

Designing Effective Group Projects

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FACULTY DEVELOPMENT SERIES, MARCH 29, 2018

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Student Challenges with Group Projects

Coordination Costs – Time & energy to coordinate schedules, arrange meetings, meet, correspond, make collective decisions, integrate individual contributions into project

Strategies to Alleviate Coordination Costs –

- Keep groups small
- Allow some in-class time for group meetings
- Devote some time to teaching communication & conflict resolution skills
- Break the overall project into stages with progress updates and time for revising and restructuring stalled or ineffective project components
- Designate time in the schedule for students to integrate their work

Student Challenges

Motivation Costs – potential loss of individual motivation due to free riding, lack to individual accountability, conflict within group, or sense that individual effort and contribution is not important

Strategies to Alleviate Motivation Costs

- Explain why working in groups is beneficial
- Consider using team contracts, or at least set clear ground rules & expectations for group members
- Embed some individual accountability into stages of the project
- Assess progress at intervals via evaluations or progress reports
- Reinforce conflict resolution skills, perhaps with scenarios discussed in class

Student Challenges

Intellectual Costs – group behaviors that might lower productivity and originality, such as Groupthink, belief that what is clear to the group will be clear to others, or discounting ideas which are less agreed upon or which are less obvious

Strategies for Alleviating Intellectual Costs –

- Have students brainstorm individually before they share ideas in their group
- Periodically require students to report their individual contributions to the group
- Encourage groups to revise and retool their processes & strategies

Student Challenges

Anxiety and the Comfort Zone - Fear of failure and/or tendency for students to want to do only what they are good at already

Strategies for Alleviating Anxiety and Comfort Zone Thinking

- Allow students to work with the same group members on smaller assignments before *The Big Project*.
- Provide a timeline with mini-due dates for stages of the project, or allow group to devise its own. Clear guidance does wonders for relieving anxiety.
- Inform students of campus resources that can assist: University Writing Center, Hauser Lab, Library, Learning Center
- Encourage use of collaborative tools (Blackboard Collaborate, Skype, Google, etc.).
- Consider requiring groups to complete the project in stages, with all group members contributing to each stage. Each student may be team leader on one stage of the project.
- Remind students that the goal is for them to build skills – and learn new ones - in each stage of the project, not just to contribute to one stage. Foster an energizing environment in which students learn, take risks, and revise strategies and processes, as needed.

Instructor Challenges with Group Projects

Determining SLO's of the project assignment. What do you want individual students as well as the group to learn from contributing to the project?

- Research skills (library, field, or original research, or a blend?)
- Group process skills
- Collaborative tool use (discussion boards, chat rooms, blogs, etc.)
- Individual & collaborative writing skills and tools
- Multimodal components (video, audio, photo)
- Presentation and video editing tools (PPT, Prezi, poster presentations, Animoto, Movie Maker, etc.)
- Class presentation itself

Instructor Challenges

Time – A well-designed group project assignment takes time up front but will yield better quality projects.

Assessment – The most effective group projects usually include both individual and group assessment, done by the students as well as by the instructor. A template or some prepared questions can help students give meaningful feedback.

Process & Product Assessment – Remind students of the importance of learning to work on complex tasks with a team. Devise assessment measures for the groups' processes as well as their final product. Provide clear assessment criteria (possibly a rubric), with weights for each component of the project.

Instructor Challenges

Teaching Process and Conflict Management Skills – Some instructors are daunted by this task, but simple, informal discussions and scenarios are effective.

Conflict Intervention & Dealing with the Non-productive Group Member – Encourage groups to settle their own disputes, but provide a mechanism for your input. Decide in advance and announce what the penalty will be for recalcitrant group members.

Integrating the Project into Overall Course Goals – Students' motivation and the quality of the projects will increase if students see how the project fits in with and enhances other course material. Consider requiring students to evaluate other groups' projects, or perhaps include a question on the final exam that asks students to reflect on the connection between their group project and the overall course goals.

How the Writing Center Can Help

- The Writing Center can help groups in the planning stages of the project, including distribution of workload, setting mini-deadlines, determining the order in which steps will be accomplished
- The Writing Center can work with individual group members on their portion of the task
- The Writing Center can help the group polish the final version of its project for presentation

PLEASE NOTE: *The Writing Center does not work with an entire project unless the entire group is present.* The best way for an instructor to facilitate group work in the Writing Center is to allow one or two groups at a time to come to the Center during class time. An appointment is not required, but it is recommended.

How to Contact the Writing Center

- **In Edinburg**, we are located in ESTAC 3.119, just to the left of the elevator.
You or your students may reach us by phone at 956-665-7977 or 956-665-2538.

- **In Brownsville**, we are located in BLIBR 3.206.
You or your students may reach us by phone at 956-882-7065.

Some Great Resources

- <https://www.cmu.edu/teaching/design/teach/instructionalstrategies/groupprojects/>
Comprehensive site with lots of tips for designing and assessing group assignments
- <https://learninginnovation.duke.edu/blog/2016/10/ideas-great-group-work/>
Good, brief overview of ideas for designing group projects, with a good list of resources for both faculty and students
- <https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/setting-up-and-facilitating-group-work-using-cooperative-learning-groups-effectively/>
Helpful introduction to the concepts and practices of cooperative learning

(Re)Designing Group Projects for *Your* Class

- Whether you are starting from scratch or redesigning an existing group project, you will find a wide range of “tools” for your and your students’ use in these suggestions.
- Some of the tips may be useful for all projects, while some may apply only to certain types of projects or for certain classes.
- Avoid getting in a rut and having a one-size-fits-all group project design. Your students will perform and learn better, and you will be happier with the results of their group work, if you tailor each project to fit the particular SLO’s or goals of a particular class.
- Remember that lower division classes may need more time or more assistance with completing a group project successfully. Upper division student groups may be able to be more self-directed.

For Reflection--

- Are there any suggestions you can sandwich into group projects for a class that is meeting this semester?
- Which suggestions do you find most promising for a project you will assign this summer or next fall?