Infotalk about Group work: Getting through the semester as a team

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00:00:00 Group work: Getting through the semester as a team

Group work. Getting through the semester as a team. A discussion about working in teams from the Academic Advising Service.

00:00:21 Introducing the interviewees

Arlett:

Hi there, and welcome to this Technische Universität Berlin podcast. My name's Arlett Sommerfeld. I'm an academic advisor and today we're going to talk about a subject that affects pretty much every student. Particularly in the first few semesters, there are many subjects, often those covering basic principles, that require students to do their homework in groups. In other words, there are assignments that need completing over the course of the semester that students have to complete and hand in as a team – and these are often prerequisites to taking an exam. And many students get together in study groups in order to prepare for an exam or carry out project work. That's why we wanted to talk about working in groups. We notice in our advisory work that students often comment on how effective this kind of work is. But it can also go really badly. As we often do on this podcast, we have invited an expert to talk to us. Today that is Robert. Hi Robert, could you briefly introduce yourself?

Robert:

Yes, hi everyone! I'm Robert Spang. I'm a teaching and research assistant at the Quality and Usability Lab. I'm currently working on my PhD, which is at the intersection between computer science and psychology. As a lecturer, I teach Introduction to Digital Media & Technology in the winter semester and the Media Production Project in summer semester. Both modules are really driven by group work.

Arlett:

OK, so you probably have a lot of direct experience of some good and bad examples of group work.

00:02:03 Why is it important to be able to work as a team?

Arlett:

Why would you say group work is so important to success?

Robert:

Oh, wow, that is quite complex.

Arlett:

Big question, right?

Robert:

Definitely. It is so multifaceted. We could start by saying that universities as institutions aim to give people an education in a field in which they would later like to work in – and most often that will involve working with other people. Of course, there are tasks and jobs that you mainly do alone. Maybe you go into business on your own. Or you might work independently on a particular project. But I think in the vast majority of cases, tasks are carried out in teams, and that means working with other people to create something bigger. On a smaller level, group work is also essential because – as you rightly mentioned earlier – over the course of the semester, we need to get grades and complete homework and coursework. The modules I teach, for instance, involve homework where students work in groups. This means that there are weekly assignments, for example in Introduction to Digital Media & Technology, where people work together in groups of two or four (this always fluctuates depending on the semester) to complete and hand in homework. These are then graded, and the students have to achieve a certain grade in order to be able to take the exam. That means there is a direct need to engage with a group and to make it work as well as possible over the course of the semester. Another thing occurs to me: I studied computer science and then psychological research methods, and I always found it incredibly interesting to think about how humans, the psyche and social interactions actually work. So, drawing on that, I would say that we humans are clearly herd animals that live together in communities and need each other. This often comes in phases and is very individual. It is more or less pronounced in different people. But fundamentally, we are social beings who interact with each other. That's why I think it's important that you not only learn how to acquire and get to grips with information on your own, but also how to pursue a goal together. Because ideally in a group of several people – even if it sounds a bit cheesy – you are more than the sum of your parts. In other words, you can not only do things that you couldn't do on your

own or would take twice as long, but that you really specialize in individual fields and can benefit from each other – and accomplish things as a group that you couldn't on your own.

Arlett:
I also think there are different stages going on here. First of all, just like you said, you have to get your university credits – and those are structured in a way that prepares you for working life. Something that comes up very frequently for us in Academic Advising is that what you have to get through in terms of content is simply not possible working on your own. I think when you're in high school it is still possible to say "I can get by without teamwork. I'll do a bit of studying on my own, and that will be enough to see me through the exam." But, when it comes to university, you might have, say, three or four exams in an exam period. So it's a really good idea to form teams, test each other and divvy up the learning material. For example, you can write index cards as a team – it's much more effective and it's such a relief in terms of coping with the sheer amount of material there is. Of course, it's super important to seek people out right from the beginning, which is what things like these math homework groups, for example, are aiming to do.

Robert:
I'd add to that that I can still remember my first semesters really well – and they were tough. Exactly in the way that you describe: The tasks were designed in such a way that I couldn't complete them alone. I had to work on them with others. Now, I experienced the problem – probably a lot of others did too – that in our group of three, which had been randomly thrown together, we just couldn't explain the tasks to each other very well. There was a big overlap in terms of what we had each understood and not understood. So that was a problem, and we had to reach out to others. But that created networks and friendships, and they still exist today. I think that's a really exciting aspect to this and a bit of a paradox: on the one hand, university gives each person a grade for their course work and exam performance – and yet it's really based on group work. In many modules, we are able to flourish thanks to group work and exchanging with each other. This is where we see the kind of effects you are talking about. You can accomplish more in a team than you would be able to on your own, and the tasks are designed in a way that you rely on being able to exchange ideas and benefit from each other.

Arlett:
Exactly, and it's not immediately obvious that that is how it works. I mean that you think "I'm going to get my own grade and certificate at the end of this," but actually the whole journey there is about teamwork.

Robert:
Yes.

Arlett:

That's right. So, the semester is starting now. And thousands of new students are arriving on campus and beginning with exactly these kinds of introductory courses.

00:07:33 How do you get off to a good start with group work?

Arlett:

What makes for a good start when it comes to group work in your view? I've started my course and have been put together in a group with a few other people. What do I do now?

Robert:

So I think there are two things to look at here. One is down to you to some extent, and I think this is something that we need to encourage people and all students to do: Engage with each other. University should be a place where we exchange ideas, get to know each other, and have conversations and discussions. I think maybe we should carry this idea around with us and go up to people – because most of them are in the same situation. Many people come to Berlin because it's such a cool place to study. So you end up with a lot of people in the lecture hall who don't know anyone and are basically in the same situation as each other. I think it's often the case that people, or at least quite a few people, are very shy and maybe don't really know how to come out of their shell – and that's perfectly okay. That's where we in the course team step in. But basically, I think it's a good idea to really carry this idea round with you and say to yourself, "Hey, the other people in my course probably feel the same way. I'll give it a go and see what happens." Worst case scenario, the other person says: "Hey, sorry, I'm not interested." But that really is the worst thing that could happen – and it usually doesn't. I think that people are generally happy to get to know each other and start up a conversation. So that's what I wanted to say about the personal level.

Arlett:

I just wanted to add something to that quickly.

Robert:

Go ahead.

Arlett:

I think that for those who aren't from elsewhere, this is actually almost more important. We sometimes come across this with students that come to us for advice. They realize in later semesters that they haven't really formed a circle of friends because they come from the region and had thought, "I don't need that. I already have my friends. I've got that sorted." So for them, I think it's also really essential that they build a new circle of study friends, so to

speak, right from the start at university. That way, they can also make connections within study groups and not think, "Well, I already have my social life sorted. I don't need to do that." That's not the case.

Robert:
You're completely right. Yes, maybe that's exactly the right mindset. Perhaps it's not so much about replacing my circle of friends or anything like that, but about making new relationships with people that I can really shape this university experience with in an interesting and satisfying way. I think what I'm getting at is that if your friends aren't sitting in the same lecture hall, it's always a good idea to find a few people who might be experiencing the same thing and need to learn about the same problems and theories and get to grips with the same thing. And then there is also the perspective of us course organizers, who can of course help guide things along. To be honest, particularly in the first semesters, group work is really a tool we use to generate contact among students – because we think this is really important. I think in all ISIS courses (ISIS is an online platform we use at Technische Universität to organize courses and materials), there are forums that are really there for students to communicate with each other about anything at all, apart from things that aren't appropriate to talk about publicly. So you can ask questions, share thoughts, arrange to meet and exchange ideas. This is exactly the idea behind these forums. In addition, there are opportunities in the module itself to exchange ideas, for example, like I said, in group work and through joint assignments. In the Media Production Project in the second semester, larger teams of three to twelve students work throughout the whole semester on a media product. There are specific points during the semester where they can give each other feedback, look at the work of the other groups and discuss how they went about it and what they could learn from it. Of course, we try to orchestrate this a bit by deliberately creating situations where there are crossovers and points of contact. I think it's good to be open to these and to use them. They are a good opportunity to get to know other people and exchange ideas. And if you have a common topic, then that could be a conversation starter that you could use.

00:11:51 How does the way groups are formed affect collaboration?
Arlett:
How do you put together groups for the courses you run?

Robert:
In Digital Media & Technology, most of the time we offer slots on the ISIS platform where people can sign up. So we might say, "Hey, we've created about 200 groups here." (Actually, it's probably not 200, more like 50.) "You can just sign up." And then people can say, "Look, there's an empty group, I'll add myself to that one." Or we might stipulate that we need homework study groups with exactly four people in them. Generally, the number is pretty

non-negotiable. That's about making it fair for everyone and ensuring that all groups have the same opportunities. Let's say there are groups of four. Then we just offer slots and people can sign up to them. If you see that there is only one slot available in a group of four, then you can add yourself to that group. Working like this, it means that it is possible for people to sign up to slots together with other students they already know. But it also means that if they don't know anyone and have just been asked to "Sign up by Friday," say, then they just sign up to a group where they probably don't know anyone yet. I think there a pros and cons to both these possibilities.

Arlett:
What are they?

Robert:
I think that's also very multifaceted. On the one hand, when you have to deal with people you don't know yet, you are pushed to step out of you comfort zone and open up a bit in order to get to know people. Of course, that takes time and energy. But, on the other hand, this is also very beneficial, because I learn new perspectives through the new people. I can benefit from ideas and knowledge that may not have been on my radar. I think this makes sense especially with these homework study groups, because they involve really getting to grips with the material. In the homework groups, we cover things that were discussed in the tutorial and in the lecture, and this is an opportunity to work through them as a group. But Digital Media & Technology is just such a huge field. I think the biggest overall criticism we get for this module is, "Guys, there is so much content here. This is just an enormous among of material." Obviously, people are coming from high schools, and there are lots of different types of schools. So people need a bit of time to find their groove and to understand university language and the system – how it all works. And I think meeting people who are in the same situation but coming from different perspectives and backgrounds and with new ideas – perhaps they went to school somewhere else in Germany and therefore have more experience of one area but less of another – I think that's something you can benefit from quite a bit. So that's why I really urge students to get talking to each other and to get to know one another, because I think that's really fundamental to your own experience, and I think you can also take away quite a lot from it. On the other hand, like I said, you're in a whole new situation. There is so much that's new and it's all coming at once. So of course, it can be a help if you already know someone, and if you don't have to start afresh and reposition yourself at every turn, but instead can say, "Hey, I feel safe because I already know who my people are in this module." That's also perfectly fine.

Arlett:
That probably also depends on the person a bit, right? That's what I was thinking just now.

Robert:

Totally. It's very individual. I'd like to bring in one of my own experiences that I had when I was starting at university: I came to Berlin to study computer science, and I didn't know anybody. No one from my circle of friends was in Berlin and certainly no one was studying computer science. So I was in exactly this situation. Somehow, I had to do this group homework assignment on what I remember was called Theoretical Foundations of Computer Science 1 back then. I think it has a different title today. The problem was that there were three of us: one from Berlin, another from Brandenburg – from quite close-by – and me. The guy from Brandenburg (who was a friend) and I – we had this problem I was describing before of understanding the same things and not understanding the same things. There was literally no gap in knowledge that the other was able to fill. We sat in front of the homework, and it was a complete enigma to us. As for the Berliner in the group... Well, afterwards I got to know loads of really great people from Berlin who were amazing at group work. But this guy said, "Hey, listen, you're new to Berlin. You don't know anyone here yet. So you go ahead and do this. Because when I get home, I have to go play soccer with my friends. They expect me to show up from time to time." Now, of course, I understand that soccer is much more fun than boring homework on theoretical computer science. But it was just an awful group assignment and a bad experience for me because I thought, "Oh God, this is gonna be so hard. I have no idea where to begin." So with one of the guys we weren't able to make much headway, and the other would disappear at the end of every lecture. It was really difficult and, to be honest, it even led to me thinking that it was too much, and that I wasn't able to do the work. I was really struggling so I went to the professor and said, "We're not getting anywhere. This isn't working." The professor at least took me very seriously and was super understanding. He said, "Write me an essay and explain the whole thing to me in detail." I actually thought that was a really great way for him to address it. In the end, I joined another group. Honestly, it was so bad – and it's probably worth mentioning – that I didn't complete the module. It was a moment when I realized I really had to get my head down. And it was actually very frustrating because I had thought to myself, "Hey, Berlin is super cool, I'm going to learn loads and it will be awesome." But then it was such a frustrating experience. But it got better because I ended up reconnecting with someone I had met through mentoring (I think that was what it was called at the time). Basically, it was where you were shown around campus with a group of students when you first got there. I bumped into one of them again and told her a bit about what had happened, and that things weren't going so well. And she said, "Hey, I have a really great group. Why don't you come join us?" That was fantastic. She was also from Berlin, by the way. So it has nothing to do with that at all! So I joined them and made friends from the group, and we still meet today. We have a relatively stable circle of friends from our time as freshmen and working in that group. It was an amazing experience, especially after it started so terribly.

00:18:22 How do you get to know each other as a group?

Arlett:

When this group has come together – whether randomly or by signing up as a pre-formed group – what would you say it is important to talk about before you start doing the group work?

Robert:

I think it's incredibly important to talk about the group as a structure, because it's such an easy escape to focus on the content of the work and say, "Okay, so we're a group. Well, let's start doing some homework." I think then you forget, maybe not intentionally, but a really fundamental aspect. Because working in a group is such a big change to how we work on assignments, how we get to grips with them, and how we learn. That's why I think it's really important to take a moment to say, "Hey, we're a group now. How do we actually want to do this? Who are we exactly?" Maybe you get to know each other a little bit – because I think good group work thrives on being able to rely on each other. And it's important to really have a vision that you want to work on together. This requires a relationship of trust. I think this is something that often doesn't get enough attention. People are maybe unsure and don't know exactly how to go about it, so they end up not doing it at all. I think it's a big problem that's actually easy to counter. People just need to take time to get to know each other, build trust and some sense of group identity. It doesn't have to be a two-week therapy course. It's enough to meet for a coffee and say, "Hey, what's your story? Tell me a bit about yourself." That way, you have a bit of a sense of who you all are. As I said, I think trust is a fundamental part of how a group works together. For that, you need a human element, and you can't argue that away. You can't just ignore it and say, "Nah, come on, let's get down to the assignment. What's x^2 here?" You need to understand that you are human beings working together, that you may have different needs, and then you can let each other in a bit. And I think it's important to create a space for that. Of course, there's a whole host of other things to bear in mind that I could rattle off. And we can also discuss that as well. But if I were to just make one point, I would say: Accept that you are humans and that you have to form this group as humans and get an understanding of it.

Arlett:

I think that in order to encourage this kind of thing, you can just start by getting to know each other and maybe going to the canteen or the student cafe round the corner to talk about how you see the group working – without it having to feel like a therapy session. So just thinking about, for instance, what you're good at and what you can contribute to the group. For example, I always like to say in group situations, "I do everything but write the minutes," which I really don't like. Other people are totally happy to take on a job like that. Just discussing that kind of thing, i.e. what people like and how they imagine the group working over the course of the semester: that's relatively easy, right?

Robert:

Yes, because it is such a low bar. You don't need a formal structure or a pedagogical approach; you can just have a meal together or a cup of coffee or tea. If you like, you could even play an ice-breaker game to get to know each other. They can be fun and are a great way to get used to one another. And then I think the most important point in terms of content is to develop a common vision together. What do we want to do exactly? Why are we doing it? Maybe why are we studying this and what interests us about it? What's the aim of this group work? So do we just want to get through it? Because there are just some subjects that are so hard for a lot of students that scraping a pass is the number one goal. And then there are other subjects where you're like, "Actually, I'd like to push myself a bit here, and maybe even attain a sense of self-fulfillment." I mean I don't think there are so many opportunities for that. But, for instance, our second semester class is an opportunity to get to grips with really practical, applied aspects and come into contact with things that you might not otherwise have in your everyday life. So I think this is about saying, "Yeah, cool, this is an interest I have. I can share this with the others, and we can develop a common vision: Why are we doing this? Why are we here?" Apart from that, I think there are things like taking a group photo so that you are reminded of the others, especially in situations where maybe you don't only work on campus, but you also have phases where you work from home. You could even give yourselves a team name. Of course, that's quite playful, but why not? It doesn't do any harm. And then I think there's a whole range of things that you could try out and see if the others are open to it. I think it's worth trying out things like warm-up games every time you meet. So you say to each other, "Let's take the first five minutes when we meet at 2pm to go round the group and find out how we are or what we're up to today." We did something like that yesterday in the group I'm in at the academic chair. The question was: What would you like to learn in the next few years? That's super exciting, and there are little things that you can sprinkle in there, so that you get a little bit of information from each other. It may not be very substantive, but it still helps you for the group work, just so that you know where each of you is coming from. That's why I think these five minutes are time well spent.

Arlett:

Tell us your favorite "get-to-know-you" game.

Robert:

OK, this one is my favorites, and has always worked great: You take it in turns to talk to each person one-on-one in the group. That way, everyone has spoken to everyone. And the task is to find something you have in common with each person. Generally, you can find something super quick. It can be something as banal as enjoying sleep. Well, I don't know – hopefully a little more substantial than that. But, say, photography is often something that a lot of

people are interested in or have a bit of a connection to – or music or sports, things like that. They can be fairly general, superficial things, but something you have in common with each person. That way, you see that they are not so different and that there are things you both like. I think it's a really great exercise that you can take through the whole time you work together as a group.

Arlett:

I wanted to mention one more aspect that often comes up in our advisory work: when there are students in the team with a disability or impairment. It is really good to talk about this kind of thing when you're having a meal or a coffee together. Perhaps someone has a special need regarding a certain time of day, because maybe they can't concentrate at particular times for health reasons. Maybe someone has depression. A question we get asked a lot in our advisory work is: "What do I do if I drop out halfway through the semester? Does that mean the group disbands and the others are unable to meet requirements for the homework assignment? What do I do? How do I talk about it? So we would always encourage not only those with the impairment to talk about it with their teammates, but also the others who do not have an impairment themselves to ask within the group. Perhaps there is someone there who doesn't feel able to bring up an issue they have themselves because they are afraid of being excluded from the group or something like that. When a group is getting going, if someone maybe doesn't know for sure that they will have the energy to make it through the semester, there are things you can do. For example, you could have a kind of placeholder position in the group, i.e. you have one more person in the group than the original number. That means the person with the impairment can relax a bit and doesn't feel the pressure that they might jeopardize the work of the whole team. That way, the group will work better for everyone. So it's important to consider that there might be people in the group who don't speak up because they are apprehensive. You can talk about that openly.

Robert:

I think that's a really valuable point, and not just for the people who feel like they're affected in some way, but also for everyone else, including those who say, "Nope, that doesn't really apply to me." They can still make sure that the group is a space where the people this does apply to feel comfortable. That's really just a roundabout way of saying that if you're thinking, "Well, I don't have depression," you can still bring it up and say: "By the way, if this is an issue for anyone, we can talk about it." You provide a space and show you are open to talk. That way, people know that it's OK and that they are not alone in it. I think it depends on everyone – not only on the person who might be affected, but also on the others to address it. And not just to address it in a stigmatizing or dismissive way but to really take it in and have an approach to dealing with it. Another point that me and the other teaching assistants who are designing this course keep thinking is that we would like you to come and

see us, let us know how you are doing and what problems you have. Get in touch, share your thoughts, ask questions and feel free to involve us. I have the impression that often students feel they are not allowed to bother the academic chair or the professor with these "little things." That's not true. Our role is to create an environment where you can study well – where you can get to grips with ideas and understand things. Of course, we have other tasks as well – to do with research and project organization, where teaching is not so much the focus. But this is also an important part of our job, and I think we have to bring a kind of "customer service" mindset to it. We need to create a course where you can learn well, take away as much as possible – something that you can even get fired up about. That would be fantastic. For that, it's not only OK but even important that we get some feedback. If you feel like you're not doing well or the group isn't working or maybe you have a personal situation that needs special attention, then it's OK to put us in the picture about it and say, like you mentioned, Arlett, "Hey, I'm not doing well and I'm afraid that this is going to have a negative impact on my group." That can put you under enormous pressure. But we can take the pressure off you right away if we know about it. That's why it's always the right thing to do to reach out, and people can do that via you guys at Academic Advising or via the academic route, i.e. you can talk to us in the academic chairs. Whatever you feel comfortable with. But do come and talk to us if you feel able to. Then we can really contribute and help resolve the situation. I have a little anecdote from last semester: We had a group in the module where one person was out for a while because someone in their family had an accident. So it's doesn't even necessarily have to be something to do with you individually, but it might be that you have to help care for someone or something else unexpected happens that requires attention. Of course, it was important that this person and their group were able to deal with it well. I think we were able to address the situation quite well as it developed by saying, "OK, we're in the middle of this now. But we can rearrange the work schedule in such a way that the rest of the group can get through it well – because one person is out for the time being." I think that can be done, but it's important that we hear about it so that we can address it and find a good solution.

Arlett:
I think it's important when taking a step like that to go to the teacher or to an advisory service, whether it's the Academic Advising or Course Guidance or somewhere else. They have the experience. Generally, it won't be the first time that these problems with group work are coming up. That means that a lot of the time we as an advisory institution, or supporting lecturers like yourself, have experience with this and can suggest five potential solutions off the bat. I think that's the important thing: That you don't have to brood over it yourself. If you do then you might find the solution too late, and the module will be over, and you won't have passed it. It's good to keep that in mind. Another thing that just occurred to me is that you don't have to think of this in terms of impairment, but much more generally. People function differently. For instance, there is this distinction between

larks and owls. If I can choose, then I tend peak between 16:00 and 20:00. Others get up at five in the morning and can really get some work done for a couple of hours. It's really important to talk generally about how you can be your best self. You can do it with a bit of humor and also in terms of how it affects group work.

Robert:

I think it's important to decide how you want to communicate with each other as a group. So maybe there are moments when you say, "This is the time when we want to work on this." So that's a slot in your calendar – or it's a time when you don't want to have anything to do with it, because of course you have other modules, other group work or maybe you're just not doing anything for university. You need to talk to each other about what your limits are and how you want to structure your work as a group.

Arlett:

Yes, you need clear agreements: When do we communicate? When can we meet regularly? I think this is a really important aspect. You have to be able to rely on each other, whatever that means exactly for you. You can talk this through with each other. What does being reliable mean? Does it mean you always have to be super punctual or, for instance, that you have to have delivered your share of the content by a certain deadline. You need to discuss what is important to you and what you want to achieve with this course – like you said earlier.

00:33:30 What obstacles are there to collaboration?

Arlett:

What really gets in the way of teamwork for you? What stops it from working?

Robert:

I think being reliable, like you mentioned, and related to that, trust. I can remember something that happened in Digital Media & Technology a year ago: There was a group of four, and three of them wrote to me in the middle of the semester and said, "We have a problem here. It's not really going well with the fourth person. They aren't really contributing." So I asked, "Well, what do you suggest?" They asked if they could have another person. I said that that would be difficult because I couldn't just make them magically appear. But I said that we could maybe fix what was happening. So I messaged the other person and asked them to explain how things were going. They said, "It's going brilliantly. We work really well together." I responded that the others had said something completely different. And they said: "Oh, yeah, hmm, that's right. Maybe there was a bit of ... but actually it's going well." I said: "OK, well, I've heard quite conflicting takes on this. Next week, there is another submission. I'd ask you to sit down again and really to keep each other on board. Don't let just one part of the group work on this." I think there's a problem

when people say, "We're actually a group of four, but three of us just get along better. So we're just going to get it done." But that's not how it works. You are a group of four and so you have to do this piece of assessed coursework as a four. If you don't want to work as four, then maybe there's another problem that you need to resolve instead of just doing it quickly as a three. Anyway, it went on like that. I'd asked them to work through the issue together, and after a week, the fourth person told me, "It was great; it worked really well." And the other three said, "No, they just didn't do anything; they didn't even get in touch." That is a level of unreliability and disingenuousness that is really damaging to the feeling within a group. I don't think it would be a bad idea to just say, "Listen guys. I don't want to do the module." OK, fine, there's lots of reasons why that might be the case. Perhaps it's not even necessary to go into all of them. It's OK to make that decision for yourself. But it's important to put the others in the picture. Another example of being unreliable is when a person completely stops getting back to you, i.e. they ghost you. That's difficult for everyone involved, including us, because we can't just kick someone out of the group – nor do we want to. We want the group to try and identify and solve the conflict so that they can work together again as a team. If someone decides that they don't want to continue the module, that's OK. But leaving the others hanging and not even getting in touch – I think that's a very bad way of dealing with people.

Arlett:
If I had to boil it down, I would say the problem is that people are just not communicating clearly, whatever form that communication might take. I have also been in teams where that was difficult. There were people who were there just to complete the module and really just wanted to scrape through. So getting a 4.0 [a low pass grade] was fine for them. But other members of the teams would say, "Actually, it's really important to me to get a top grade for this project." Especially when the project lasts two semesters. That's a tricky situation but I've found that if you talk about it, you can manage it to suit everyone. So, for instance, the people who really don't want to make a big effort can do things like take the minutes and other organizational tasks, and the others can immerse themselves in the content. That way, you can still work well as a group. But if this doesn't get said at the beginning, then you have to negotiate as you go along and that is super difficult. I like it when people lay it out clearly from the start. I think that just about sums it up.

Robert:
Absolutely. That also links up with what we were saying about developing a common vision around what you want to achieve together.

Arlett:
Exactly. I think it's also important to divide up the tasks pretty clearly. You need to look at if there are some sets of tasks you can separate out based on content. So, for instance, if there

are five tasks, everyone does one. Or perhaps, you combine them and do two in teams of two and then the last one together. So you structure how you tackle these groups of tasks in a way that suits everyone. I also think it's important to decide what you're meeting up for each time. That can get a bit lost occasionally, especially when you have to get a lot done. But you do need to decide what you're meeting up for. Maybe it is just to chat, because you haven't talked properly for a while and it's important to have some social time with people you've been working with for a semester. Or do you want to talk about plans for the next semester, for instance? Everyone needs to know what the aim of the session is. I still notice in my working life that I benefit from having practiced this at university. I always asked in advance why we were meeting. I turn down invites where I don't know what the aim is. I might say, "I can come but only if it is in a structured way. Please think again about what I'm needed for because otherwise I won't come." I don't have time for meetings where that isn't clear. That's something you can really get in the habit of doing: Always starting with a clear intention and asking, "Why are we doing this?"

Robert:

I have another point about dominance. This is the idea that someone leads the group, facilitates and perhaps distributes tasks. I think that can be a curse and a blessing. Sometimes you need someone to step up and say, "Listen guys, I have an idea. How about we do things like this?" It's great when a person volunteers that and the group wants to embrace it. But it's important to check in with people that they think it's a good idea. You don't want to bulldoze past anyone just because you're in a strong position yourself. One idea you could apply is to nominate one person for each meeting to guide the group through and facilitate things." And you can do that on rotation. To give an example: The other doctoral students and I who work in the same office in my academic chair have a weekly meeting, and it's really just about giving others a picture a bit about what you're working on at the moment, what's giving you grief, and what you're happy about. There are always synergies that come up where people say things like, "Oh, hey, I did something related to that recently. Maybe I can send it to you later." The person who had run the weekly meeting for a long time left the team at some point, and no one really took it on. So I ended up slipping into the role a bit – setting the date, inviting the others, and facilitating it a bit. After two or three times, I realized that I quite liked doing it, but also didn't really have a mandate. The others hadn't asked me to do it, and I didn't want to impose myself on them. So I said, "Hey, guys, how about this: I can do this if you like, but it's important to me that it's by mutual agreement. Or maybe even better, we can just switch it up." So we started, and at the end of the first meeting, we said "Who's going to do this next week?" Someone usually volunteers, and it works its way round the group. The person facilitating sort of takes the lead in the conversation. It's much more pleasant to receive a task from someone in that role. They don't have to be a manager, just someone who says, "Listen, this is how I suggest we structure this." Everyone gets to try out this role a bit.

Arlett:

When you say "to try out" that reminds me of something else. What I notice again and again in our advisory sessions at the Academic Advising Service is that it is really important to talk about the place you want to work. So there are teams that really like to meet in the library and others that use workspaces at the university. And there are others still that work on individual tasks at home before pulling them together. Maybe they meet on Zoom to briefly discuss them, and then upload them together to ISIS or however they are meant to submit the assignment. Groups need to ask themselves: Are these meetings super important to us? Is once a month enough? Is the library a good place to work? Are there other places where we can work well? Do we prefer to sit on the lawn behind the Main Building? You really shouldn't turn your nose up at these discussions. Because if you don't talk about it you might end up meeting in places that three people don't enjoy but don't want to say. So it's important to find a routine. You've also said mentioned that a few times. That it's important to create a routine but also to try different things out over the course of a semester. I think that's important.

Robert:

Absolutely. I think for the key question for this whole area is: How do you communicate with each other? You need to agree on things like when you are generally available to be contacted and when would you rather be left alone. And when do you want to meet in person and when will you meet online? As you were talking, it also occurred to me that sometimes people go away, of course. You might not be on campus every week; you might be at home or traveling for a short time – but you still want to continue with the group work. You need to let people know. You don't have to get their permission, but just say, "So next week I'll be away. I'd still like to join. Can we arrange that somehow?" You also need to think about which communication channels you want to use so that you don't end up using 20 different messaging services. You can say, "This is our channel, and this is where we organize things." You might use something that the university offers. It has a whole range of tools. But it can also be something private, if that's OK with everyone. I think with all of these things, it's important that each person has a veto. If the suggestion is that you use Signal but one of, say, the five of you doesn't want to, then you can go for something else. There are loads of options available, including from the University, so you should be able to identify a common denominator. But as you say, it's about trying things out, agreeing with each other on things that work well for everyone, and being considerate when someone says, "that doesn't work so well for me."

00:44:13 Where do I find suitable tools and software?
Arlett:

Robert, can you say what some of the tools are that the University provides that your teams use frequently?

Robert:
Yes and no. There's a bit of a disconnect between what the University provides and what our teams use. Let's start with ISIS. ISIS is the platform that everything goes through. For those just starting out: it's basically a website run by the University where you'll find everything about your lectures and modules – information, materials, pdfs, assignments, and so on. It has forums, like I mentioned, and I think there's also a chat. For messaging, there's something called Matrix. That's also provided by the University and runs on its servers. So in terms of data protection none of the information leaves the premises, basically. It's a bit more responsive. And works faster. Of course, we also have email. All students have their own Technische Universität Berlin email address. That's a bit of a baseline. You get your email without having to set up anything specifically. And, by the way, it's a super important channel, because if something comes up with ISIS or isn't working, then you'll always get an email from your programs, your modules and from the university administration. So that's probably the most important channel, if not the most ideal for quick communication. Then we have WebEx Teams. This is a program produced by Cisco. It looks a bit like Slack – which some people might be familiar with. You can use it to chat and make video calls. And you can also create groups in WebEx. For a lot of groups, this covers quite a lot of bases. That might be incomplete, but these are now the ones that come to mind in terms of what the University provides. What have I forgotten?

Arlett:
Those are the ones I would have said when it comes to chat. Of course, I would also mention Zoom, because a lot of courses are run on there.

Robert:
Definitely.

Arlett:
There are a number of video conferencing tools. I think you just have to decide together and try things out, depending on what the job is and how big the team is. But yes, those are the ones that are in my notes as well.

Robert:
Great. I think there are some best practices for that as well. What I always suggest to groups, especially in the beginning when they are getting to know each other and aren't all able to meet in one room, is to say, "Hey, let's start by turning on the camera." For us as lecturers, it's always a bit exhausting and a bit of shame really, especially when you are talking to a

virtual lecture hall of 50 people on Zoom, and you only ever see 50 black boxes. It's a real shame. The point isn't to peek into their bedrooms or anything, but just to get some feedback: Are people there? Are they interested? Are they maybe even smiling? It's such an important human element that we often lose when we move online, and I think it should actually be good manners to start at least one conversation with your camera on. For example, you could do a warm-up with your video on. And when it comes to the content, you can agree to turn it off. But I think it's important to find a common denominator. For example, if someone says that they don't want to do it, I'd err on the side of leaving the cameras off. And in that case, it is probably better if everyone does the same, so that no one feels at an advantage or disadvantage. That brings us back to the point from the very beginning about talking to each other and trying things out to find what works well for you. But generally I would say start with your videos on, and if you feel afterwards that it's annoying or that it doesn't work that well, then it's OK to turn them off.

Arlett:
This is something we notice at the Academic Advising Service too, of course. Talking to a black window can work perfectly well. And sometimes it's really good if you can see each other in order to generate a sense of closeness and depth. But as you say there could be any number of reasons why you don't want to turn on your video. But I'd also like to highlight the impairment side of things again, because it is obviously really important – especially for students who have a visual or hearing impairment – to be able to follow what's being said. So, for example, if I have my video turned off, someone with a hearing impairment can't read my lips. It's good that we also talk about this. For people who are very sensitive to noise, it is incredibly difficult when all 15 people on a video call have their microphones on. It is important to observe a few basic rules, not only for people with impairments who want to join, but also more generally, so that the calls aren't so much of a drain on people's energy.

Robert:
Another thing that comes to mind while we're talking about cameras is that they mean presenting yourself in a new way. It's means thinking about not only what the others are taking from me as I talk, but also that what's behind me is in shot. Perhaps I don't want to show them the room because it's also where I sleep, and that feels too private. And that's absolutely understandable. I don't think that's necessarily a reason to turn the video off because you could maybe cover up the background with a bed sheet. Or just ask yourself: What does my screen currently show and am I OK with people seeing everything that's in view?

00:49:52 How much project management does a team need?
Arlett:

We've talked about things like punctuality, being clear on your expectations from the beginning, and allocating roles within the group. Another thing we should touch on again is planning. How important do you think project management is in teamwork, particularly in terms planning your time?

Robert:

Really important overall. But I think it depends a lot on the content. The approach that has developed over time in Introduction to Digital Media & Technology, which is a first semester course for many students, is that we don't specify so much. We just say to people, "Do your homework in groups. You have to hand it in as a four, and you'll be admitted to the exam if you have enough points." That's basically it. We don't add all the other stuff to it, because to begin with it's important to get used to university, with how these tasks work, and with the content. In the second semester, as I said, we have this Media Production Project, which is larger, and the group works on it over the course of an entire semester. That includes a lecture on project management. We also made it a requirement that one person in each team should take on a project management role. You can facilitate this a bit in terms of how the group decides who to nominate for the role. But I think it is really important to have this experience and that there is a person who structures things, works out what needs to be done by when, makes sure no one has nothing on their desk, and keeps people communicating well. We guide the students through this. In the special lecture on this, we cover the basics. We start with how you deal with each other, how you organize and structure that, and how you start a meeting. We make a few suggestions. And we also go a bit further. For instance, we explain how to use a Gantt chart, which students can use to schedule tasks, pin down when they start and end, and perhaps include responsibilities. And then we describe and discuss workstreams. So you have a work plan, where you can say: "Which workstream do we want to combine into one milestone? Which workstreams are due when? And what is mutually dependent?" That's how we've divided it up at the academic chair over those two semesters. I think it's always a good idea to talk about that. Of course, it might still be a good idea to consider project management on homework assignments as well. But we decided against covering it explicitly in the course, because we felt we had so much material to get through, and the structure is actually relatively clear in that we have a submission every week. So there is actually relatively little room for maneuver in terms of how you organize your work. But your question went a bit further than that. You also asked how you organize your group work. I think there are two tools that are easy to implement and super useful. One is a shared calendar, so that you have an overview as a group of things like what you're doing by when, when you want to meet, and when people have committed to preparing something in time to present it at the next meeting. You can use a calendar for this, and it's really easy because with the Technische Universität email account, you're provided with a calendar that has a web interface. So you can log into the calendar through your browser and favorite it so that it appears on your

phone or computer calendar. It is super easy to use. You can create events in there and invite each other. It works well with teamwork, because you can see who is busy at what times and when people are available. That also helps with coordination. So I'd really urge students to use shared calendars, and secondly, you could also consider using a joint to-do list. I don't want to advertise a specific product. There are so many to-do list tools out there. Personally, I use one that has tabs where I can put individual cards from left to right into different lists. That way I can structure my tasks. Organizing your to-do list is a whole other task in itself. But using a tool like that and trying it out as a group can nip a lot of potential conflict, in the bud.

00:54:23 Why do conflicts occur even when you've done a lot of the groundwork?

Arlett:

OK, so I've taken all this advice in my group, and things have gone really well for, say, two or three months, and then suddenly about halfway through a conflict arises. Is this normal? Have I done something wrong? What can I do?

Robert:

That's really interesting. There was some work done on this back in the 1960s by a researcher called Tuckman, who first identified four, then five stages of group work. He asked the questions: How do groups work, and what do we see happening in them? Are there any characteristics or patterns when it comes to group work? The five stages he identified in answering these questions were: Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing, and Adjourning. They all sound a bit similar. So let's start at the beginning: Forming basically means when a group comes together and is formed. So that stage is about creating a common identity. Common goals are articulated and defined. And everyone sits down together, gets to know each other, and works out what they want to achieve. The next stage is Storming. This is where people start to express opinions. Trust develops, but on the basis of this trust, people feel able to say things that may stir things up a bit, because the processes for dealing with criticism and conflict have not yet been defined. That's why this is a stage in which conflicts often arise because of the status and hierarchies that exist in the groups. For instance, one person somehow stands out, is particularly loud and likes to take over the conversation, and another person perhaps feels a bit squeezed out by this or patronized because they are just quieter by nature. So during this stage it is important to talk about how the group wants to deal with conflict. This is a really important aspect, because conflict is an intrinsic part of group work. I don't think it's a bad thing at all, but something we can learn from and something we can learn about ourselves from. But ultimately, it's important to accept conflict as part and parcel of working together as people pursue a goal. You can never get rid of it completely. The question you need to ask instead is how do we deal with this situation? And I think we have a very good handle on that. So once you've developed strategies on addressing conflicts, the group enters the Norming stage. This is

where the group defines norms or rules of conduct. It's often not necessarily an explicit and completely transparent process but can refer to things that get embedded without being consciously discussed. I'm struggling to think of an example right now. OK, perhaps this: I remember my group used to meet in the cafeteria in the Math Building. We would grab a coffee and then look for a table where would start to work. So we would always start working there together. That's a silly example, but it was a norm for our group and how we worked together. So at this point, you're moving away from the conflict phase. You've developed a common understanding of roles, set joint goals, and everyone is pulling in the same direction and accepting each other's idiosyncrasies. One problem that can arise though is that everyone is so focused on getting along well that no one expresses controversial ideas anymore, and everyone tries to go with the flow. I think it's important to have diversity, both in terms of people and ideas, and to have the courage to articulate things that might go against the grain. Once you have developed a good approach, the fourth stage in this model is called Performing. This is a stage in which the group produces a lot of work. Things run like clockwork; there are good processes in place for different situations; everyone knows their roles. Of course, the model refers more to teams operating in a professional context where they might work together closely on a product for one or two years. So perhaps this can only partially be applied to homework groups, which usually only spend a few hours a week with each other. But an important aspect of this model is that you can jump back from any stage into almost any other stage, especially from the Norming or Performing stages back to the Storming stage. That happens when you reach a stage where you worked well with each other, and then something happened – an external influence or something that makes us question our norms and the group dynamics – and then conflicts arise again. Ideally, you are able to solve them, because you've already learned what makes people tick and how to deal with each other. But these are all the dynamics that can occur and are usually observable in groups – especially in teams that work closely with each other – and I find that keeping this model in mind helps me to understand that it is perhaps not so bad if after three months I have the feeling that things aren't working. Then I can use this model to ask: What has changed? What should we talk about again? Is it maybe a good idea for us to sit down again and talk about our group dynamic? So if people are interested in this, I can highly recommend it; it's an easy read, and there is an enormous number of articles on it. Tuckman's Stages of Group Development. I think he first wrote about it in 1965.

01:00:17 When is group work successful?

Arlett:

We started with a big question, Robert, and I would like to close with a big question as well. When is group work a success in your view?

Robert:

I think when the group achieves a goal that they have set together. That could be many things. In the university context, it will usually be a grade, because the modules usually end with a grade or a certificate to demonstrate that the module has been passed. But it can also be something like having an experience that the group is happy with and grateful for. So, for example, I told that anecdote earlier that really didn't start well, and yet it was a very valuable experience. There was a lot that I could take away from that, even though it was awful to go through it at the time. But with a little bit of distance, I was able to learn a lot from it, and so I wouldn't even say that that the group was a failure, but it just didn't achieve the goal that was originally agreed on. But I would basically say if you have common idea of what you want to achieve together, then that's probably the goal for now. I find it an extremely difficult question.

Arlett:
I think you said something super important for the university context. When I finish a group project, it is great if I get a really good grade, of course; everyone is happy, and it all went really well. But even if goes really wrong halfway through the semester, and I feel like I come close to breaking point, then I probably won't end up making a similar mistake again in the next group assignment. And I think from a pedagogical point of view, that is actually a successful assignment, because I've realized what I might have to do differently next time. That's part of the learning process that we talked about at the beginning. So I think no matter what happens – even I've done really well in terms of grades, and I'm totally satisfied with everything and will just do it the same way again next time – I still have to reflect on what has made the assignment particularly successful. And if things go wrong, I'll probably learn a couple of things from it that I can put to the test in the next group assignment. For me, that's still a success.

Robert:
Yes, I think that sounds very good. That's what I was getting at as well.

Arlett:
Exactly.

01:02:42 Wrapping-up and getting in touch
Arlett:
OK, so that brings us to the end of our episode today on group and teamwork. In the episode description and infoboxes, we'll put links to all the things we've mentioned including the Technische Universität tools. Robert has produced videos on this topic that you can find on YouTube. They look at things like how to organize a team and how to organize your own work at home, so that you can really contribute to a team assignment. You can also find lots of advice on the Academic Advising Service and Psychological Counseling webpages around

exam preparation, motivation and things like that. And you can really apply that to your group work as well. We talked about studying with impairments a few times during the podcast. There is a separate point of contact that exclusively deals with students with impairments within the Academic Advising Service team, including applying for academic adjustments and ensuring that special study needs are met. We'll put that contact information in the infobox for you as well. So to finish off, I just want to really encourage everyone to talk to each other. Come see us if things are taking a turn for the worse, and we can see about getting you some support. Robert, do you have any words of wisdom you'd like to finish on?

Robert:
I'm not sure they're words of wisdom, but I have the urge to really encourage people to ask questions. So, ask you all questions in the Academic Advising Service – you have an outside perspective and are an additional point of contact...

Arlett:
...we're an independent party. We don't have to be so involved to begin with, exactly.

Robert:
Exactly. Yes, that's right. And also ask us questions. Pester us. The research associates, tutors, professors: We're not really here to teach you loads. That was more how things were at high school. We're here to provide you with what you need to be able to teach yourself and understand things yourself. I always find it interesting to think about the word "study." It really means dealing with something in detail, questioning it and looking at it from all angles. For instance, people used to talk, colloquially, about "studying the newspaper." Studying is an opportunity to get to grips with something, to dig deep and understand the background of a subject, vocational training or a topic that you're interested in. But it's something that you have to do yourself, and generally speaking, no one is going to push you to do it. It is an active and sometimes pretty exhausting process. But that's exactly why I think it's really worth it in the end. While the university teachers aren't here to drum the material into you, we are responsible for providing you with all that you need so that you can teach yourself. To do this, you have to ask questions. For that, it's important to come talk to us, to really shower us with questions. Like I was touching on before, our work combines research projects and teaching, and in this teaching element, we have a responsibility to create an environment that is conducive to learning. Sometimes we're too far removed from it, or it's been too long, and sometimes people can't really imagine or remember how hard it is to deal with something. That's why it is always a good idea and super important to make use of our office hours and to contact tutors, research associates and professors. Generally, people are happy to take the time for this because they can see that someone is really engaging with the material. There are no dumb questions; the only

dumb thing to do is to have a question but not ask it. I understand why that happens, and in the past, I often found it very difficult, but looking back, I wish I had made more use of people's office hours and the opportunities to ask questions. That's why I really urge students to come talk to us and to fire questions at us. That's our job, and we like to do it because it's why we're here. So I wish everyone the best of success with that.

Arlett:
See you soon.