

Starting your research

This article makes practical suggestions to get you started on the background research which you will have to do on most if not all group projects.

Getting started

When you start working on a student group project, one of the first tasks you need to do is to find and read some information about the topic from credible sources. Tutors sometimes complain that students fall into the trap of thinking that any text from a website or magazine can be considered a good source. However, your tutors will expect you to use material that has been carefully edited and reviewed by experts in the field (a process called peer-review) which is especially important in academic texts.

Credible research will not only help your group decide how to proceed with the project but most tutors will expect some referencing in the final write-up to show that the project is informed by academic reading. Your module tutors will often provide some suggestions in a reading list which will usually include a mix of relevant academic books, journal articles and online materials. The list is usually found in your module guide or space on the virtual learning environment (VLE). You should ensure you read at least some of these and some tips for this are below.

1. Most academic papers start with a review of existing research/knowledge about the topic: a literature review. Reading a few of these for your topic will give you a good grounding in the latest thinking and some ideas about what other texts to read.
2. If you are finding the topic hard to understand, consider using Wikipedia to give yourself a basic understanding about the subject. Your tutor will expect more academic references for your final write-up but it can be a great place to start if you don't know much about the topic!
3. Most university libraries will have introductory texts with more basic descriptions of key topics for your subject. These books will include references to other academic work and will often be written in a more accessible way than journal articles or more specialist publications.
4. The latest research for your topic will be found in academic journals. Take some time to log into your library's online search facility and do a search using different terms. If you are getting a lot of results, you might want to do an advanced search, limiting the results to just the last few years. Experiment with using different search terms. A search for **'group'+ 'dynamics'+ 'theory'** will bring back quite different results from **'team'+ 'processes'+ 'research'**.

And remember that you can always ask staff in your university library for help.

Adopt a critical approach to all published research

One of the skills which you should develop during your course is critical analysis. You may feel nervous about doing this in relation to research which has been peer-reviewed and

published in journals with established reputations. But remember that all research has limitations which you may be able to spot and which mean that the results cannot be generalised to your context. We will use a couple of examples of research into group behaviour to show how you can raise important critical questions about established research studies. You can also ask questions about the type of study that you are looking at.

Example 1 uses the approach where the researcher collects all the studies they can find about a particular topic and tries to develop an explanation which covers them all. In Example 2, the authors used a pre-existing model or framework to analyse meeting behaviours. This is common in academic research. A study may result in observations about something leading to a suggested model. This will then be further tested/examined by other academics to see how accurate it might be. If the model is found to be useful, it may then be used by other researchers who want to investigate the same issue. However, caution should be used as models may not always fit every circumstance and could have been influenced by how the original research was conducted. For example, it might not be appropriate to apply a model designed for factory workers in a developing country to a group of international students in the UK. If you do decide to use a model or theory in your reflection, try to think of its strengths and weaknesses and apply these to your group circumstances.

Example 1

There have been a number of theories put forward about how groups form and develop as they collaborate on a project or task. In the book we talked about probably the best-known theory of group development which was devised by Bruce Tuckman (see Hartley, 1997). Based on a review of previous studies, he suggested that most groups go through recognisable stages in the following order:

Stage	What happens
Forming	Members feel anxious and insecure. They need to get to know one another and work out how they might work together.
Storming	Conflict and disagreement surface. Group members become more confident and comfortable in airing their opinions. Power struggles and cliques may develop.
Norming	Consensus emerges - the group finds ways to get on with each other and to work together on the task.
Performing	The group becomes effective with a clear, shared view of the task and a settled way of working.

Adjourning	(fifth stage, added later) The group prepares to split up. There can be feelings of satisfaction but also sadness and loss.
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Critical questions

You can review this theory using a number of questions which can also be applied to other studies of human behaviour:

- Are there alternative theories or models of the process of group development?
There are a number of alternatives to this model (Hartley: 1997, 2005) and we mention one in the book which focused on student groups.
- When was the research done?
Tuckman surveyed studies of groups which he could find at the time, back in the 60s and 70s.
- Who did Tuckman study?
Tuckman collected all the studies he could find but these were typically groups who only met for training or therapy purposes.
- What has changed that might affect the results if we repeated the study today?
These groups had no access to the technologies which we now take for granted.

As a result, we do not think that Tuckman's model will always apply to student groups you may join.

Example 2

The importance of a positive mindset, constructive behaviours and organised meetings was illustrated neatly in a study by Kauffeld and Lehmann-Willenbrock (2012) who recorded almost 100 group meetings from various industrial project teams in Germany. Using a model of common meeting behaviours like 'positive socio-emotional statements' and 'differentiating a problem', the authors attempted to look for relationships between certain behaviours and team satisfaction and success. They found that practical, constructive behaviours were associated with higher team satisfaction scores from meetings with more of those behaviours; and that these meetings were also associated with higher team productivity and organisation success. In contrast, negative communication and behaviours were correlated with lower satisfaction with the meeting and less productivity and success.

The study provides good evidence that teams who are well organised and focussed on supporting each other constructively during meetings are more likely to produce good outcomes. It also shows that negative behaviours like constantly complaining or interrupting were more likely to have a strongly opposite effect. Indeed, the negative effect of negative behaviours was stronger than the positive effect of positive behaviours! It is important to note here that good teams do involve criticism and rejection of ideas but that how someone does this is important. Teams who have agreed how to behave in meetings and plan to stick to this are more likely to succeed.

Critical questions

You can use the same questions we used in Example 1:

- Are there alternative theories or models of meeting processes?
A number of studies have highlighted the importance of 'practical constructive behaviours' but you can also find other characteristics which have been identified as important.
- When was the research done?
The research was done over 10 years ago.
- Who was studied?
'Industrial project teams' will have a 'leader' and so a more formal structure than student groups.
- What has changed that might affect the results if we repeated the study today?
These groups also had limited access to the technologies which we now take for granted.

References

Hartley, P. (1997) *Group Communication*. London: Routledge.

Hartley, P. (2005) Developing students' skills in groups and teamworking: moving experience into critical reflection. In P. Hartley, A. Woods, and M. Pill (eds) *Enhancing teaching in Higher Education*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.

Kauffeld, S. & Lehmann-Willenbrock, N. (2012) Meetings Matter: Effects of Team Meetings on Team and Organizational Success. *Small Group Research*. 43 (2) 130-158. DOI: 10.1177/1046496411429599