Making group contracts

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What is a group contract?

A group contract is a document you create as a group to formalize the expectations of group members (see Appendix 1). A group contract should preferably include the following:

→ Name and contact information of group members
→ Expectations (ground rules) about:
  - Preparation for and attendance at group meetings.
  - The frequency and duration of meetings
  - The communication

The contract should focus on behaviors expected of all group members and should include only those behaviors critical to the group's effectiveness. Groups can aim for five to seven ground rules.

→ Assignment of specific tasks, roles and responsibilities with due dates. The group can list the tasks to be completed for the project and provide a space where each group member can sign up for that task.

→ Outline the specific procedure for dealing with unmet expectations or other problems that might arise.

→ Agree how and when to give each other feedback so that problems can be addressed before the project ends.

→ A place where each group member can put their signature to indicate their agreement to the contract.

→ A place where group members can put their signatures when the project is finished to indicate whether or not they agree that all group members contributed as expected and therefore deserve the group grade.

Why a group contract?

By explicitly discussing the benefits of group contracts, you can strengthen trust in each other in the process. What are the benefits?

The benefits of learning in small groups are well known - group work is associated with deeper learning, better retention of information, and the acquisition of valuable communication and team skills.

On top of that, because group contracts allow you to take an active role in setting the tone for group interaction, group contracts can help "motivate ownership of learning."

Writing group contracts can also:

→ Help you identify expectations of each other, communicate those expectations, and practice articulating your expectations.
→ Facilitate each other's reflection on your past experiences and communication practices, important transferable skills for future work and personal relationships.
→ Increase the sense of community in the group as you get to know and work with each other.

When do you make a group contract?

It seems logical: you make the group contract at the beginning of your collaboration. The question is who initiates this. Perhaps some students think it is just strange and excessive to make a contract. That creates a barrier to talk about it openly. But take the initiative, even if only to discuss whether a contract is useful. Do you find it exciting to do this? Ask your teacher to spend class time on it.

Appendix 1: Sample of a group contract

Use the information below as the basis for a group contract.

Group contract

Members of the group _____:

- _____ / contact information _____
- _____/ contact information _____
- _____/ contact information _____
- _____/ contact information _____

This is the behavior we expect from each other:

Punctuality and Timeliness

1. All group members will be punctual on time. Meetings will begin five minutes after the appointed start time, and everyone should be present and ready at that time.
2. We must attend all meetings unless there are unavoidable events such as illness.
3. All group members will remain in the meeting until (a) all tasks for that meeting are completed, or (b) the meeting is unanimously adjourned.
4. Breaks shall be by unanimous vote and shall not exceed twenty minutes.

Procedures

All group members shall come to meetings prepared by reading the assigned material (as much as possible) and coming up with ideas regarding the tasks and decisions to be made.

1. Tasks that group members agree to perform must be completed by the agreed upon deadline. If it appears that a deadline cannot be met, the individual should seek help from other members of the team in time to avoid delay.
2. At the end of the session, there is an assimilation period to evaluate group mechanisms and ensure that all tasks have been completed properly.
3. Each group member has the right to indicate if any of these rules are being violated.
4. All group members share short informational messages via WhatsApps/Teams Group
5. All documents are saved and shared on Teams/Google Drive / ____in the folder (so data is always backed up). Folders are numbered and properly described.

Behavior

1. The group will actively seek consensus based on the opinions of all members.
2. Each member will take turns listening and talking, and active listening will be a strategy for all group discussions.
3. Sexist and racist comments are not acceptable.
4. Aggressive and dominant behavior is not acceptable.

Roles

1. Roles will be assigned before the meeting or, if not possible, at the beginning of the meeting. Tasks rotate each meeting.
2. The leader will establish sub-goals at the beginning of a meeting. These sub-goals will be presented to the group for consensus of approval. The leader is also responsible for presenting the group material to the rest of the class.
3. The secretary will be responsible for taking notes during the session and preparing presentation materials based on these notes.
4. The timekeeper is responsible for keeping track of the time allocated to each discussion and for keeping the group informed of the time remaining. The leader is responsible for deciding what to do if time runs out during a discussion.
5. The devil's advocate keeps his/her mind open to problems, possibilities, and divergent or opposing ideas.

Evaluate

Despite making agreements in a group contract, things can still go wrong in group work. Therefore, it is good to regularly discuss with each other whether everything is still going according to the agreements or whether adjustments are needed. At the start of the project, set up a few moments to discuss this. It is good to do this in advance because scheduling these once there are problems is more complicated.

Method for resolving an impasse

If there does exist a problem, for example the group cannot decide how to address problems, then apply the simple step-by-step plan below.

Step 1: Group members will isolate the points of disagreement and the group will come to a consensus. If no consensus is reached, we will proceed to step 2.
Step 2: The leader will decide on the relevance or importance of the conflict and may postpone the conflict if its relevance or importance is considered questionable or minimal.
Step 3: The leader will decide how much time there is for discussion or arbitration before proceeding to a vote.
Step 4: The leader will call a vote. If the vote results in a deadlock, the leader will make a final decision.

Signature/ Date

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