

## Recognising and handling group dynamics

This chapter examines the five stages of group dynamics and the way to use the concept for managing and motivating learners in both in-person and online educational settings. After exploring this chapter, you should be able to:

- ✓ Explain the role of group dynamics in the digital classroom,
- ✓ Identify the main causes of negative group dynamics in online learning,
- ✓ Describe the stages of group dynamics and possible problems at each stage,
- ✓ Compare group dynamics in face-to-face and online learning environments.

**This chapter includes the following sections:**

1. *Group dynamics in educational settings – definition and importance*
2. *The role of the educator in supporting groups of learners*
3. *The dos and don'ts of online communication – Netiquette and its importance for group dynamics*
4. *Group dynamics in face-to-face, synchronous, and asynchronous education*
5. *Challenges and how to overcome them*
6. *Questions for reflection*
7. *References and resources*



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# 1. Group dynamics in educational settings – definition and importance

## Defining the concept

Educators agree that one of the most challenging aspects of facilitating the learning process in both traditional and virtual environments is dealing with the group dynamics.

The term “group dynamics” belongs to the social psychologist Kurt Lewin. In the early 1940s, Lewin noticed that when working in groups, people often take on distinct roles and behaviours. The concept of “group dynamics” describes how different roles and behaviours influence people in the group.

In an educational setting, we use the group dynamics concept to look into the relationships between the learners in a group and how these relationships impact the effectiveness and efficiency of the group as a whole.

## The importance of group dynamics – Why should you study group dynamics?

It is easy to recognise the positive dynamics in the group. Usually, it’s obvious – team members trust one another, they share problem-solving and decision-making, and they hold one another accountable for keeping the agreement. Research showed that when a group has a positive dynamic, it creates a pre-condition for group members to be more open and responsive to learning.

In contrast – in a group with poor group dynamics, people have difficulty in opening up, and the cooperation level is very low. Group members could spend a lot of time arguing but decisions wouldn’t be made. In a group with poor group dynamics, learners don’t feel safe, and they don’t trust educators, nor do they feel free to share their opinion and experiences that lead to better cooperation. Educators, learners, and team members can all be the source of a negative group dynamic. Some of the most common challenges that could occur are:

- **Weak leadership:** a more dominant member of the group takes charge, which leads to a lack of direction and focus.
- **Excessive deference to authority:** members hold back on their real opinions because they want to be seen as agreeing with the leader.
- **Blocking:** team members disrupt the flow of information in different ways (e.g., they are too critical, or refuse to participate)

Bruce Tuckman’s theory of stages of group development can help you to pre-empt problems that could arise and support the group to move from stage to stage.

If instead of reading the text you prefer video presentation, watch the five stages of group development [as told by the fellowship of the Ring](#) or from the movie [Remember the Titans](#).

## Five Stages of Group Development

### 1. Forming<sup>1</sup>

The first few days or weeks when learners come together and form the group is called the Forming stage of the group development. At this stage, learners are mostly interested in getting to know each other and figuring out relationship dynamics inside the group. This stage is known as the polite stage, when group members are avoiding serious conversations or critical remarks. Learners are excited, anxious, and a little bit cautious of one another. During this stage, group members tend to avoid conflict, they are rather reserved with their behaviour and feel ambiguous as they try to assimilate within the group.

<b>Observable Behaviours</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Politeness</li><li>• Tentative joining</li><li>• Orienting with others personally</li><li>• Avoiding controversy</li><li>• Cliques may form</li><li>• Need for safety and approval</li><li>• Attempts to define tasks, processes</li><li>• Discussion of problems not relevant to the task</li></ul>
<b>Feelings and Thoughts</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Many feel excited, optimistic, and full of anticipation</li><li>• Others may feel suspicious, fearful, and anxious working with others</li><li>• Question - "What is expected of me"?</li><li>• Uncertainty and Apprehension</li></ul>
<b>Group Needs</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Team mission and vision</li><li>• Establishing specific objectives and tasks</li><li>• Identify roles and responsibilities of team members</li><li>• Establish team ground rules</li><li>• Team member expectations</li><li>• Operational guidelines for team</li><li>• Effective in-class meetings</li><li>• Effective Chat meetings</li></ul>
<b>Leadership Required</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Taking the "lead"</li><li>• Being highly visible</li><li>• Facilitating introductions</li><li>• Allow for get-acquainted time</li><li>• Providing the "big picture"</li><li>• Establishing clear expectations</li><li>• Provide structure and task direction</li><li>• Create an atmosphere of confidence and optimism</li><li>• Encouraging Active involvement</li><li>• Communicating success criteria</li></ul>

<sup>1</sup> Taken and adapted from: <https://www.wcupa.edu/coral/tuckmanStagesGroupDevelopment.aspx>

## Practical tips for helping your group in the Forming stage:

- **Establish early communication.** The learners need to perceive the educator's presence as soon as the course begins.
- **Develop a positive social atmosphere.** Get to know the learners' names and interests and be open to telling them a bit about yourself. Use different icebreakers at the beginning of the program, for example, [Common points](#) or [You can leave your hat on](#) to help learners to get to know each other better. For more ideas check on our website [Trainer's Toolkit](#). For additional information on "getting to know each other" activities and name games check out [special icebreakers](#), and special online [Team Bonding exercises](#).
- **Reinforce predictable patterns of communication and action.** The learners need structured activity, repetition, and feedback. Without these, the learners will get the impression that the educator does not care about the course or the students, making the development of trust unlikely.
  - Be available for office hours.
  - Take a few minutes before and after class to interact with students.
- **Involve team members in tasks** such as group projects or activities that require learners to rely on each other to complete them. Have students create their own goals for the class.
- **Establish ground rules – create netiquette** (more in the next section).

## 2. Storming<sup>2</sup>

From the name of this stage, it is obvious that interpersonal tension and conflicts can arise. After the "quiet and calm" forming stage, it is natural to have competition and confrontation between learners. If this stage is not managed properly, resentment and hostility could take place.

The reason for possible negativity in the group can be the members' desire to express their opinion and show their individuality. Learners could react emotionally when they disagree with the stated opinion or the given task. At this stage cooperation and teamwork is extremely difficult and it seems like the group is moving backwards and regressing. Keep in mind that the group is actually developing and moving forward to the next stage of group development.

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<sup>2</sup> Taken and adapted from: <https://www.wcupa.edu/coral/tuckmanStagesGroupDevelopment.aspx>

<b>Observable Behaviours</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some resistance</li> <li>• Arguing among members</li> <li>• Desire for leadership</li> <li>• Differences in points of view and personal styles are evident</li> <li>• Lack of role clarity</li> <li>• Lack of participation</li> <li>• Power struggles and clashes</li> <li>• Lack of consensus-seeking behaviours</li> <li>• Lack of progress</li> <li>• Establishment of unrealistic goals</li> <li>• Concern over excessive work</li> <li>• Competition</li> </ul>
<b>Feelings and Thoughts</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Defensiveness</li> <li>• Confusion, and loss of interest can result</li> <li>• Resistance to tasks</li> <li>• Fluctuations in attitude about the team</li> <li>• Unsure if I agree with the team's mission and purpose</li> <li>• Questioning the wisdom of team members</li> <li>• Increase in tension and jealousy</li> <li>• Unsure about my freedom and ability to influence</li> <li>• We're not getting anywhere</li> </ul>
<b>Group Needs</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inter and intrapersonal relationships</li> <li>• Identify personal differences</li> <li>• Effective listening</li> <li>• Giving and receiving feedback</li> <li>• Conflict resolution</li> <li>• Clarify and understand the team's purpose</li> <li>• Re-establish roles and ground rules</li> <li>• How to deal with those team members who are violating team codes of conduct</li> <li>• Receiving feedback from the educator</li> </ul>
<b>Leadership Required</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Requesting and encouraging feedback</li> <li>• Educators acknowledge a conflict</li> <li>• Educators suggest that consensus is required among group members</li> <li>• Get members to assume more task responsibility</li> <li>• Concept of shared leadership emerges</li> <li>• Identifying issues and facilitating their resolutions</li> <li>• Teach conflict resolution methods</li> <li>• Offer support and praise</li> <li>• Building trust by honouring commitments</li> <li>• Actively involved group members begin consulting one another – shared leadership emerging but have difficulty with decision making</li> </ul>

According to Bruce Tuckman, the storming stage is crucial for the development of the group, and it is an opportunity for the group members to practice patience and tolerance. Your major role as an educator is to help group members to learn how to resolve conflicts constructively.

## Practical Tips

**Dealing with conflicts** – one possible challenge in this stage is to overcome tension and conflicts in the digital learning environment. Possible ways to deal with conflicts are:

- **Set clear expectations and group norms** for discussions. One of the reasons for conflicts is unclear expectations and not well-defined and commonly agreed on rules.
- **Pay attention to the topics** that can be more **sensitive to the group members**. Think in advance about how you might structure a controversial or sensitive discussion and prepare for the possibility of conflict.
- If there is an **unexpected conflict**, you could take the following steps:
  - **Debrief** with students after the conflict by sending a summary of the conversation, addressing the learners' feelings as well as addressing misconceptions.
  - Consider using **reflection** as a short assignment to encourage learners to examine their beliefs and how the conflict may have changed their thinking on the topic.

One serious challenge that educators face at this stage is the uncertainty of how to read, and how to recognise the signs of coming conflict in an online setting without being in the same space with the group members.

- If you are leading an online synchronous class, you may very well be able to recognise some physical or vocal cues if learners are becoming uncomfortable.
  - Pay attention to tone in written communication. Tension may arise when students use more emotion-focused words.
- **If learners challenge your authority:**
    - Know that it is normal for this stage and stay positive.
    - Pay attention to your emotional reactions to feelings of being threatened or challenged.
    - Be aware of your body language and what you communicate through your actions.
    - Address behaviours, not people.
    - Uphold class norms and netiquette. Address issues that arise every time and remain consistent in how you deal with learners. Refer to your class/group guidelines.
    - Approach learners and talk to them privately.

Check out the [Trainers' Toolkit](#) to find activities for digital classrooms that might help you in guiding your learners through group development stages.

### **3. Norming**<sup>3</sup>

This stage is sometimes called the **accommodation** stage. Group members know each other well and create new ways of interacting with each other. If at the Forming and Storming stages the main concern was building relationships and finding one's place and role, at this stage, the members start working toward the success of the group's goals. As the group matures, leadership changes from one teammate in charge to shared leadership. For shared leadership to be effective, group members learn that they have to trust one another.

<b>Observable Behaviours</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Processes and Procedures are agreed upon</li> <li>● Comfortable with relationships</li> <li>● Focus and energy on the task</li> <li>● Effective conflict resolution skills</li> <li>● Sincere attempt to make consensual decisions</li> <li>● Balanced influence, shared problem-solving</li> <li>● Develop team routines</li> <li>● Sets and achieves task milestones</li> </ul>
<b>Feelings and Thoughts</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Sense of belonging to a team</li> <li>● Confidence is high</li> <li>● Team members feel a new ability to express criticism constructively</li> <li>● Acceptance of all members of the team</li> <li>● General sense of trust</li> <li>● Assured that everything is going to work out okay</li> <li>● Freedom to express and contribute.</li> </ul>
<b>Group Needs</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Develop a decision-making process</li> <li>● Be prepared to offer ideas and suggestions</li> <li>● Problem-solving is shared</li> <li>● Team members take responsibility for shared leadership skills</li> <li>● Receiving feedback from educators</li> </ul>
<b>Leadership Required</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Requesting and encouraging feedback</li> <li>● Shared leadership</li> <li>● Give feedback and support from Educators</li> <li>● Allow for less structure</li> <li>● Promotes team interaction</li> <li>● Asks for contributions from all team members</li> <li>● Collaboration becomes clearer</li> <li>● Encouraging others in making decisions</li> <li>● Continues to build strong relationships</li> </ul>

<sup>3</sup> Taken and adapted from: <https://www.wcupa.edu/coral/tuckmanStagesGroupDevelopment.aspx>



At the Norming stage, the team members freely share their feelings and ideas, give and get feedback to and from one another, and discuss different ways of accomplishing the task. Creativity, as well as a sense of belonging, is high. Collaboration emerges during this stage when the teamwork ethic and shared leadership are understood.

**Practical Tips:**

- **Build Team Spirit.** Use virtual team-building activities, group games, challenges and exercises via platforms like [Zoom](#), [Microsoft Teams](#) and [Google Meet](#). Remember, having fun is important for team spirit. Examples of activity types include icebreaker questions, virtual campfires, and group fitness classes. The purpose of these [virtual activities](#) is to build relationships, improve communication, and boost motivation.
- **Team self-assessment.** For team development, self-assessment is an essential step. It can provide space for constructive conversations. Look into this team development activity that can help you to guide your group through a structured discussion. Discussion is built around six different areas. You could use the learnings from this activity to further strengthen the group, resolve the issues and help the group to move from the Norming to the Performing stage.

**4. Performing** <sup>4</sup>

At this stage of group development, the team’s mission becomes the priority, and the team makes significant progress towards defined goals. At the performing stage, team members feel comfortable with each other, and interdependence becomes a norm. This is a highly productive stage for the team.

<p><b>Observable behaviours</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Fully functional teams</li> <li>● Roles are more explicit</li> <li>● Team develops independence</li> <li>● The team can organise itself</li> <li>● Flexible members function well individually, in subgroups or as a team</li> <li>● Better understand each other’s strengths and weaknesses and insights into group processes</li> </ul>
<p><b>Feelings and thoughts</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Empathy for one another</li> <li>● High commitment</li> <li>● Begin understanding collaborative work ethic</li> <li>● Fun and excitement</li> <li>● Lots of personal development and creativity</li> <li>● General sense of satisfaction</li> <li>● Continual discovery of how to sustain enthusiasm</li> </ul>

<sup>4</sup> Taken and adapted from: <https://www.wcupa.edu/coral/tuckmanStagesGroupDevelopment.aspx>



<b>Group needs</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Leaders assure team is moving in a collaborative direction</li> <li>● Maintain team flexibility</li> <li>● Measure knowledge performance – Post-test</li> <li>● Provide information</li> <li>● Giving and receiving feedback</li> </ul>
<b>Leadership required</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Shared leadership being practised</li> <li>● Observing, inquiring and fulfilling team needs</li> <li>● Collaborative efforts among team members</li> <li>● Educators provide little direction</li> <li>● Team members offer positive reinforcement and support</li> <li>● Share new information</li> </ul>

In the Performing stage, the group has **established norms**, most interpersonal issues are solved, and the group's attention shifts to the tasks. Group members are motivated to work together as a team and through experience know how to solve arising in the group disagreements. Learners at this stage of group development are focused on accomplishing educational goals.

As an educator, your role in the Performing stage changes from managing the group dynamics to concentrating on helping learners to grow and develop in a supportive, positive way. Encourage learners to try new strategies for academic success and achievements. Be aware of the influence of external changes on group performance. For example, a change in a course schedule or group composition might put the group back into the Storming and Norming stages for a while, so by using the tools and techniques discussed in previous stages you can help the group to recover quickly and return to Performing stage.

Check out the [Trainers' Toolkit](#) to find activities for digital classrooms that might help you in guiding your learners through group development stages. In addition, look into activities from [Mentoring for Success](#) website. These activities will help your learners to cooperate to achieve their goals.

## **5. Adjourning**<sup>5</sup>

This is the final stage of group development. Team members are preparing to say goodbye and leave. During the last week of the class, there will be significant changes to the team structure, goal, or purpose within the team. Learners will experience change and transition. Because of this, the main goal of the adjourning stage is to help team members to process their emotions, achieve closure and prepare for departure on a positive note.

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<sup>5</sup> Taken and adapted from: <https://www.wcupa.edu/coral/tuckmanStagesGroupDevelopment.aspx>

<b>Observable Behaviours</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Visible signs of grief</li> <li>• Momentum slows down</li> <li>• Restless behaviour</li> <li>• Bursts of extreme energy usually followed by a lack of energy</li> </ul>
<b>Feelings and Thoughts</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sadness</li> <li>• Humour</li> <li>• Glad that is over – relief</li> </ul>
<b>Group Needs</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evaluate the efforts of the team</li> <li>• Tie up loose ends and tasks</li> <li>• Recognize and reward team efforts</li> </ul>
<b>Leadership required</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leaders help the team develop options for termination</li> <li>• Good listening</li> <li>• Reflection and carry forth collaborative learning to the next opportunity</li> </ul>

Your role as an educator at this stage is to create a space where learners can:

- Reflect on their growth and engagement.
- Receive individual and group recognition of the progress, growth and achievements.
- Celebrate their hard work and accomplishments.

Keep in mind that the learners, who bonded and might feel sad because of the class coming to an end, might seem less motivated and even withdraw from participation. Try to choose activities for the last part of your program that can help wrap up group projects and stimulate planning a celebration to have closure, and at the same time excitement about the future. Encourage learners to stay in touch with each other and network.

There are different activities that you can use in your digital classroom to help learners go through the Adjourning stage. Even though this particular source was developed for youngsters, we are sure you can build on it and create a well-balanced plan for the last stage of the group development - [7 ideas for virtual end-of-the-year activities](#).

## 2. The role of the educator in supporting groups of learners

As an educator, you need to help your learners perform well and to use the group as a source of learning, experimenting, and creativity. To accomplish this, you should change your approach within each stage.

Follow these steps to ensure that you're doing the right thing at the right time:

1. Use the descriptions above to identify which stage of development your team is currently in.
2. Consider what you need to do to move towards the performing stage. Understand your role and the ways you can help the team progress.
3. To continually understand the stage at which the group is operating, schedule regular reviews, and adjust your way of behaving, including your approach to leadership.

*To learn more about Tuckman's stages of group development, check out this video **Forming, Storming, Norming, and Performing: Bruce Tuckman's Team Stages Model Explained***

*or scan this QR code*

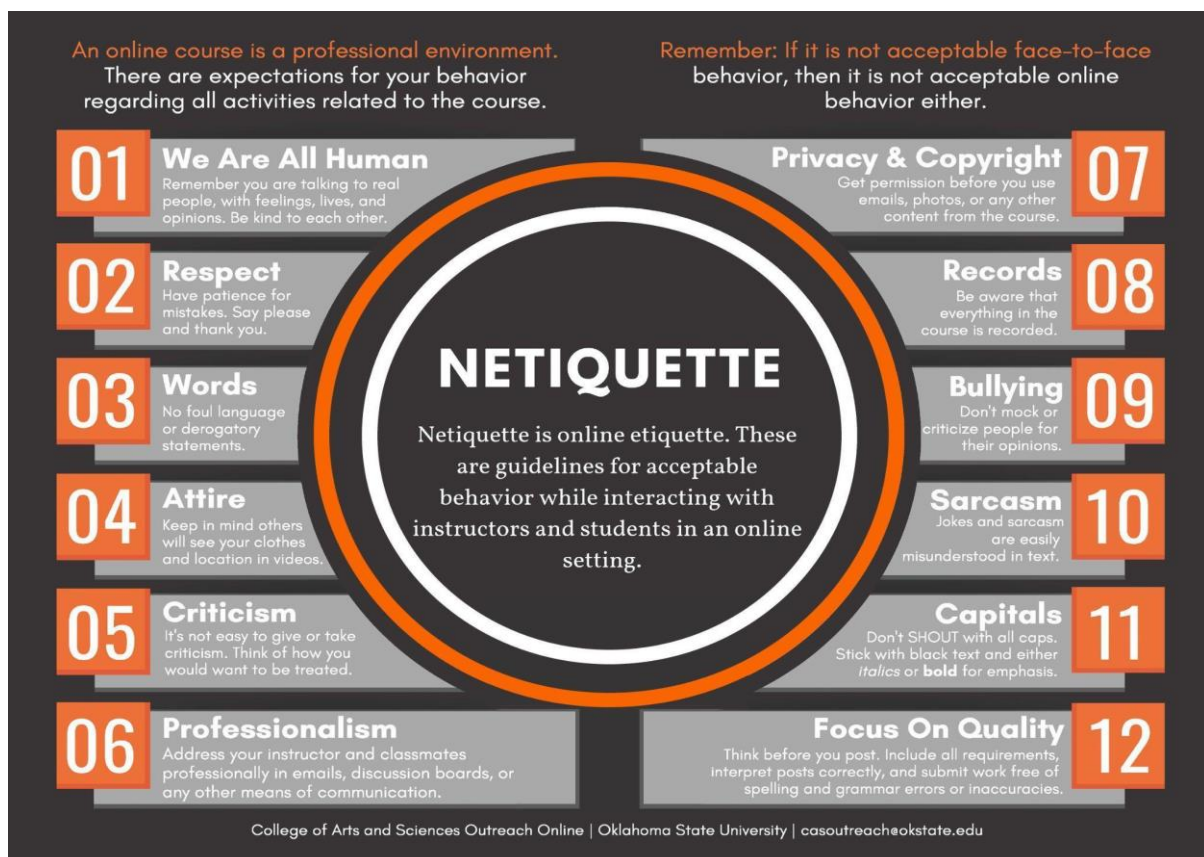


You can watch a great video tutorial about group dynamics in an online setting by clicking [here](#).

### 3. The dos and don'ts of online communication – Netiquette and its importance for group dynamics <sup>6</sup>

The word *netiquette* was created by the combination of the words “network” and “etiquette” and it is a set of ethical rules for online communication. The concept of netiquette has emerged from the lack of visual and auditory cues in online environments, which can lead to misunderstandings. Applying netiquette can help resolve inappropriate communication and conflict, and promote safe, engaging, and collaborative group work, as well as help educators and learners to improve their soft skills.

The rules of online communication are different from the ones in person, so we cannot automatically assume our learners know them. Effective communication is vital for successful digital education, so we strongly recommend creating and agreeing on the rules of your classroom netiquette. The rules that you will choose depend on the context and environment of your class – informal or formal, on whether the learners are familiar with each other or not, and on the type of technology used in your program. Explain to the learners that noncompliance with netiquette rules can be interpreted as a sign of disrespect. Below you can see an example created by Oklahoma State University, that could be used as a model to create your version.



Taken from: <https://cas.okstate.edu/casid/netiquette.html>

<sup>6</sup> Netiquette syllabus example - <https://blog.citl.mun.ca/instructionalresources/tag/netiquette/>

#### 4. Group dynamics in face-to-face, synchronous, and asynchronous education

In their study “Group Dynamics in On-Line and Face-to-Face Interactions: An Experimental Study on Learning Methods” researchers Sergio Severino and Roberta Messina share very interesting observations when comparing differences in online and face-to-face interactions and give very valuable advice.<sup>7</sup>

Face-to-face education	Synchronous education	Asynchronous education
<p>In face-to-face education, you have a big variety of tools to influence group dynamics in your class. Because of the close social proximity, you can better observe the group, interaction between learners, and interaction between learners and yourself; you can read their body language and make immediate interventions when needed.</p> <p>To understand the learners' emotional state, you could use observable behavioural indications. When the learner is in a positive state, he/she:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Shows respect, gives help and support, gives praise</li> <li>● Jokes, laughs, is relaxed and content</li> <li>● Nods, approves, accepts, follows through.</li> </ul> <p>When the learner is in a neutral state, he/she:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Gives ideas, indicates solutions</li> <li>● Evaluates, judges, analyses, interprets, expresses desire and feelings</li> <li>● Informs herself, repeats, confirms, clears up, shows</li> </ul>	<p>In online synchronous education, you can have real-time interpersonal communication, the use of natural language and immediate feedback.</p> <p>To understand your learners' emotional state, you could use observable behavioural indications. When the learner is in a positive state, he/she:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Shows respect, gives help and support, praise through textual language, funny faces, appropriate images</li> <li>● Jokes, uses funny faces and images that express a positive attitude</li> <li>● Nods, approves and accepts through textual and funny face language.</li> </ul> <p>When the learner is in a neutral state, he/she:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Gives ideas, indicates solutions through textual “question language”</li> <li>● Evaluates, judges, analyses, interprets, expresses desires and feelings through textual, image, funny face and “question language”</li> </ul>	<p>In an asynchronous online setting, we talk about managing group work, not classroom dynamics.</p> <p>Our suggestion is to look into <a href="#">Gilly Salmon's E-tivities</a>, which means “task online” – a framework for dynamic and interactive asynchronous online learning. <i>E-tivities</i> are based on intensive interaction and reflective dialogue between learners, and between learners and educators. <i>E-tivities</i> are electronically moderated by educators and are text-based. Look into this <a href="#">Successful E-tivities Handout &amp; Reminders</a></p> <p>In asynchronous learning you can use discussion boards to support group dynamics through threaded discussions. The discussion board is a tool for an asynchronous environment that gives each learner a chance to post a statement and opinion as well as to respond to the other students' postings. Even though learners cannot see each other, this format gives them an opportunity to interact in the text form.</p>

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/267219057\\_Group\\_Dynamics\\_in\\_On-Line\\_and\\_Face-to-Face\\_Interactions\\_An\\_Experimental\\_Study\\_on\\_Learning\\_Methods](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/267219057_Group_Dynamics_in_On-Line_and_Face-to-Face_Interactions_An_Experimental_Study_on_Learning_Methods)

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Asks for information, explanations, confirmations</li> <li>● Asks for evaluations and judgements, questions, feelings</li> <li>● Asks for specific directions</li> </ul> <p>When the learner is in a negative state, he/she:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Refuses help, doubts, gives up, is too formal</li> <li>● Asks for help, increasing tension, non-participation</li> <li>● Debates, seems discouraged, depressed, and humiliated.</li> </ul> <p>This information can help educators to better understand the dynamic in the group and make necessary interventions.</p> <p>In a face-to-face educational setting, there are numerous tested methods, activities, games, and exercises to help learners to move from one stage of group development to another.</p> <p>For the best results in managing the group dynamic and creating a safe and encouraging learning environment, use activities that are beneficial for the particular stage that the group is currently at.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Informs, repeats, confirms, clarifies, illustrates through posting, new topic and a link insertion</li> <li>● Asks for information, explanations, confirms through post or new topic</li> <li>● Asks for evaluations, judgements, questions, sentiments, and states of mind through posts or openness to new topics</li> </ul> <p>When the learner is in a negative state, he/she:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Refuses help, is absent, doubts, gives up or reveals formalistic analysis through language and use of emoticons</li> <li>● Asks for help, uses funny faces that express negative attitudes, is absent</li> <li>● Argues, seems discouraged, depressed and humiliated through textual language, the use of emotion and images.</li> </ul> <p>In online synchronous education, you can use the same tips as in a face-to-face setting, you just need to adjust and modify the activities for online use.</p> <p>Check out the <a href="#">TRENDSS Trainer's Toolkit</a> for various creative ideas!</p>	<p>For making this interaction more “humane”, learners and educators could use online nonverbal communication tools, such as different fonts, different colours, emojis, symbols, etc.</p>
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## 5. Challenges and how to overcome them <sup>8</sup>

Challenge	Description	Solution
<b>Avoiding groupthink</b>	Individuals place views of the group ahead of their own opinion to preserve unity. Occurs during the Norming stage of group development.	Dedicate time for individual thought/brainstorming around views/ideas for a specific question/topic.
<b>Moving off-topic</b>	A participant brings up unrelated topics for discussion.	<p>If it is easily answered, answer the question.</p> <p>If the topic is related to a later part of the program, recognize the importance of the question, answer it briefly, place it in the “waiting room” and bring it up later.</p> <p>If the topic is not to be addressed in your program, identify if the topic might have a related undercurrent or frustration that is causing the topic to come up. Dedicate time to address that concern individually. If not, remind the group of the appropriate topic/goal of the conversation.</p>
<b>Dealing with disagreement, conflict, anger, and personal attacks</b>	<p><b>Disagreement:</b> Participants do not agree on the approach or next steps.</p> <p>Disagreement is confined to the content being discussed.</p> <p><b>Conflict:</b> Deeper than a disagreement about content, conflict may be about organisational differences or a past disagreement.</p>	<p><b>Disagreement:</b> Identify the source of disagreement. Facilitate a discussion about the difference in opinion or schedule a separate time to work through differences. Rephrase the concern/frustration, ask the person to indicate if they are hearing him/her correctly, and provide an alternative or corrected frame of the concern.</p> <p><b>Conflict:</b> Take a break and ask the affected participants individually about how to handle the conflict in order to move forward with the group discussion. Additional time may be scheduled to facilitate a conflict resolution exercise.</p>

<sup>8</sup> Common facilitation challenges [https://www.advocacyandcommunication.org/wp-content/themes/acs/docs/resources/redesigned\\_tools/ACS\\_Common\\_Facilitative\\_Challenges1.pdf](https://www.advocacyandcommunication.org/wp-content/themes/acs/docs/resources/redesigned_tools/ACS_Common_Facilitative_Challenges1.pdf)



	<p><b>Anger:</b> An individual is raising his/her voice and displaying other signs of anger.</p> <p><b>Personal attacks:</b> An individual personally attacks the character of another participant, someone not in the room or you personally.</p>	<p><b>Anger/personal attacks:</b> Suggest a break and approach the person individually to address the issue. Remind him/her that personal attacks are breaking the “ground rules” of the group. Schedule a time for conflict resolution. In rare instances ask individuals to remove themselves and if they don’t obey, use the function of automatic removal from the conference room.</p>
<p><b>Wordsmithing</b></p>	<p>The group gets focused on discussing the wording in a document (such as mission/vision) rather than coming to a consensus on the meaning of the words or moving on to other decision points.</p>	<p>Determine if there is an issue in clarity of terms that requires further definition to move on with decision-making or conceptual conversation or determine if the group can move forward without the discussion.</p> <p>If the group decides to move on from the discussion, admit the final words need to be worked out, identify this task in the “waiting room” (an ongoing list of all these topics on a whiteboard or poster) and guide the discussion back to the conceptual. Remember to build time into your agenda to address “waiting room” topics.</p> <p>If the group needs additional clarity on meaning, set a bounded time limit for the discussion. Write out the “definition” or ask group members what they think the definition is, and then facilitate a discussion toward consensus. At the end of the set time, if the group has not come to a consensus, ask for volunteers for a sub-group to work on the issue later. Remember to give them a bounded task and time frame to hold the discussion.</p>
<p><b>Managing side conversations</b></p>	<p>The participants are not focused on the discussion at hand. Individual conversations occur that exclude the group.</p>	<p>Stand near the conversing individuals to provide a hint that they are being disruptive.</p> <p>Ask one of the individuals if there is a question or if he/she can share thoughts because they are probably important to the entire room.</p> <p>Take a five-minute break and ask everyone to sit in a new seat when they come back (frame it as a getting to know new people exercise).</p>

		Ask participants to step out if it is highly disruptive.
<b>Knowing when to change directions and throw out your carefully planned agenda</b>	The group is not at the place you thought the members were when you planned your agenda, or an unplanned event altered the overall approach that the group needs to take.	Take a five-minute break and discuss your change in approach with fellow facilitators. Review the decision points that you had intended on reaching during your agenda and determine which can still be reached. If an unplanned event has altered the group's goals or approach, discuss those changes with the group. You may need to dedicate more time to defining issues, clarifying items or brainstorming.
<b>Managing time and staying flexible</b>	Knowing when to move on to the next topic or allow a group to discuss more fully.	<p>Create and share a timed agenda. Remind people if/when the group is close to running out of time or over time. Ask the room and get an agreement before spending more than the allotted time. "This seems to be an important conversation. Do we want to spend 15 more minutes on this?"</p> <p>If the discussion is breaking down barriers or will benefit future activities, it might be worthwhile to continue. When a group is spinning its wheels, bored or rehashing, it is time to move on.</p>
<b>Lack of engagement/participating in discussion</b>	Few or no volunteers to answer questions, and discussions lull. The facilitator is "pulling" information out of participants.	It may be time to take a break. Personalise the material by asking the audience specific questions. Ask for specific examples or experiences that relate to the discussion through open-ended questions.
<b>Spotting harmful non-verbal cues</b>	Crossed arms, attention on the phone/computer, eye-rolling, sighs, scowling, etc.	Check in with the individual during a break. Ask if he/she has concerns or questions to identify what the sources of the cues are.
<b>Dealing with negativity or resistance</b>	One or two participants are very negative about the material, direction of the group or approach. They participate through negative statements and do not see how the	<p>Proper meeting preparation will help you deal with this. Working with meeting organisers in advance to understand who is in the audience, their expectations and experiences will help you develop material that is relevant to them.</p> <p>If the negative participants are resistant to change, work with them individually on a break</p>

	<p>material/content applies to them. This type of behaviour can be toxic to a successful meeting and can prevent group consensus, buy-in and/or decision-making.</p>	<p>to understand what their challenges are with the material. Engage in a group exercise to brainstorm solutions.</p> <p>If the participant is still negative or resistant, address the issue with the meeting organiser/the participant's manager after the meeting to come up with an alternative approach to dealing with negativity prior to the next meeting.</p>
<p><b>What to do if you (the facilitator) offend someone or cross a boundary</b></p>	<p>Facilitators are not always perfect, and it is easy to overstep your boundaries or offend someone in the group. When you do cross a boundary, it is important to address the issue immediately.</p>	<p>Once a boundary has been crossed, it is important to acknowledge the issue and rebuild your relationship with the individual. Once you recognize a boundary might have been crossed, reach out and have an individual conversation to understand the issue as soon as possible. Reaching out and acknowledging the issue will help the individual understand that you did not mean to cross the boundary and will work to resolve the issue in the future.</p>
<p><b>The conversation does not have a natural conclusion/ decision</b></p>	<p>The group goes through brainstorming and discovery, but it is not clear what happens next to reach a desired conclusion or decision.</p>	<p>Identify what questions need to be answered to get to a conclusion and identify when that conversation can take place.</p>
<p><b>Making sure that every voice has been heard</b></p>	<p>Some people process information internally, while others process it verbally. It is easy for internal thinkers to get lost in the mix.</p>	<p>As you get to know the group and build relationships with participants, begin to identify how they process information.</p> <p>Check in with individuals who have not spoken, or those you know process more internally, to see if they have additional thoughts before moving on to a new topic/ agenda item.</p> <p>Always build a Q&amp;A section at the end of presentations. Distribute a feedback form at the end of sessions and address items at the next meeting or between meetings.</p>

[Adaptation from the Advocacy and Communication Solutions, LLC "Common Facilitating Challenges"](#)

## 6. Questions for reflection

1. Think about groups you have been a member of. Reflect on your experience – what kind of experience have you had?
2. Think about one of your positive experiences. Did these groups have something in common?
3. Think about the groups you worked with as an educator. Which groups were easy to work with and why? Which were difficult? Which were mixed? What was the cause for these different experiences?

## 7. References and resources

Forsyth, D. R. (2018). *Group dynamics*. Cengage Learning.

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Hasler-Waters, L., & Napier, W. (2002). Building and supporting student team collaboration in the virtual classroom. *Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, 3(3), 345-52.

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Group Dynamics in On-Line and Face-to-Face Interactions: An Experimental Study on Learning Methods - [https://www.scirp.org/pdf/SM20110200009\\_55883307.pdf](https://www.scirp.org/pdf/SM20110200009_55883307.pdf)

### Webpages

- [Advocacy and Communication Solutions, LLC - Common Facilitative Challenges](#)
- [Teacher-Powered Schools](#)
- [West Chester University](#)
- [A pedagogical model for e-learning: "The five-stage model of online learning" by Gilly Salmon](#)
- [The influence of group dynamics in learning](#)
- [Instructional resources](#)
- [Creating trust in online education](#)
- [Getting Started with Managing Classroom Conflict](#)
- [Facilitating group work online](#)