

FACULTY FOCUS

HIGHER ED TEACHING STRATEGIES FROM MAGNA PUBLICATIONS

10 Recommendations for Improving Group Work

September 12, 2014

By: Maryellen Weimer, PhD

Many faculty now have students do some graded work in groups. The task may be, for example, preparation of a paper or report, collection and analysis of data, a presentation supported with visuals, or creation of a website. Faculty make these assignments with high expectations. They want the groups to produce quality work—better than what the students could do individually—and they want the students to learn how to work productively with others. Sometimes those expectations are realized, but most of the time there is room for improvement—sometimes lots of it. To that end, below is a set of suggestions for improving group projects. A list in the article referenced below provided a starting place for these recommendations.

1. **Emphasize the importance of teamwork**—Before the groups are formed and the task is set out, teachers should make clear why this particular assignment is being done in groups. Students are still regularly reporting in survey data that teachers use groups so they don't have to teach or have as much work to grade. Most of us are using groups because employers in many fields want employees who can work with others they don't know, may not like, who hold different views, and possess different skills and capabilities.
2. **Teach teamwork skills**—Most students don't come to group work knowing how to function effectively in groups. Whether in handouts, online resources, or discussions in class, teachers need to talk about the responsibilities members have to the group (such as how sometimes individual goals and priorities must be relinquished in favor of group goals) and about what members have the right to expect from their groups. Students need strategies for dealing with members who are not doing their fair share. They need ideas about constructively resolving disagreement. They need advice on time management.
3. **Use team-building exercises to build cohesive groups**—Members need the chance to get to know each other, and they should be encouraged to talk about how they'd like to work together. Sometimes a discussion of worst group experiences makes clear to everyone that there are behaviors to avoid. This might be followed with a discussion of what individual members need from the group in order to do their best work. Things like picking a group name and creating a logo also help create a sense of identity for the group, which in turn fosters the commitment groups need from their members in order to succeed.
4. **Thoughtfully consider group formation**—Most students prefer forming their own groups, and in some studies these groups are more productive. In other research, students in these groups “enjoy” the experience of working together, but they don't always get a lot done. In most professional contexts, people don't get to choose their project partners. If the goal is for students to learn how to work with others whom they don't know, then the teacher should form the groups. There are many ways groups can be formed and

many criteria that can be used to assemble groups. Groups should be formed in a way that furthers the learning goals of the group activity.

5. **Make the workload reasonable and the goals clear**—Yes, the task can be larger than what one individual can complete. But students without a lot of group work experience may struggle with large, complex tasks. Whatever the task, the teacher’s goals and objectives should be clear. Students shouldn’t have to spend a lot of time trying to figure out what they are supposed to be doing.
6. **Consider roles for group members**—Not all the literature recommends assigning roles, although some does. Roles can emerge on their own as members see what functions the group needs and step up to fill those roles. However, this doesn’t always happen when students are new to group work. The teacher can decide on the necessary roles and suggest them to a group with the group deciding who does what. The teacher can assign the roles, but should realize that assigning roles doesn’t guarantee that students will assume those roles. Assigned roles can stay the same or they can rotate. However they’re implemented, roles are taken more seriously if groups are required to report who filled what role in the group.
7. **Provide some class time for meetings**—It is very hard for students to orchestrate their schedules. Part of what they need to be taught about group work is the importance of coming to meetings with an agenda—some expectation about what needs to get done. They also need to know that significant amounts of work can be done in short periods of time, provided the group knows what needs to be done next. Working online is also increasingly an option, but being able to convene even briefly in class gives groups the chance to touch base and get organized for the next steps.
8. **Request interim reports and group process feedback**—One of the group’s first tasks ought to be the creation of a time line—what they expect to have done by when. That time line should guide instructor requests for progress reports from the group, and the reports should be supported with evidence. It’s not good enough for the group to say it’s collecting references. A list of references collected should be submitted with the report. Students should report individually on how well the group is working together, including their contributions to the group. Ask students what else could they contribute that would make the group function even more effectively.
9. **Require individual members to keep track of their contributions**—The final project should include a report from every member identifying their contribution to the project. If two members report contributing the same thing, the teacher defers to the student who has evidence that supports what the student claims to have done.
10. **Include peer assessment in the evaluation process**—What a student claims to have contributed to the group and its final product can also be verified with a peer assessment in which members rate or rank (or both) the contributions of others. A formative peer assessment early in the process can help members redress what the group might identify as problems they are experiencing at this stage.

Students, like the rest of us, aren’t born knowing how to work well in a group. Fortunately, it’s a skill that can be taught and learned. Teacher design and management of group work on projects can do much to ensure that the lessons students learn about working with others are the ones that will serve them well the next time they work in groups.

Reference: Hansen, R.S. (2006). Benefits and problems with student teams: Suggestions for improving team projects. *Journal of Education for Business*, September/October, 11-19.