

TEACHING STUDENTS TO WORK IN GROUPS

PURPOSE

Even when faced with [well-structured group work](#), students occasionally struggle because they lack the skills necessary for working successfully in a group context. This tool suggests ways that instructors can help students improve their skills to better negotiate collaborative activities.

DESCRIPTION

Increasingly, faculty members are requiring students to take more responsibility for their learning through the use of collaborative activities. Assigning group work is one of many [Teach One Another](#) approaches proven to be effective in increasing student learning.

However, simply giving a group assignment does not guarantee that the students will work effectively. Student focus groups conducted here on campus reveal that many BYU-Idaho groups struggle with:

- Unclear roles
- Uneven workloads
- Unproductive meetings

Instructors who use group assignments of one kind or the other need to train students in successful group processes. Training students in group management skills helps them better handle these issues both with their assignments at BYU-Idaho, and in the many life contexts that require group collaboration.

EXAMPLES

Assess Student Ability

Before giving group work, ascertain the level of experience your students have with group work. This will help you design appropriate training. Exploring students' prior experiences with group work can also help you catch and overcome negative attitudes towards group work.

Explain Learning is Different in Groups

Many students, especially younger students define learning almost exclusively as committing to memory a body of information or a process. These

students often fail to understand the purpose of group work because they see memorization as happening more efficiently through individual study. For these students, it is necessary to explain the type of learning one hopes to accomplish through group collaboration. Explain that in some cases articulating questions, finding connections, probing issues and exploring the parameters of a problem is more valuable to deep understanding and long-term retention. These are all types of learning better pursued in collaboration with others.

Review Group Formation Issues

Many of the dysfunctional aspects of groups arise from a failure to explicitly address how the group will work together. Such issues must be addressed before the group can effectively focus its attention on the task at hand. Faculty can help by encouraging students to address the following issues:

Break the Ice

It is much easier for students to function if they are acquainted with one another. Provide time and space for students to become acquainted and develop trust in one another.

Define Roles & Responsibilities

Sharing leadership among group members, each with his or her own clear role and responsibilities, increases ownership and commitment. It fosters the idea that the success of the group depends on everyone contributing. Whether students volunteer or are assigned to their roles, it is critical that they have specific role assignments. Brainstorm possible roles and encourage students to discuss the duties involved with being the chair, note-taker, timekeeper, scheduler, communicator, researcher, process coach, etc. Encourage students to clearly assign and define roles.

Addressing roles early avoids "sidestepping" and "dancing around" the issue of what students expect from one another. It also prevents conflicts that can arise due to misunderstandings.

Develop Ground Rules

Sport teams cannot play a game without knowing

the rules. In a similar fashion, groups need to know appropriate behaviors or “ground rules.” Students often make assumptions about the ways others should behave. When these expectations are not met or even articulated, group process breaks down.

Students have a wide variety of ways to interact, but the decisions regarding how they plan to work together must be made as a group. Encourage students to develop shared norms on issues such as:

- Workloads
- Meeting attendance
- Participation
- Decision-making

Address Accountability

Group norms are helpful, but have little value unless students hold each other accountable. Help students address how the group will deal with uncompleted assignments, late arrivals to meetings, or deviating from other rules. Groups should determine sanctions in advance, not just when problems arise. For example, students may decide that if someone misses an assignment, they must bring pizza to the next meeting.

Discuss Group Implementation Issues

When the group has a good understanding of how they will work together, they can focus their energy on the task at hand and on the interpersonal skills needed to manage the group process itself.

Task Management

To be effective, students must have a common understanding of their purpose, their goals and their plan for completing their task. As a group, students should review

- How will the members divide the work?
- What is the timeline on assignments?
- How will members share information?

One way to help students develop this plan is to have them “start with the end in mind.” Ask students to map a timeline backwards from the completion of the group task to the current date.

Work from an Agenda

All group meetings should have some type of agenda to guide the process. While this need not be formal,

a written agenda helps avoid many of the most common difficulties in group work.

Interpersonal Skills

Even with the most successful groups, conflicts develop. Good interpersonal skills and conflict resolution skills help students work through these issues. Encourage students to articulate their differences early. Discuss ways to resolve disagreements in a productive fashion. Share examples of ambiguous vs. clear complaints.

TIPS

- **Structure as appropriate.** Structuring of the group, the activity and the process by the instructor is critical.
- **Grade accordingly.** Give students incentive to make their group experiences successful.

PITFALLS

- **Assuming students are prepared for groups.** Effective group work is new to many students. Don’t assume that they won’t need training.
- **Ad Hoc group formation.** Research indicates that groups assigned by the instructor tend to be more effective learning experiences than groups who form ad hoc or who self-select their members.

CAMPUS PRACTITIONERS

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KEY ARTICLES

[Davis, G. D. \(2009\). *Learning in Groups in Tools for Teaching*. Second Edition. San Francisco: Jossey - Bass](#)
[Stein, R.F. and Hurd, S. \(2000\). *Using student teams in the classroom*. Boston: Anker Publishing.](#)
[Prichard, J. S., Straford, R.J., and Hardy, C. \(2004\). *Training students to work in teams: why and how?* York, UK: Learning and Teaching Support Network in Psychology.](#)

OTHER RESOURCES

- [Harvard Manage Mentor](#) Individual tutorial and training materials on Team Management