Recognizing & Reinforcing the Value of Groups and Collaborations!

Do you use group projects in your classes? Do you notice that some groups produce high quality products without much distress while other groups struggle to work together? Have you heard students complaining about their entire group getting the same grade on their project because one or two students did more work than the others? Are you concerned about using group graded assignments for these very reasons?

In most professions, much of the work of an organization or a project occurs in task groups (or teams or coalitions or partnerships or collaborations, or a variety of other terms that are used to describe groups). Team work is an expected professional skill and group graded projects are often utilized as a way for our students to build or enhance this skill set.

However, if, as faculty, we are simply expecting the group-graded assignment to miraculously produce the professional skills of working collaboratively in a team, we are going to be very disappointed…and our students are going to be very frustrated. Group-graded projects CAN be highly effective, but only if we prepare ourselves, our students and our content to align to [best practices for using groups in academic settings](http://www.hanoverresearch.com/2012/04/09/best-practices-for-group-learning-in-higher-education/).

Here are a few tips to ensure that your group projects actually achieve the learning outcomes we want our emerging professionals to exhibit:

In Advance of Assigning a Project to a Group

* When planning your course assignments, be intentional about your rationale for group projects.  Clearly articulate this rationale to your students so they are aware of the purpose and expectations for the group’s process and product.
* Things to consider:
* What benefit does working as a group bring to this particular assignment?  Consider both the product and the process:
* How will the finished product be stronger as a result of working together?
* What can students learn about themselves and their classmates from the process of working as a group?
* What are the potential pitfalls that working as a group will bring to this particular assignment?
* What resources will you offer to address the potential pitfalls?
* Do you want the group to work together for a short length of time (just one class period/project/paper/presentation) or will you have the same group work together for the entire semester?
* Make an intentional decision about how students will be assigned to a particular group – will they self-select into groups or will you assign students to a particular group?
* Are there particular dynamics that you need to consider when forming the groups? (learning styles, individual student backgrounds and experiences, just to name a few).
* This can be especially important to consider if you have a diverse class makeup and want to encourage students to learn from those with different backgrounds or experiences. Some recent research (Rienties, et al 2014) suggests that students who are assigned by the instructor to a group have stronger learning networks at the conclusion of the project than students who were allowed to self-select their groupmates.

At the Beginning of a Group Project

* Consider having the group [create a team charter](https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/instructional-design/use-team-charters-improve-group-assignments/?utm_campaign=Faculty%20Focus&utm_source=hs_email&utm_medium=email&utm_content=54144549&_hsenc=p2ANqtz-8qZUx0Q0-7uvfRo4a7QlCwTO8Yh0mHdwa23YRCsAnbrxl2mAfSI6n81nWTFpQC7ESTBnghyxSr7jKd13pbpYW4mkZctA&_hsmi=54144549) at the outset of the project. The charter is a working document that outlines expectations and creates accountability. Consider including categories related to:
* Attendance and participation
* How to give and receive feedback
* Personality traits (including True Colors descriptions) and personal situations that need to be taken into account when assigning elements of the project.
* How (and how often) the team’s collaborative functioning will be assessed.

During the Group Project

* Be sure to allocate sufficient time (during and/or outside of class) for the group to work through the challenges and create a polished product.
* Create a dedicated page in your LMS for each small group.  They can use this group page to virtually collaborate on the assignment.  They can email each other, upload content, write and edit drafts of the paper and use all of the other features of the LMS.
* Encourage students to openly discuss the division of labor within the group project. When groups “go bad”, it is often because students perceive that the workload was not equitably balanced amongst the group members.  Notice that I used equitably, not equally.  Most projects will have multiple elements that require different strengths and skill sets.  Some students may do better at the written elements and others may do better at the presentation elements.  These may not have equal weight within the assignment but by allowing students to focus their efforts on the element that plays to their strengths, the overall product is stronger.
* Include a process for [interim reports or reflections](https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/effective-teaching-strategies/10-recommendations-improving-group-work/). Have the group create a timeline, using backwards planning from the due date for the assignment. The timeline can be shared with the instructor, who can then select a date to check in with the group about their progress with the tasks and with their collaborative process. Use that check in (which can be done in person during class, online through a dedicated discussion board in your LMS or through a brief reflection assignment) to gather information about:
* Progress towards their end product (are they on track, ahead, behind and why)
* how the group is working together, with specific examples
* where they have faced challenges with content or with their process of working together and how they’ve addressed those challenges.
* if the anticipated tasks are being completed by the person who was assigned responsibility for them and if not, why not.
* also use this check in as an opportunity to find out what they need, from you and from each other, in order to experience more success for the remainder of the project.
* Be prepared to teach [negotiation and consensus skills](https://www.envisionexperience.com/blog/teaching-students-the-art-of-collaboration) when group members encounter conflict, including disagreements about how the workload is being handled. Instead of seeing conflict as negative, you (and they) need to understand that it is normal for group members to experience disagreement as they delve deep into the project. Encourage them to reframe disagreement as a different perspective that is worthy of exploration and respectful attention. It provides an opportunity to re-visit the charter and since the charter is a working document, it can be revised to reflect new information as necessary.

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At the Conclusion of the Group Project:

* Consider a [peer assessment process](file:///C%3A%5CUsers%5Cjposton%5CDownloads%5C%E2%80%A2%09https%3A%5Cwww.facultyfocus.com%5Carticles%5Ccourse-design-ideas%5Cpeer-assessment-that-improves-performance-in-groups%5C).  When all group members receive the same grade for a project, some students may feel that the instructor was unaware of one (or more) of the group member’s contributions (or lack thereof).  One way to address this is to offer the group the opportunity to grade each other’s contributions to the project as part of the overall assignment grade.  In order for this to be effective, it MUST include a “formative” assessment element (see the interim report strategy above) not only a “summative” assessment at the conclusion of the project. If implemented only at the conclusion, it will be used as a way to punish the members who didn’t complete work in a timely fashion, or didn’t attend the required meetings, but the information comes too late to provide a corrective process.
* Use a behaviorally anchored rating scale [like this one](https://provost.uni.edu/sites/default/files/documents/the_comprehensive_assessment_of_team_member_effectiveness.pdf) that includes items within five categories of effective teamwork: 1) contributing to the team’s work; 2) interacting with teammates; 3) keeping the team on track; 4) expecting quality; and 5) having relevant knowledge, skills, and abilities.
* Consider using it as both a self-assessment as well as a peer assessment.
* Require self-reflection.  This is actually an element that you should consider before, during *and* after the group project. These reflection elements could be individually graded assignments or simply a discussion post in your LMS, depending on how much you want to emphasize this component.
* In advance of the group project, consider asking each student to self-reflect on their strengths and challenges with regards to task groups.  They can identify the skills that they bring to the group process and assignment product as well as areas where they will benefit from learning from their group mates.
* During the project, consider having a formal “mid-point” check in with each group.  You could ask the group members to identify what’s going well with the project and a few areas for improvement that they could make in order to have a strong finished product.
* At the conclusion of the project, consider a self and peer assessment of the product and the process.  As noted above with the peer grading strategy, this could be a formal graded element or it could be a discussion board post for the small group only.

**References**

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