning groups pairing may take three possible forms.

- 1 Two students provide mutual respect and support for each other to the exclusion of other members who are thus rendered inactive.

- 2 The pair engage in intellectual battle, each partner representing a different side of a conflict that has been preoccupying the group. Again the rest of the group are mere bystanders.
- 3 The tutor may pair with the group as a whole and collude with them in their wish to avoid the appropriate task.

The Tavistock theoretical concepts were developed through a wealth of experience of groups in therapeutic settings and at conferences in human relations training and the Tavistock Institute applied them with some degree of success to industrial and organisational settings. However, they are not always easy to accept and to identify without a certain amount of induction and it is sometimes said that their interpretations of group behaviour are probably 25 per cent right 25 per cent of the time. They may be less relevant to learning groups committed to the task of intellectual development, but we think that every tutor should at least be aware of them as a latent force as when issues surface they can be quite powerful.

Understanding Tavistock in your groups

Pairing is often characterised by a sense of unreal hope: 'Everything will be okay when we get a new room', 'It'll come all right in the New Year'. The need to face up to and work through disappointments and failures is conveniently avoided by this unreal but seductive promise of things to come. Pairing can also be likened to two cells coming together in order for the group to reproduce itself – that is to say, develop another task and direction for the group distinct from the agreed one.

The Tavistock approach has also brought into focus other issues of value in our understanding of group dynamics such as concepts of authority, responsibility, boundaries, projections, organisation and large group phenomena.

Authority in groups

Whenever decisions have to be made, as in a team or a project group, about tasks and process or about the allocation roles, authority problems are likely to occur. Whose job is it to decide? Can the group give any one person that sanction? Where a designated 'authority person' exists, a group may either find itself dependent on them, or counter-dependent (attacking authority). Sometimes an individual may become a repository for repressed or unexpressed feelings in a group, no matter how reasonable or unreasonable, and where these are about their perception of the leader may resolve into a conflict between the two as protagonists.

Many students who object to the authority of the teacher are not really seeking an alternative to the status quo. They may be avoiding the need to accept that learning is their own responsibility and that they have to face the consequences of the choices they make. It is important therefore for the teacher to create the conditions in which the students can make conscious choices of alternative courses of action, supportively but firmly bringing such issues out into the open (see contract, pages 90 and 93).

Responsibility

Often there is a feeling in groups that the ultimate responsibility for each person's action, and its consequences, resides in any figure of authority. In learning groups, students may not take responsibility for the role they play in contributing to a successful experience. Whether they are accustomed to challenging authority overtly, accepting it meekly, or tolerating it with resentment and bad grace, they may never have examined the consequences of such attitudes. Somehow the responsibility for what happens is assumed to lie firmly on the shoulders of the teacher who may find it difficult to shrug it off. Equally problematical may be the actions of a teacher who wants to keep everyone happy and meet all their needs. It may seem easier to respond to a student's sense of helplessness by offering to meet it and without questioning its provenance, to play the role of the compulsive helper, thus missing an opportunity to develop the student's capacity for self-growth into greater autonomy and responsibility.

Boundaries

All of us have a physical and psychological boundary in relation to others. Our own skin constitutes a physical boundary while the distinction between our private thoughts, feelings and fantasies, and the 'known' or assumed outside world constitutes another. The same can be said of the group; both in a subjective sense, and a more objective and symbolic way, boundaries can distinguish one group from another. The physical or virtual space occupied by the group and the time span it covers are obvious and objective boundaries. Both of these are typically under the control of the tutor or leader. Less tangible and more subjective are the task boundary, which determines what the group should or should not do, and the input boundary which requires members to undergo certain social procedures before membership is acquired. Evidence of the strength of subjective boundaries can be readily perceived if a stranger – perhaps a new student – arrives unannounced in an established group, or if the tutor invites a colleague to sit in on a seminar.

Projection

Sometimes the negative feelings we have towards other people are too dangerous to permit of conscious expression and, as a mechanism to defend us against the anxiety that this produces, we attribute these feelings, motives or qualities to the person or persons towards whom our feelings are really directed. We thus experience the feelings as coming 'at us' rather than 'from us'. This is the mechanism known as projection. Some students may for instance see the tutor as hostile when they are in fact feeling hostility to the tutor but unable to recognise it. They will usually hotly deny the existence of such a feeling if challenged.

Just as individuals can plant their own bad feelings on others in the group, so a group can spend a lot of time and energy in projecting its own conflicts or inadequacies onto another group or the institution. This is more usually more true of staff groups (discussed further in Chapter 8) and student political and union meetings than of learning groups.