

Designing Successful Online Course Collaborations

Collaborating with others in educational settings does not come naturally. It takes knowledge and skill to do it effectively. In the workplace and at home, we often collaborate with others on tasks – ones that are too large or complex to complete independently.

Some educators argue that group work is challenging and an approach that should not be incorporated into the curriculum, particularly during unusual and complex times. Yet, as is shown below, the rewards associated with group work and collaboration can lead to learning opportunities that are meaningful.

CHALLENGES

- “Ghosting” or disappearing without notice
- (Mis)communication
- Personality conflicts
- Scheduling

REWARDS

- Interpersonal communication skills
- Leadership skills
- Positive learning outcomes
- Practical experience
- Problem solving
- Responsibility
- Teamwork
- Time management skills
- Workplace skills

Students need opportunities to learn how to work in partnership with others. Acquiring skills associated with collaboration is important to their lives both inside our classrooms and outside the boundaries of our institutions. There are ways to minimize or eliminate the challenges associated with group projects that lead to rewarding online learning experiences.

Consider the following best practices for designing successful online course collaborations for your students.

COURSE COLLABORATIONS – BEST PRACTICES

Task Category	Challenges	Recommendations
Assignment Purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Busy work that could be accomplished by one person 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop projects that have real world connections and are too large to be accomplished by one person
Group Creation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Friends working with friends • Student strengths and weaknesses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intentionally create teams • Form teams with members that can bring something different to the group

Task Category	Challenges	Recommendations
Group Size	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time zones • Small versus larger • Odd versus even number of members 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partner students with similar schedules • Cap the number in a group to approximately three students • Groups with odd number of members will eliminate the potential of groups being divided when forced to make decisions
Student Expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student “ghosting” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop clear directions and a rubric indicating how contributions to the group project will be evaluated • Establish group member roles and responsibilities • Ask students to set ground rules for their group at their first meeting
Online Group Meeting Space	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of a shared space 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a private virtual space for students to connect and collaborate • Monitor the space • Identify times you are available to offer advice and feedback to the group • If students select alternative modes of communication, such as GroupMe, ask them to share the chat with you or post a copy to the class online course site on a weekly basis
Group Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication breakdowns 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct students to specific communication tools as they navigate the process and share ideas • Select tools that you can monitor
Group Meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students do not know the status of other group member’s contributions to the project 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with students to develop a weekly schedule for the group to check in with each other • Plan to schedule additional meeting times closer to project deadlines
Project Schedule	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Problems are not identified until the projects are submitted 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a schedule and deadlines for the project components • Provide feedback and, if appropriate, a grade for these deliverables

Task Category	Challenges	Recommendations
Group Member Roles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students do not know how to contribute to the project 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assign project roles to each group member based on individual strengths and interests • Ask students to prepare and sign a group contract articulating the roles and responsibilities of each member
Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student accountability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop peer and self-evaluation systems • Assign team and individual grades

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

SC&I IDTS

If you need assistance designing course collaborations, please contact the IDTS team at:

sci-idts@comminfo.rutgers.edu

Readings

- Demystifying Online Group Projects
 - <https://ce.uwex.edu/demystifying-online-group-projects/>
- Designing Effective Team Projects in Online Courses
 - <https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/online-education/designing-effective-team-projects-in-online-courses/>
- Ground Rules for Effective Groups
 - https://is.muni.cz/el/1423/podzim2010/HEN572/um/13._SchwarzGroundRules.pdf
- Roadmap to Group Project Success in Online Classes
 - <https://online.illinois.edu/articles/online-learning/item/2017/07/13/roadmap-to-group-project-success-in-online-classes>