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## Designing Effective Team Projects in Online Courses

January 29, 2016  Stephanie Smith Budhai, PhD



Participating in team projects offers students the chance to develop interpersonal communication skills (Figueira & Leal, 2013), build relationships with classmates, and increase the level of collective competencies as each

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group member brings something different to the group. However, in the online environment where the majority of the work occurs asynchronously, students may resist having to work with others (Smith et al., 2011) on graded assignments.

Students often say that they do not like group work because they expect that they will have to contribute more than their teammates or that they will have difficulty scheduling times to meet with other group members. They also may be uneasy about being assigned an individual grade based on the work of the team.

After teaching fully online courses for the past five years, I offer seven best practices for teamwork in online courses:

**Intentionally create teams.** The best teams are formed when each member can bring something different to the group. Having three leaders may cause tension, as there would be no one willing to be led. At the same time, if there are no leaders present, it may be difficult for the group to form a vision for the project and get the work started. Get to know your online students and their preferences. This can come from a survey or preference inventory or through online discussion boards or other interactive course features. In a traditional class, you would see who the students are sitting next to and engaging with; do the same within the online class. Are there certain people who always respond to each other's discussion board responses? Have you noticed that some people work at the same organization? Get to know your students as much as possible within the online course, and be very intentional in creating teams.

**Keep groups small and odd.** Every student is very busy with professional and personal obligations, making scheduling to meet as a team difficult. One of the most attractive features of online courses for students is the ability to learn at times most convenient for the individual, without the requirement of being in class at certain times and days each week. The larger the teams, the more complicated scheduling can be. Teams, particularly in online courses where there are no regularly scheduled meetings, should be capped at approximately three students. Having an odd number also eliminates the potential of groups being split when forced to make a decision. I encourage teams to come to a unanimous decision, but this may not always be possible. Having an odd number guarantees that there will always be a majority in the event of a team



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vote. There will be times when, because of the overall number of students in the class, one group may need to consist of more than three students, but in general, a team of three is more manageable and conducive to best practices in online teamwork.

**Set clear expectations for individual contributions.** Most assignments have general directions with a rubric explaining how the final product will be assessed. For team projects, it is imperative to go beyond this and identify individual contributions and expectations for each team member. A jigsaw approach could be employed in which the instructor divides the project into equal parts for each group member so all members know exactly what they are expected to do. If the instructor wants each team member to contribute something to the entire project, those expectations should be laid out with a framework to help facilitate that dissemination process.

**Create a virtual group space.** All learning management systems (LMS) have tools and applications that serve teamwork well. Instructors should create a private virtual space for each team where they can connect with one another and share ideas. At a minimum, the shared virtual team space should include a discussion board, a file sharing area, and a space for live, real-time sessions or chat. Instructors should provide an overview of each feature of the virtual shared space and make suggestions for how it should be used. While this may seem intuitive for instructors, some students may not know how to best leverage the space or use the individual features. This can lead to underutilization of the shared virtual space and a less efficient process during the team project. Be sure that all students know how to access and use the virtual team space to support the team's work.

**Monitor online group space.** Do not wait for students to email you when issues arise. Make it known that you will be "present" within the virtual space, and consistently offer advice and feedback as the team progresses through the project. It is important to do this in a manner that is not overly intrusive. You are simply guiding the process and making adjustments as needed if the group requires individualized support. This is also helpful for teams who are not able to transparently navigate the process and communicate their needs. Monitoring of the online group space also builds faculty presence within the online course and presents another opportunity to engage with students virtually.

**Develop a peer feedback system.** The ability to provide and accept constructive feedback is part of being an adult. While this can be difficult and uncomfortable, it is an important part of the team project experience. In online courses especially, develop a template for peer feedback and share it with students prior to the project. The constructs on the template can be based on key interpersonal skills that you are expecting students to exhibit throughout the team project. Peer evaluations benefit students who make contributions (Dingel & Wei, 2014), and can help address students who do not fully participate in the collaborative experience. The knowledge that they will be evaluated by peers can motivate students to work more collaboratively with their team members.

**Assign individual and team grades.** It is important to assign both individual and team grades for the team assignments. Students should be assessed on the individual contributions they made as well as on how well they participate in the team components. Assigning individual grades requires a clear expectation for individual contributions and progress monitoring throughout the project. Assigning individual grades increases individual accountability and can make for a more positive collaborative experience.

Instead of eliminating effective pedagogical techniques present in traditional courses, such as team projects, online instructors must leverage technologies and best practices to include equal learning opportunities for students in online courses.

## References

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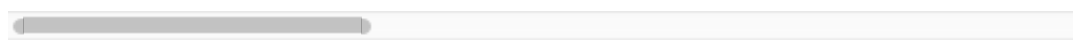
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**Linda Aragoni** • 4 years ago

It's tricky to get student groups to learn how to work in groups. These suggestions are ideas I've found work in my classes.

I'd add this to the suggestion for the instructor to create groups. When the group product is to be a written document, try to get people with different writing strengths so each person has a sense of being indispensable to the team.

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