DigiGuide: Encouraging Student Group Work and Collaboration on Official Channels

Overview

Student-led group work is a cornerstone of the Liverpool curriculum. However, the rise of unofficial platforms (like WhatsApp) has led to increased risks, including **contact from essay mills** and **data privacy breaches**. This guide outlines how staff can model best practices by integrating secure, University-supported platforms into the curriculum narrative.

The Strategy: Modelling Best Practice

Instead of simply telling students which apps to avoid, we recommend a "curriculum-led" approach that evolves as students progress through their studies.

Phase 1: Mandated Frameworks (Year 1 / Semester 1)

- **The Approach:** Remove the guesswork by setting up official spaces for students immediately.
- **The Benefit:** Demonstrates the value of business-level tools (like Microsoft Teams), backed up by the voices of industry experts, early in your students' professional development.
- **Action:** Provide specific "onboarding" time in lectures to show students how to use their Group Team or Canvas Space.

Phase 2: Guided Choice (Later Years)

- **The Approach:** Allow students to select their own platforms but provide a "recommended list" of UoL-supported tools. If students have already gone through Phase 1 they will already be knowledgeable in this area and keen to build on their experience.
- **The Benefit:** Encourages student agency and allows them to reflect on the benefits of security and reliability in professional environments.

Canvas Grouping Strategies

The platforms you choose—and how you introduce them—are often determined by your grouping strategy. In Canvas, you organise students into groups within the **People** area, typically under a single **Group Set** (see How do I add a Group Set for more information).

Option A: Instructor-Led Allocation (Recommended for Phase 1)

In this model, the staff takes full control of the group setup to provide a stable, pre-configured environment.

- **The Process:** Staff create a set number of groups and allocate students via random assignment, manual drag-and-drop, or a CSV import (often based on seminar/timetable data).
- **Best For:** New students (Year 1) who need clear structure and immediate access to their "official" UoL workspace without the overhead of coordination. This may also form an approach used with/by students in later years where they are looking to develop teamwork skills including forming groups with new people.

Option B: Student Self-Organisation (Recommended for Phase 2)

This approach gives students a window of time to form their own teams before any remaining students are allocated by the tutor.

- **The Process:** Groups are created in Canvas, but "Self-Sign Up" is enabled. Students choose their teammates based on prior experience or shared interests identified in class. (See Appendix C for some sample text that can be used with students.)
- **Best For:** Later-year students who are developing professional autonomy. This pairs well with a "Guided Choice" platform strategy, as they are already making collaborative decisions.

The Toolkit: Official Platforms

Staff should direct students to these two core environments. Note that these are not just for remote work; they are **integrated hubs** that support students whether they are sitting together in a seminar room, working on a document simultaneously from home, or managing a hybrid meeting.

Platform	Best For...	Key Advantage / Challenges
Canvas Group Homepages	Quick discussions and initial ice-breaking. A great place for students to quickly introduce themselves to their new teammates and agree where they will work	**+ Ease of Access:** Directly tied to the module and easy for students to find. **- Limited Collaboration tools:** Students can communicate via Announcement or Discussion Board. No options for simultaneous editing of documents

Microsoft Teams	Collaborative projects, file sharing, and live meetings.	**+ Enterprise Security:** Hosted on UoL servers with professional-grade privacy. Suite of tools for expressive forms of communication, video, rich text, and simultaneous editing of documents. **- Administrative burden with set up of large cohorts:** Creation of Teams with Private Channels and student enrolments can be resource intensive (although [tools for bulk creation and enrolment based on Canvas group data](#) exist.)

A System for All Modes of Working

These tools are designed to adapt to the specific needs of the group at any given time:

- **On-Campus Support:** Students meeting in person can use Teams as a central "live" repository to coordinate tasks and co-author documents in real-time.
- **Hybrid Meetings:** If one or more group members cannot make it to campus, they can join the physical group via a Teams call, ensuring no one is excluded from the conversation.
- **Fully Virtual Collaboration:** For periods of independent study or distance learning, the platform provides a seamless, high-fidelity environment for complex project management.

Security, Equity, and Academic Integrity

It is vital to explicitly address the risks of "unofficial" channels (e.g., WhatsApp) within your course narrative. Framing this correctly helps students see official platforms as a benefit rather than a restriction.

The Case for Equity of Access

Not every student has—or wants—a social media account. Using University-supported platforms ensures that:

- **Privacy is Respected:** Students aren't forced to share personal phone numbers or social media profiles with peers.

- **Inclusivity is Guaranteed:** Every student has the same high-level access to the tools needed to succeed, regardless of their personal tech habits.

Reframing the "Lecturer Presence"

While students often prefer spaces away from "official" eyes, you can flip this narrative to highlight the benefits of institutional support:

- **Virtual "Office Hours":** If you schedule group work time within the timetable, you can drop into a Teams channel or video call to provide real-time guidance exactly when they need it.
- **A Safer Environment:** Having a tutor with monitoring access provides students with a "safety net." It ensures that all group members behave respectfully and stay diligent, reducing the stress of potential peer conflict.

Communicating the Risks

Directly discuss the risks of private messaging groups during your module induction:

- **Targeted Marketing (Essay Mills):** Explain that external companies often infiltrate private student groups to harvest contact details and assignment data for predatory marketing.
- **Data & Conduct Breaches:** Remind students that sharing a peer's personal contact information or internal module data without consent can breach the **Student Code of Conduct** and **UoL Data Policies**.

Staff Resources & Templates

To help staff implement these ideas, we provide the following downloadable materials that can be adapted for any module:

- **Groupwork Contract Template:** A framework for students to agree on communication norms.
- **Sample Course Text:** Pre-written copy for Canvas announcements regarding group communication (see Appendices below).
- **Technical 'How-To' Guides:** Bulk Creating MS Teams via Canvas Data.
  - Setting up Canvas Group Discussions.
- **KnowHow online tutorial:** Working as a Group
- **CIE Online tutorial:** Peer Conflict in Groupwork

Appendices

Over the page you will find sample text as used by other instructors for you to reuse and adapt to your own Canvas course. Copy and paste the text within a new Page alongside your other assessment information or within the weekly structure, and refer students to it.

Appendix A: Sample Text – Explaining Microsoft Teams

💻 Using Microsoft Teams for Groupwork 🤝

Microsoft Teams is more than just a video calling app—it's a powerful **digital workspace** that can significantly improve how your group manages and completes projects. Developing proficiency in tools like Teams is also a valuable **employability skill** for virtual teamwork, something you can reflect back on in job interviews!

Why Use Teams for Groupwork?

Using Teams for your group projects offers several key benefits:

Equity of Access: As an official university tool (part of Office 365), everyone has access to the same professional, industry-standard suite of tools.

Virtual Teamwork Skills: You'll gain experience in managing projects, communications, and files in a digital environment, preparing you for professional life.

Centralised Organisation: Teams keeps all your group's communications, files, and meetings in one place, reducing the clutter of emails and fragmented documents.

Flexible Working: You can use Teams whether you're working remotely or even when meeting in the same room, using it as a central hub for organisation and management.

🛠️ Setup and Structure

Finding Your Team

You have been added to a **Team** by your instructor, and in here you will find a **Private Channel** set up for your individual group to use.

Access your Team here: [Insert Team Link] (The link will open through Teams on the web or your installed app)

Pro Tip: You can also create your own Teams for other modules! As a University of Liverpool student, you have the [ability to create your own Microsoft Team](#) for collaboration at any time.

Private Channels: The Groupwork Space

For your confidential group work, your instructor has created **Private Channels** to mirror your seminar/Canvas groups.

Who can see it? Only the members of that private channel (your group and the instructors). This keeps your discussions private and focused.

🧠 Essential Tools and Approaches

Teams integrates communication, file storage, and meetings seamlessly:

Meetings, Recordings, and Transcripts

- **Scheduling:** Use the **Meetings** function to find a time that works for everyone. This is a great way for off-campus members to join in.
- **Recordings:** Meetings can be recorded and saved directly to your Team's **Files** area—useful for catching up or reviewing decisions.
- **Transcripts:** Recordings generate searchable transcripts, making it easy to find specific action items without re-watching the whole video.

Chat and Tagging

- **Chat:** The **Posts** tab is your main chat area for discussing tasks and sharing media (images, video, GIFs).
- **Tagging (@ Mentions):** Use **@name** (e.g., **@Jane Smith**) to notify a specific person. Use **@everyone** to alert the whole group to an update.

Sharing and Collaborating on Files 📝

Teams is built around **real-time collaboration** using Word, Excel, and PowerPoint.

- **Seamless Access:** Access everything via the **Files** tab. You can edit directly within Teams or open the file in the desktop app for full functionality.

Real-Time Co-authoring: Multiple members can work in the same document **simultaneously**. You can see each other typing in real-time.

Version Control: Work is **automatically saved**. If you make a mistake, you can use the built-in version control to revert to an older copy.

Adding Tabs

Customise your channel by **Adding Tabs** at the top to pin resources:

Wiki/Notes: For group notes or meeting agendas.

Planner/Tasks: Highly recommended for complex projects to assign tasks and track deadlines.

External Links: Pin your assignment brief or key research sites.

💡 Recommendations for the Best Experience

Install the Desktop App: Download and install Microsoft Teams for PC or Mac for a faster, more reliable experience: Download Teams

Consider the Mobile App: Great for staying up-to-date with chat notifications on the go.

Use Office 365: You have free access to the full Office suite on up to 5 computers. UoL Office 365 Information

Further Support: * ITS Teams Quickstart Guide (PDF)

Support one another: If you get stuck, ask your group or contact your module tutor to be put in touch with technical support.

Appendix B – Sample brief for groupwork first tasks

First group task: Get together and decide how you will approach the task, find a meeting space

Word to the Wise

If there is one piece of advice from past students that they would advise you as current students, it is to start early to get the most out of and enjoy the opportunities of this unique module, avoid stress later on! So let's crack on!

In the first week you should aim to meet with the rest of your group to discuss how you will approach the task and agree on how you will decide on which company you want to use to carry out an internal analysis for the groupwork assignment. You will need to agree a meeting place and a place where you can collaborate and start to work on your assignment.

Deciding on a Platform

These days with digital technology you don't need to be all in the one place to meet or work together, and with tools such as Google Drive or Office365 you can even be working on the same document at the same time. Some platforms allow you to meet in the same space as you collaborate (Microsoft Teams). It's up to you and your team to decide what will work the best - have a discussion and agree on a platform. If you feel that one group member may be able to lead on this then take advantage of your group resources - and try to use this as a learning experience you can find of value in your later careers. Here is a quick rundown of the options.

- Microsoft Teams (an industry-level platform used to support virtual and in-person teamwork, every UoL student has access, and it is fully supported by the university so this is our recommendation). Setup a new Team for your group and invite other group members into that space. Schedule video meetings in there and create/upload shared documents. Use the chat function to move things along. Here's how to get started: Create a Microsoft Team
- Google Drive (a platform for collaborating on files, requires each group member to make a Google account). For functionality take a look at this video: Take team collaboration to the next level with Google Drive. Here's how to get started: How to use Google Drive.
- Zoom - use this as an alternative to Microsoft Teams for video conferencing, but does not have any document collaboration features. Get started here: How to schedule a meeting in Zoom.

Other collaborative tools you might use in conjunction with your overall platform

- Padlet - in the same way that Padlet is used to deliver this course, you can use a Padlet board to assemble resources and ideas. Here's how to [get started with Padlet](#)
- Miro / MURAL - these are a bit more free-form compared to Padlet, but can be really effective at doing rich collaboration and ideation. Both platforms are similar and you would either use them if you are in the same room (with each person on a different device) and/or use it in combination with a video conferencing tool such as Teams/Zoom.
  - [Getting Started With Miro](#)
  - [How to use Mural - your quickstart guide](#)

Discuss how your groupwork will proceed (and succeed!)

Whenever we introduce this, students often yawn, but for us if we were back at uni doing groupwork we would definitely run through a groupwork contract. It will help you to find out about each other, identify each person's goals and commitment and avoid problems later. It's also a great thing to talk about at job interviews! Have a look at our sample [groupwork contract](#) if you think it would be useful to start discussion in your groups.

The things you might like to discuss are your roles, how and how often you will meet, how to communicate to each other, different roles in the assignment work, and different availabilities. It might well be that one of your group members will be unavailable for a period of time, try to create a space where every group member can be honest about what they can commit to, but try to find a mutually agreeable way whereby each group member can contribute in an equitable way to the task. The group contract can help.

As a reminder, on this module we will use Buddycheck as a group review and peer evaluation tool to help the drive engagement and fairness in the groupwork, so please try to work well together, and recognise the valuable opportunity you have to work with other people with whom you may never have worked with before, and all of the learning you can gain from that experience.

Next Steps as a Group

After you have a platform, and agreed how you will work together then a piece of work you may like to agree amongst yourselves is how you will identify and agree on a company to use for your analysis. Will you give each other a few days to research some companies and present pro's and con's to the rest of the group, will you vote on a company, how will you all get behind your chosen company? It's over to you!

Appendix C – Sample text to encourage students to form groups

Forming Your Group for the Group Assignment

Getting your group together early is essential for your success in the group assignment. The sooner you form your group, the better positioned you will be to dive into the seminars and make meaningful progress. Here's how to get started:

Option 1: Create Your Own Group

Build your ideal team!

Think about who you would like to collaborate with based on your classmates' skills, interests, or prior experiences.

Use the Group Tool: Go to the "People" section in Canvas and [follow the steps to join a group (Links to an external site)](#) with your chosen members.

Option 2: Network and Find Groupmates

Not sure who to partner with?

Join us during the first lecture for a group networking session. This will be a great opportunity to meet fellow students, discuss potential collaborations, and find group members. You will also have networking opportunities during week [X].

Form Your Group: Once you have connected with your teammates, use the Group Tool in Canvas to officially form your group.

Option 3: Random Group Assignment

Prefer to be assigned randomly?

If you cannot find a group or prefer to be randomly assigned, please note that any remaining unclaimed groups will be filled with randomly selected students by **[DATE AND TIME].**

Note, option 3 is the least preferred option. There is too much at stake in your final year to leave things to chance. You should be more proactive about choosing your group mates.

Why Early Group Formation Matters

Starting early is **critical** to the success of your group assignment. Early formation gives your group time to plan, collaborate, and fully engage with the seminars.   The sooner you are set up, the better prepared you will be to succeed!

Feel free to use the [group contract](#) to assign key responsibilities to your group.

If you have any questions, feel free to post a question on the module Padlet board or use the other support options for further clarification.

Early Communications within your Canvas Group

Your Canvas Group is your **first, readily available meeting point**. It provides a Group Homepage where you can:

Make First Contact: Use this space to introduce yourselves to your group members and start building your team relationship.

Determine Your Main Workspace: Since Canvas offers limited collaboration features (e.g., no live document editing or video calls), your primary goal here is to **quickly agree on your main platform** for continued work (e.g., Microsoft Teams, Google Workspace) and whether you will meet virtually or on-campus.

This is essential if your tutor has not already set up a dedicated platform for you.

You can access your Group Homepage either through the **People** area of your Canvas course, or via the **Groups** tool. More instructions here: [How do I use groups as a student?](#)