# Designing Successful Online Group Work [1]

January 17, 2019 by Sarah North | Office of Digital Education [2]

If we were to mention "online group work" to you or your students, you may cringe and remember all of the challenges encountered when attempting such a task. You are likely familiar with feedback from students such as:

"I don't have time for this"
"My work schedule doesn't match when my group members want to meet"
"My group members didn't pull their own weight"
"I wasn't able to meet with my group, because I couldn't get Zoom to work"

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Sound familiar? Yet, despite the challenges, group work is worth considering for your online courses. So let's put these concerns aside for a moment, look at why group work is so important, and briefly touch on some strategies that will improve the chances for successful online group work.

"Collaboration can be seen as the cornerstone of the educational experience"

Palloff and Pratt, Collaborating Online: Learning Together in Community (2005)

What makes collaboration a cornerstone of education? Working with a team promotes active learning, critical thinking, social learning, and authentic learning. More specific to the online environment, group work also benefits students by mitigating feelings of isolation, building community and trust, and increasing the likelihood of success online. We want to foster this cornerstone of online education and do our best to set the stage for positive, powerful student experiences. And by planning ahead, we can lessen some of the expected challenges.

## Setting the Stage

Setting the stage means seriously considering why and how students undertake group work in your particular course.  Here are some ideas to get you started:

**Purpose.** What is your reason for this type of work? What is the benefit for students? Students will respond to group work better with a long-term purpose in sight.

**Expectations.** Communicate clearly what students need to know about group work in your course. What are your expectations for the project, and their process? Explain this up front.

**Scaffolding.** Think about breaking up bigger projects into smaller tasks. This allows individuals in groups to get a better sense of how they work together and address any functional issues sooner rather than later.

**Forming groups.** Self-selected groups or instructor assigned? Random or guided by parameters such as interests or background? There is no one-size-fits-all approach. Just be thoughtful about what the impacts of different methods might be and how they relate back to your purpose.

**Group agreements/charters.** Have each group create their own guidelines and parameters for how they will work together, communicate, and address challenges. This gives them autonomy and responsibility over the process.

## Wrapping it Up

How you plan for evaluation and assessment can make a big impact on student perceptions of collaboration. Here are some strategies to consider:

**Evaluations.** Do you want students to be able to evaluate themselves, their group members, and will this evaluation play into the final grade of the activity? Self evaluation encourages stronger self-reflection, and peer evaluation can positively impact how much effort individuals make in group participation.

**Assessment.** Will you grade each individual student separately? Or give a group grade? Some combination of the two? It is up to you, which course of action makes sense for the project, assignment outcomes, and overall course outcomes. (Consider using rubrics in your assessment too!)

**Reflection.** A post-reflection is important for students to think about the collaborative skills they've gained along the way (working in virtual teams, communication, collaborative technologies, etc.) Don't forget to also reflect on the process yourself, which will help improve the design of the experience each time you repeat it!

## Get Started

Looking for a quick way to get started? Knowing the answers to these questions will help guide you in creating stronger assignments and will also allow you to better communicate the whys and wherefores to your students:

- What is your outlook and philosophy on student collaboration?
- What is the purpose of group work in the context of your course?
- Should the project be broken up into multiple phases? If so, what are some different project phases that will help groups build to the final product?
- Will students form their own groups or be assigned groups? Will groups be randomized or based on criteria? Why?
- What is your role throughout the process?
- Will students evaluate their own performance and/or group members' performance?

- Will you evaluate students individually, or as a group?

**Need more ideas? Check out these helpful resources:**

- Collaborating Online: Learning Together in Community by Rena Palloff and Keith Pratt
- "Group work: Using cooperative learning groups effectively" from Vanderbilt University's Center for Teaching
- Cooperative Learning: http://www.co-operation.org [3](Johnson & Johnson)

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