Defining and Promoting Teamwork in the Classroom

Maryellen Weimer, PhD

Group work and teamwork. In college courses the terms refer to students working together, often on an assignment or an activity. Group work is the more neutral term, whereas teamwork implies something about *how* the students are working together. And although teamwork is easy to identify when we see it on a playing field or court, what does teamwork look like in a college classroom?

I found a useful answer in an article by Deeter-Schmelz, Kennedy, and Ramsey. They propose a list of behaviors which can help students and teachers understand what teamwork looks like when it happens in a group. Here's a slightly edited version of what they propose.

A good team player:

- Works toward the understood goals of the team
- Contributes to an informal, comfortable, and tension-free work environment
- Is enthusiastic about working with the team
- Follows through on commitment
- Takes pride in the team's work
- Shows interest in other team members' achievements
- Readily accepts feedback on performance
- Encourages others to achieve at high levels
- Is able to stay focused on team tasks
- Openly communicates with others in the group
- Is sensitive to the feelings of other group members
- Is able to resolve conflict effectively
- Is eager to try new approaches.

A list like this can be given to students when a project begins and used to start a discussion of how you would like the group to work together. McKendall proposes an activity that might really give this discussion legs. When her students first meet in their groups, they are given a canister of tinker toys and told they have 15 minutes to build the best structure they can. A group spokesperson will then try to convince the rest of the class that his or her team's structure is the best. She writes, "The teams make very predictable mistakes: They never discuss what 'best' means, they don't solicit several ideas before starting, they don't plan or organize their work, they don't watch the time, and they don't appoint or coach a spokesperson." (p. 278) After the activity, she facilitates a discussion of "why teams often do not perform optimally."

But it's McKendall's next activity that really helps the group solidify how they plan to work together. Each group must write a contract that describes how they will operate as a team. They address expectations about attendance, preparation, division of the work, decision-making processes, and what the group plans to do about leadership and other roles. They also discuss how disagreements will be handled, how group members will treat each other and what actions the group will take if the terms of the contract are violated.

McKendall encourages students to regularly revisit and revise this contract. For example, she says many of the

teams in her course on teambuilding start out with a statement in their contract saying they will make all their decisions by consensus. Once they discover how much time it takes the group to reach consensus, they revise their contract. Groups also tend to not want to designate a leader, but then frequently discover that operating without one is difficult. Revising the contract encourages them to confront the leadership issues that may be emerging in the group.

The list of behaviors describing good teamwork and a group-authored contract can be used at the end of a group project. The behaviors can be transformed into the criteria members use to assess each other's contributions and the contract can provide the basis for individual analysis of how the group functioned. Making behaviors and working relationships explicit doesn't guarantee group productivity, but it does make it much more likely. Moreover, approaches like these are what develop the skills students need to take them with to subsequent group work in other courses and their careers.

References: Detter-Schmelz, D. R., Kennedy, K. N., and Ramsey, R. P. (2002). Enriching our understanding of student team effectiveness. *Journal of Marketing Education,* 24 (2), 114-124.

McKendall, M. (2000). Teaching groups to become teams. *Journal of Education for Business*, May/June, 277-282.