

Improving the Odds of Effective Collaborative Work in Online Courses

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The following are some guidelines and suggestions I've found helpful when designing collaborative (groupwork and teamwork) activities.

Definitions

Tenets of collaborative/cooperative learning ~

- Positive interdependence
- Individual accountability
- Promotive interaction
- Development of teamwork skills (with guided practice)
- Regular assessment of teamwork functioning

Groupwork ~

- Activity spans short time frame.
- Groups formed spontaneously.
- Groups breakup after a session (little or no commitment).
- Most students equipped with skills to do groupwork.

Teamwork ~

- Activities span long time frame.
- Teams formed carefully.
- Teams stay formed and have commitments.
- Students are ill equipped with skills to do teamwork.

Basic guidelines for online collaborative student work

1. Balance individual and collaborative work, online and off-line work.
2. Make sure collaborative work is relevant, and that learners understand the relevance.
3. Even if you are not involving learners in collaborative projects, assign learners to study/support groups or involve them in other collaborative activities: role-playing, debates, discussion protocols (e.g., jigsaw, rotating stations, the final word), peer review, case studies, game/quiz show, competitions, group test taking, “Naked Came the Manatee” co-construction/writing, and so on.
4. Assign learners to teams with 4-5 members. Form team with goal to spread abilities, skills and learning preferences/styles. [Follow a method, such as mixed ability, or learning preference assessment, or learning goal focus.]
5. Keep learners in same teams during the whole semester.
6. Build time into the course schedule for team formation.
7. Establish explicit individual learner roles and responsibilities (e.g., organizer/project manager, main researcher, section writer, editor, etc.). Roles and responsibilities should lead to a fair division of labor. Rotate roles with each project.

8. Have learners construct a team agreement, including ramifications of non-compliance with the agreement. Wikis (e.g., PBwiki and Wikispaces) and collaborative document creation tools like Google Docs are useful tools to make available to learners as the work on collaborative documents, such as the team agreement. Plus, it will give learners an opportunity to practice using a tool or tools they will find helpful as they continue their collaborative work together.
9. Consider easier team projects early on, building towards more complexity.
10. Break a collaborative project up into a subset of deliverables (smaller, more manageable team projects), with due dates spread out across the timeframe.
11. Establish a mechanism for checking in on teams and individual team members, such as:
 - Engage in structured walkthroughs at various points during the project. Use synchronous tools (e.g., Adobe Connect) to meet with a team and ask pointed questions of each team member regarding contributions to the project.
 - Require weekly status reports from each team/team member (e.g., summarize what the team accomplished this week, describe your most significant contribution to the project this week, describe why the contribution was significant, describe with other team members contributed, and describe what you need to accomplish on the project next week). Blogging tools such as Blogger, WordPress, and LiveJournal are great ways for team members to share their weekly status reports.
12. With each project, include a team-graded component and an individual-graded component.
13. Assess process, product, and outcome.
14. Consider “no jeopardy” approaches to collaborative work that allow for a submitted product to be complete without a missing member’s contribution. Examples include:
 - Each student completes an allocated task that contributes to the final team product and gets the marks for that task;
 - Each student writes and submits an individual report based on the team’s work on the task/project;
 - Each student takes an exam, with exam questions that specifically target the team project, and can only be answered by students who have been thoroughly involved in the project;
 - Each student’s contribution is assessed via individually-produced evidence such as status reports, journals, time logs, and direct observation;
 - Each student produces an individual paper based on the team project.
15. Allow for the use of a variety of collaboration tools, such as the ones mentioned above as well as those included in the learning management system (e.g., Blackboard, eCollege). Also, use tools and technologies commonly used in the profession for which you are preparing students.

Assessing online collaborative work: A few suggestions

1. Teamwork rubric. Create a rubric for assessing collaborative contribution (see Table 1), with clear criteria. Make that rubric available to learners well in advance of a collaborative project.
2. “Rules of Engagement” contract. This contract should include information on:

- Who will post: Which team member will be responsible for posting the group's deliverables?
 - Leader or not: Some groups chose a leader to keep things moving, some groups change that leader each week (or every other week or whatever), and some groups decide not to do this.
 - Communication and deadlines: How will they communicate with each other? How often? Will they set interim deadlines? Some groups like to set certain deadlines, such as initial work done by Wednesday, rewrites by Friday, and final posted Sunday.
 - Equal contributions: How will work be distributed?
 - Preferred work style: Some people like to get things done during the week and take the weekend off and others prefer the opposite. What is your style? How will you handle style differences?
 - Not getting work done: What will the group do if one member cannot fulfill his or her obligations? Will that member be docked points, or can the member make up the work?
 - Known problems: Issues you know will come up, how to handle dates you know you will be out of town?
3. Team Review Form: Figure 1 is a form learners use to assess each other's contributions to team projects (as well as their own contributions). These assessments can have ramifications, such as if a team member receives less than 50 points on the Team Review Form from more than one team member then that learner's points for the deliverable will be reduced by 20%. This form can be completed at the end of projects, or at key points throughout a project.
 4. Weekly status reports. Have learners submit weekly (or biweekly) status reports (see #11 under basic guidelines above).
 5. Public and semi-public structured walkthroughs. Similar to #11 above, but with a different objective, meet with teams/groups during a project using the chatroom feature provided in the learning management system, or other meeting tool like Adobe Connect or Skype. In advance, provide the group with a set of questions you will ask about the project. When together, randomly select group members to respond to particular questions.
 6. Project quiz/exam. Once the project is complete, test team members on the content of the project. You can easily build quizzes using the test construction tool built into the learning management system, or by using Google Spreadsheets (specifically, the Forms feature).

Table 1. Rubric for assessing collaborative contribution

CATEGORY	4	3	2	1
Contributions	Routinely provides useful ideas when participating in the group and in classroom discussion. A leader who contributes a lot of effort.	Usually provides useful ideas when participating in the group and in classroom discussion. A strong group member who tries hard!	Sometimes provides useful ideas when participating in the group and in classroom discussion. A satisfactory group member who does what is required.	Rarely provides useful ideas when participating in the group and in classroom discussion. May refuse to participate.
Problem-Solving	Actively looks for and suggests solutions to problems.	Refines solutions suggested by others.	Does not suggest or refine solutions, but is willing to try out solutions suggested by others.	Does not try to solve problems or help others solve problems. Lets others do the work.
Attitude	Is never publicly critical of the project or the work of others. Always has a positive attitude about the task(s).	Is rarely publicly critical of the project or the work of others. Often has a positive attitude about the task(s).	Is occasionally publicly critical of the project or the work of other members of the group.	Is often publicly critical of the project or the work of other members of the group. Is often negative about the task(s).
Focus on the Task	Consistently stays focused on the task and what needs to be done. Very self-directed.	Focuses on the task and what needs to be done most of the time. Other group members can count on this person.	Focuses on the task and what needs to be done some of the time. Other group members must sometimes nag, prod, and remind to keep this person on-task..	Rarely focuses on the task and what needs to be done. Lets others do the work.
Working with Others	Almost always listens to, shares with, and supports the efforts of others. Tries to keep people working well together.	Usually listens to, shares with, and supports the efforts of others. Does not cause "waves" in the group.	Often listens to, shares with, and supports the efforts of others, but sometimes is not a good team member.	Rarely listens to, shares with, and supports the efforts of others. Often is not a good team player.

Figure 1. Team Review Form

For an online team to be successful, it requires that each member of the team works toward the achievement of the group's goals and helps support the group working processes. Each member must also participate actively in online discussions and interactions in ways that are sensitive to the needs and feelings of other members of the group.

Use the following rubric to evaluate your colleagues' contributions and effectiveness as online team members. Then, use this same rubric to evaluate yourself as a team member. When evaluating yourself, please use the Comments field to describe in detail your contribution to the group's work.

As an aside: A group member may have an emergency that keeps him/her from being able to participate on an activity. If the group agrees that this person will miss helping on one assignment but will make up for it on another assignment after returning from the emergency, then you can let me know that you will not be submitting a form for that individual on the missing assignment (please refer to your "Rules of Engagement" team contract to verify how your group has decided to handle such events). In the past, these sorts of arrangements have been made, and the form doesn't accommodate deal making (but I will).

For each item, select the score you believe best reflects that person's efforts and contributions.

If the person:

- Always demonstrates the quality, you would give a score of 5.
- Frequently demonstrates the quality, you would give a score of 4.
- Sometimes demonstrates the quality, you would give a score of 3.
- Seldom demonstrates the quality, you would give a score of 2.
- Never demonstrates the quality, you would give a score of 1.

Your Name:	<input type="text"/>				
Team Member Reviewed:	<input type="text"/>				
1. Is willing to frequently share ideas and resources.	<input type="radio"/> 5	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 1
2. Accepts responsibilities for tasks determined by the group.	<input type="radio"/> 5	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 1
3. Respects differences of opinions and backgrounds.	<input type="radio"/> 5	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 1
4. Is willing to negotiate and make compromises.	<input type="radio"/> 5	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 1
5. Provides leadership and support by taking an active role in initiating ideas and actions.	<input type="radio"/> 5	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 1
6. Respects decisions of others.	<input type="radio"/> 5	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 1
7. Provides positive feedback of team members' accomplishments.	<input type="radio"/> 5	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 1
8. Is willing to work with others for the purpose of group success.	<input type="radio"/> 5	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 1
9. Online communication is friendly in tone.	<input type="radio"/> 5	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 1
10. Keeps in close contact with team members for the purpose of maintaining team cohesion and collaboration.	<input type="radio"/> 5	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 1
11. Produces high quality work.	<input type="radio"/> 5	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 1
12. Meets team deadlines.	<input type="radio"/> 5	<input type="radio"/> 4	<input type="radio"/> 3	<input type="radio"/> 2	<input type="radio"/> 1
13. Comments (Please provide your teammate with positive and constructive feedback.):	<input type="text"/>				