

INTRODUCTION

The phrase “group work” can immediately elicit a less-than-positive response from students for a variety of reasons. Working on a project with classmates can be frustrating if there are not clear guidelines and support built into group assignments. If a group project is designed thoughtfully and is the right fit, it can be a meaningful and effective learning experience. Let’s explore some of the ways we can set students up for success with group work.

A CLOSER LOOK

Consider utilizing the following three tips to help promote successful group work.

Tip 1: Provide Purpose

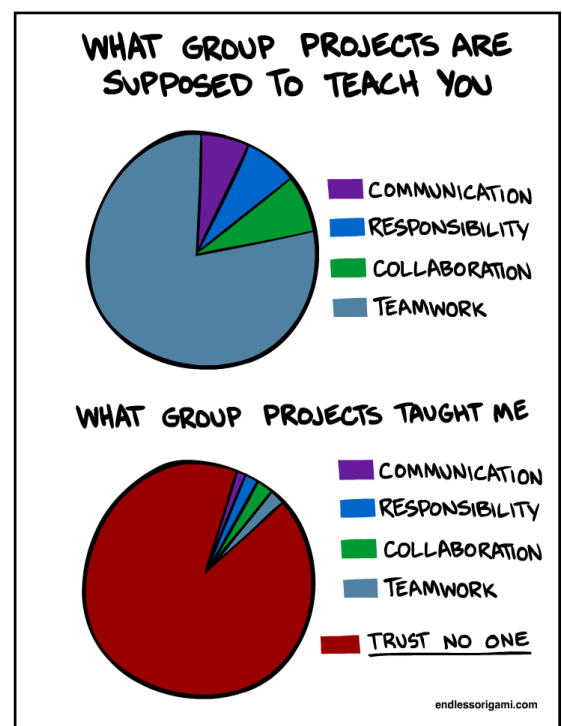
- Establish the value of group work in real-world situations. For example, you could share a tip that teamwork is a common job interview topic and that this experience is something that students can draw from; or that employers are reporting new graduates lack experience in team leadership and this is a way to improve these skills.
- Another rationale might be that the project is too large to accomplish by students working individually in the time given.

Tip 2: Provide Support

- Provide students practical support about working in teams. Give students resources. For example, provide an article about working in teams or tips on how to work collaboratively online to help them get started.
- Provide students social support. For example, provide student teams a place to begin, such as a group discussion forum, and provide guiding questions for them to answer about themselves, their roles in the project, and how they will communicate. In the online environment, encourage them to post photos or bios of themselves.
- Provide technological support. Examples of these tools are the chat function in D2L or Skype for synchronous communication. Google Docs is a tool commonly used for document co-creation. There are many more tools available (too many to mention here)! Students can still have the autonomy to find a way to communicate that works for them, but giving them some suggestions will be helpful.

Tip 3: Provide Opportunities for Peer and Self-Evaluation

- Include peer and self-evaluation as an accountability measure, especially if group work is part of a larger project in your course. Frustrations with accountability are common in group projects so it helps to include these evaluations.
- If group work is part of a longer project that takes up more than half of the semester, consider requiring students to submit evaluations midway through the project and again at the end. This way, students get formative feedback from group members and students learn the value of working on a team during the learning experience.



Additional Best Practices

- Provide detailed information about group work as soon as possible. For example, you might include information about a group project in your course syllabus and provide a time frame for when the group work will take place (e.g., weeks 3-6, or the entire semester) and, if the work is to be submitted in stages, indicate at what points in the course those submissions should occur.
- Provide information about how assigned groups will be decided. If you are assigning groups, let students know how they will be notified about who is in their group.
- Remind students that you are available to offer support and answer questions that the group may have regarding the project.
- Develop strategies to monitor participation. If students are having trouble with group members who aren't participating, it can be helpful if the team can produce artifacts that show group members are not participating (such as discussion forums in D2L, chat records, Google Doc participation, phone meeting notes, and so forth).

Is Group Work the Right Fit?

If you are considering assigning group work, first determine whether it's the right fit.

Is the project truly of a collaborative nature? Can students still accomplish the same task on their own?

EXAMPLE

Here is how one project from a real course followed the three tips to design a group project that works.

Assignment	Tip 1: Provide Purpose	Tip 2: Provide Support	Tip 3: Evaluation
Learners in a health promotion program planning course are divided into teams and given a case study based on a real-life company. Each group creates a strategic plan for their proposed wellness program to present to the CEO.	Page in the syllabus called "Group Project Information" includes a statement of purpose (to provide students experience working with a team in a situation that simulates an experience they may encounter in their future career).	Info page includes tips on working in groups, suggestions for collaborative tools, and Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ). Each group is given a forum on the Discussion board to begin connecting.	Students are provided with a team assessment rubric at the beginning of the semester, which they will use at the end of the semester to rate themselves and their peers.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- **[How to Design Effective Online Group Work Activities](#)** – This Faculty Focus article features an online group work checklist for planning and designing group projects.
- **[Video: Promoting a Positive Environment for Online Group Work](#)** – This presentation explores the value of group work, suggests practical tips for setting up your group project with a purpose, and suggests "dos and don'ts" for online group work (YouTube, 17:43).
- **[Faculty Focus Special Report: Student Collaboration in the Online Classroom](#)** - This 30-page document is a useful reference tool. It is a very readable collection of various articles on best practices for online group work.
- **[20 Collaboration Tools for College Students](#)** - This online article describes a variety of online collaboration tools that can help students work effectively on group projects.