**Supporting autistic students undertaking group work**

## Context

Group work can present several difficulties for autistic students, often because the nature of group work interacts directly with the central characteristics of autism. **Please bear in mind that every experience of autism is unique, and not all autistic people will find group work challenging. No guidance can replace talking with your students and finding out what works for them.**

* **Unpredictability:** group work is often more ‘free form’ and without obvious structure. Groups may change, which can add to the sense of unpredictability. Groups may be left to get on with the task with little direction or intervention.
* **Lack of control:** autistic students who set high standards of perfection (for themselves, and others), may find it difficult to share control over the task or the outcomes. They may find the reliance on the knowledge and dedication of others to be unsettling and hard to manage.
* **Group selection:** when groups are left to form themselves, it can be difficult for autistic students to navigate the complex social interaction required to select partners. Autistic people communicate differently to their neurotypical peers. Group selection requires high level **neurotypical** (i.e. non-autistic) communication skills and social skills, and the confidence to approach others, from which can be challenging for autistic students in an environment where their autistic communication is not considered or accepted.
* **Sharing space and the sensory environment:** group work often requires the group to be physically located in close proximity in order to carry out the set tasks. This can be overwhelming for autistic students who may experience sensory hypersensitivity and can be exacerbated by issues such as participants talking over each other, or sitting in close contact.
* **Social interaction:** group work places the focus on the ability to negotiate social situations successfully, according to neurotypical norms. The group setting rarely has written rules of conduct and participants will need to assume or negotiate key roles within the group. There is often a level of power-sharing at play which can be hard to navigate. Knowing when to interject can be particularly difficult for autistic students, who process information differently, and who may miss the hidden social cues that enable participants to contribute effectively.
* **Clarity of purpose:** group work usually involves a set task, but the ways in which that task should be carried out may be left to the group to decide. Tasks and roles are not always clear and may change organically as the group develops.

## Strategies

There are several strategies which can make group work more accessible to, and inclusive of autistic students. **Many of these strategies simply represent good practice for all students.**

* Do not expect the autistic student to make all the adjustments and work around their neurotypical peers. The **whole group should take responsibility** for inclusion and accessibility and modify their approach where necessary.
* Give **advance warning**: clearly identify when group work will take place and what its main purpose is. Link to published learning outcomes or core competencies.
* Consider **allocating groups** rather than allowing students to select their own groups.
* **Limit numbers** where possible to reduce the demands of social interaction.
* Try to keep groups **familiar** where possible.
* Consider **assigning group roles** from the outset. Some group work tasks identify key roles as part of the task, but where this is not obvious, identify those roles which are likely to be required. Examples include group chair, note-taker, meeting organiser etc. Make sure that everyone is aware of their role within the group.
* Develop **ground rules** from the outset – this can be the group’s first task. Clearly define the task, the rules and the expectations. This might include not talking over each other, methods of communication outside group meetings, timescales for key elements and individual responsibilities. It should also include boundaries such as how often the group will meet or email each other, and which methods of communication are preferred. Autistic students may find it difficult to know what to do if things start to go wrong, so the ground rules could also cover strategies for addressing issues if they arise.
* Encourage **varied methods of communication and collaboration**. This could include pre-meetings, meetings via messaging or in online collaboration spaces.
* Encourage **varied methods of presenting group work**: many autistic students find oral presentations difficult. Alternatives could include a group video presentation, or a using technology to demonstrate.
* Assist autistic students in **identifying their key strengths** so they can use these effectively within different group settings. Consider suggesting those roles within a typical group which are likely to match the student’s strengths.
* Be aware of **potential tensions or imbalances** and be prepared to intervene where there may be issues, such as an unfair division of work, participants feeling excluded or over-burdened.
* Consider asking the student whether they would like to **share information** about their autism with the group – but do not force them to do so. This should be from a strengths-based perspective but could also cover communication preferences and preferred ways of working.
* Some autistic students will not be able to demonstrate their knowledge effectively in a group setting, as a direct result of their autism and the inaccessible nature of the task. Consideration may need to be given to **alternatives** where this is possible.