At a Glance: Group Work Best Practices and Tools

The Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching

Group Work: The Collaboration Conundrum

Most of us would readily agree that peer-to-peer learning can be powerfully effective. We would probably also agree that it can be difficult to organize and a nightmare to manage effectively. With that in mind let's look at some of the reasons why the benefits are worth the effort involved. If your goal is to provide active, engaged learning, collaboration encourages students to interact authentically with each other and with the material. It opens the door for productive struggle and gives quieter students a smaller, lower-risk environment in which to participate while also preparing students with interpersonal skills that are applicable to professional situations that they might experience. That's a lot of potential benefits, so read on to find best practices and tools that will help you make more effective use of group work.

Best Practices

Group Formation
- Though it may be easier to allow students to choose their own groups, instructor-created groups often result in more heterogeneous groups which allows for more variety of perspective and ideas. It also helps keep students from being left out or marginalized.
- The size of the group should be determined by the amount of work required by the assignment, the length of time to be committed to the assignment, and the type of assignment.
- Groups should be small enough to encourage individual accountability and community, but large enough that one member's absence won't be an undue hindrance.

Assignment Design
- Successful group work assignments and projects require adequate planning and organization.
- Assignment design should include clear goals and details about the task(s).
- Expectations you may want to communicate:
    - Peer interactions
    - Leadership or group member roles – what roles might be present amongst professionals of your discipline?
    - Final product
- A rubric will help clarify the desired outcomes and how the assignment will be evaluated. See the model rubric at the end of this guide.
- Consider what resources students will need and make sure they have access – you may want to create a resource packet or a hyperdoc for longer assignments to save time.

Types of groups

Informal, short-term group work:
- Think-pair-share
- Jigsaw discussion

Long-term group work:
- Project-based learning
- Research Teams

Tools for Group Work

Group Management Tools
- Blackboard

    ○ [Video on creating and managing groups in Blackboard](#)

- Zoom

    ○ If your class is synchronous online or hybrid, use Zoom groups to facilitate group work

Collaboration Tools
- Google Docs – shared docs make it easy for students to create together
- Google Sites – Sites are a great way for students to display or present group research
- Diagrams.net – a canvas for creating diagrams, charts, and other visual displays, it can be shared like a google doc
    ○ [Video on Diagrams.net](#)

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Model Rubric

Here's a rubric that you can adapt to fit your needs. It's a good idea to post your group work rubric on the board or on Blackboard so that students can refer to expectations as they work.

Skills and Behaviors	4 Exceeds expectations	3 Meets expectations	2 Approaching expectations	1 Below expectations
Participation	Student contributed frequently to the discussion and regularly offered productive ideas. Did more work than others in the group to make sure that the tasks got done.	Student participated in the discussion and generally offered useful ideas. Student did their part to complete the task.	Student sometimes participated in the discussion. Sometimes offered useful ideas. Student did less than others and worked reluctantly.	Student was rarely engaged in the discussion and contributed few useful ideas. Student contributed little or no work to the task.
Focus	Student attempted to keep the discussion focused on the task. Stayed committed to their part of the work until completed.	Student focused on the task most of the time and rarely needed to be redirected.	Student often needed to be redirected and reminded by peers and/or instructor to stay on task.	Student did not focus on the task or contribute to its completion.
Communication and Interaction	Student listened to peers and provided useful feedback. Kept a positive attitude throughout.	Student mostly listened to peers and provided relevant feedback. Kept a mostly positive attitude.	Student sometimes listened to peers and occasionally provided feedback or provided superficial feedback. Displayed little positivity toward the work.	Student rarely listens to peers and provides little or very superficial feedback. Displayed a negative attitude that was counterproductive.
Task Completion and Correctness	Student's work product is well-organized, correct, and complete.	Student's work product is complete, meets the requirements of the task, and is mostly correct.	Student's work is poorly-organized, incomplete, and contains substantial inaccuracies.	Student's work is incomplete and has excessive errors or no attempt was made.

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