

COMM1120

Business Innovation and Collaboration

UNSW Business School

Covers: Collaboration | Innovation | Design Thinking | Reflective Practice | Project Management

Course Coverage

Weeks 1-2: Introduction to Collaboration -- what collaboration is, teamwork vs collaboration, diversity, bias, team formation, the team agreement

Week 3: Problem Context and Analysis -- the Double Diamond, macro themes, fishbone (cause and effect) diagram, 5 Ws, root cause analysis

Week 4: Problem Definition and Project Planning -- How Might We (HMW) statements, gap analysis, project roles, customised project plan

Weeks 5-7: Ideation and Development -- Crazy 8s, convergent and divergent thinking, prototyping, stakeholder feedback, value proposition canvas

Weeks 8-10: Solution Delivery -- evaluation, communication of solutions, project evaluation, risk management, reflective practice

Cross-cutting: Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle, reflective practice, project management, persuasive communication, collaboration and innovation nexus

WEEKS 1-2: COLLABORATION AND TEAM FORMATION

1.1 What is Collaboration?

Definition: Collaboration

Collaboration is the process by which a diverse group of individuals come together to effectively solve a challenge. It is distinct from mere teamwork in that it involves the active pooling of diverse skills, perspectives, and knowledge to produce outcomes that no single individual could achieve alone.

Collaboration is not a single event or moment -- it is a dynamic, ongoing process. It requires participants to listen actively, challenge each other constructively, and build on each other's contributions. The core idea is that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

1.1.1 Collaboration vs Teamwork

Teamwork	Collaboration
Focuses on coordinating existing roles and tasks toward a shared goal	Focuses on the active, joint creation of ideas and solutions through interaction
Members can work relatively independently on their assigned components	Members must engage with each other's thinking, challenging and building upon ideas
Effective in stable, well-defined environments where tasks are clear	More powerful in ambiguous or complex situations where the 'right answer' is unknown
Emphasises execution of a plan	Emphasises ideation, exploration, and sense-making together
A sports team running a play from the playbook	A group of engineers redesigning a product based on emerging user feedback

Key insight: In the context of COMM1120, the focus is on collaborative ideation -- working together during the 'discovery' and 'definition' phases of the design process where the problem and solution are not yet clear. This requires a different set of skills from simply assigning tasks and checking them off.

1.2 The Importance of Diversity in Collaboration

1.2.1 What is Diversity?

Definition: Diversity (Sandeep, 2023)

Diversity refers to strengths, skills, experiences, and mindsets. It is not limited to demographic differences (race, gender, nationality) but encompasses the full range of backgrounds, knowledge domains, cognitive styles, and lived experiences that team members bring.

A diverse team brings multiple 'cultural lenses' to a problem -- different ways of framing questions, different assumptions about what is normal, and different standards of evidence. This breadth of perspective is a strategic asset in innovation contexts because:

- Diverse teams identify a wider range of solutions (more ideas in the ideation pool)
- Diverse perspectives challenge assumptions that a homogeneous group would miss
- Cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary knowledge reveals needs and constraints that specialists overlook
- Diverse feedback from external stakeholders can be better interpreted by a team that reflects that diversity

1.2.2 Friction as a Feature, Not a Bug

Michael (2023) on friction: friction -- the productive tension created when diverse perspectives clash -- is crucial in the process of innovation. When team members disagree or challenge each other's ideas, this is not merely a conflict to be managed; it is the mechanism by which better solutions emerge.

"Collaboration consisted of two aspects. My ideas and opinions were consistently challenged as other team members possessed greater knowledge in some areas, increasing the overall value of the team. It was through this group collaboration that differing views could create a more unique solution."

-- Michael, COMM1120 Moodle Video (2023)

The challenge: friction is uncomfortable. People naturally seek harmony and agreement. The skill of productive collaboration is to tolerate and engage with discomfort -- to resist the temptation to suppress disagreement or converge prematurely on a consensus that everyone is comfortable with but that is not the best possible solution.

1.2.3 Cognitive Biases in Team Formation

Biases significantly affect how teams form and how well they collaborate. Common biases that impede effective collaboration:

Bias	What it looks like	Why it matters
In-group bias	Preference for working with people similar to oneself (same background, culture, experience level)	Leads to homogeneous teams that miss diverse perspectives; reduces the innovation potential
Affinity bias	Choosing team members based on personal liking rather than complementary skills	Team may work well together but lack the breadth of

		knowledge needed to solve the problem
Halo effect	Assuming someone who is strong in one area is strong in all areas	Poor role allocation; overreliance on perceived 'stars' rather than drawing on team's full range
Status bias	Deferring to the loudest or most confident voice	Junior or quieter members with valuable insights are not heard; leads to groupthink
Attribution error	Blaming individuals rather than systems when things go wrong	Destroys psychological safety; team members become reluctant to take risks or raise concerns

Real-World Example: Overcoming In-Group Bias

A common scenario in university group work: a student initially avoids being placed in a group with international students due to preconceived notions about work ethic or language barriers. When involuntarily placed in such a group, initial frustration eventually gives way to recognition that these team members brought new cultural lenses to the problem -- identifying solutions and challenging assumptions that the domestic students had normalised. The moment of recognition ('I realised my biases stopped me from collaborating effectively') is a concrete example of the Kolb cycle in action.

1.3 Principles of Effective Collaboration

1.3.1 Dr Collins (2023): Interpersonal Relationships and Team Confidence

Dr Collins (2023) identifies that building strong interpersonal relationships within a team motivates members and builds confidence. Key principles:

- **Active listening:** genuinely attending to what other team members are saying, not just waiting to speak
- **Psychological safety:** creating an environment where members feel safe to share ideas, take risks, and admit mistakes without fear of ridicule or penalty
- **Mutual accountability:** team members holding each other responsible for commitments, not just individual outputs but the collective outcome
- **Consistent communication:** regular check-ins, clear updates on progress, proactive flagging of issues before they become crises

1.3.2 Roles and Responsibilities in Collaborative Teams

Effective collaboration is facilitated by clear role allocation. Roles should be assigned based on individual strengths, experiences, and the needs of the project -- not arbitrarily. Key principles from the course material:

- Roles should not be mutually exclusive -- members can contribute across different areas

- Role assignment should be explicit and agreed upon -- not assumed
- Roles should be revisited as the project evolves -- what is needed in the problem definition phase may differ from the solution delivery phase
- A shared project role structure builds accountability and prevents 'free riding'

Common roles in a COMM1120 project team:

Role	Responsibilities	How it facilitates collaboration	Evaluation criteria
Project Manager	Keeps timelines, tracks progress, runs meetings, maintains accountability	Creates structure that allows everyone to know what is expected and when	Meets deadlines; team stays on track; issues escalated early
Researcher	Investigates the problem context, finds supporting evidence, verifies assumptions	Provides the factual foundation that the whole team builds arguments on	Evidence is relevant, current, appropriately sourced
Designer / Creative Lead	Develops visual materials, structures presentations, oversees prototype design	Translates team ideas into a communicable form that others can respond to	Visual aids clear, relevant, persuasive
Communication Lead	Manages stakeholder outreach, drafts emails, coordinates external feedback	Ensures the team's work is grounded in real-world user feedback, not assumptions	Feedback incorporated; stakeholders actually engaged

1.4 The Team Agreement

1.4.1 Purpose and Components

The team agreement (also called a team contract) is a collaborative document created at the start of a project that establishes shared norms, expectations, and accountability mechanisms. It is not merely a formality -- research on team dynamics shows that explicit upfront agreements reduce conflict and improve performance, because ambiguity about expectations is a major driver of team dysfunction.

Key components of a team agreement:

- **Goals and priorities:** What grade is the team aiming for? What is each member's commitment to learning vs performance vs relationships?
- **Communication norms:** How will the team communicate? What platforms (Messenger, WhatsApp, email)? What is the expected response time?
- **Meeting expectations:** How often will the team meet? Will meetings be in-person or online? What happens when someone misses a meeting?
- **Role allocation:** Who is responsible for what? Are roles fixed or rotational?
- **Decision-making:** How will the team make decisions when there is disagreement? Majority vote? Consensus? One person has final say on particular areas?
- **Conflict resolution:** What is the process if a team member is not fulfilling their commitments? At what point does the issue escalate?
- **Quality standards:** What level of work quality is acceptable? Who reviews work before submission?

1.4.2 Performance, Learning, and People: Competing Priorities

Many teams must balance three potentially competing priorities:

Priority	Focus	Tension with others
Performance	Maximising marks / output quality	High performance focus may mean less time for exploration or relationship-building
Learning	Developing skills and knowledge through the process	Deep learning may sacrifice efficiency and mark-optimisation
People	Building relationships and supporting team member wellbeing	People focus may slow task completion but builds long-term trust

Week 2 preparation exercise: teams are asked to explicitly discuss and agree on how to balance these priorities. A realistic, honest conversation about each member's capacity (hours available, other commitments) prevents resentment and misalignment later.

1.5 Team Formation Theory

1.5.1 Tuckman's Stages of Team Development

Tuckman's Stages (1965): Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing

- 1. Forming:** Team members come together, are polite and guarded, and test the boundaries. Roles and norms are not yet established. Everyone is on best behaviour.
- 2. Storming:** Conflict emerges as members assert their preferences and styles. Power dynamics play out. Subgroups may form. This stage is uncomfortable but necessary.
- 3. Norming:** The team establishes shared norms, roles become clearer, and members learn to work together. Trust begins to develop.
- 4. Performing:** The team operates efficiently and productively. Members are interdependent, motivated, and focused on the collective goal.
- 5. Adjourning:** The team disbands after completing the project. Reflection on the experience and relationships often occurs at this stage.

Implication for COMM1120: the team agreement is designed to help teams move quickly through the Forming and Storming stages by making explicit the norms and expectations that would otherwise emerge (or fail to emerge) organically. Productive use of the storming stage -- genuine engagement with disagreement and difference -- is what differentiates high-performing collaborative teams from those that produce mediocre work through premature consensus.

1.5.2 Psychological Safety (Google Project Aristotle, 2016)

Google's Project Aristotle (2016) identified psychological safety -- the belief that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes -- as the single