

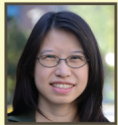
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Centre for Teaching and Learning



Using Teams or Groups in Coursework

Teams vs. Groups:

A group is usually formed for a short term collaborative project which consists of independent parts of the project assembled together to make a whole. A team typically remains together for an extended period of time (over the entire term or over several different tasks) and members work on interdependent portions of the task, that is, one team member cannot complete a task alone, he/she will need the input of other members in order to finish their portion of the project. A team is more collaborative in nature.

There are a number of things to consider when using groups or teams in the classroom:

Number of members of the group/team – this will depend on the difficulty and depth of the task, but generally 3 is the minimum and 8 is the maximum, with 3-4 being ideal for most projects. Larger teams are used

with specific teaching methods like team-based learning and problem-based learning where you may have 6 to 8 members of the team and they have many tasks/projects to complete over the course of a term.

Make sure you have enough work for all members so that you are not encouraging idle hands by making the group too large.

Expectations for in-class and out of class meetings – it is best if you can allot time in class for most if not all team/group meetings. It is difficult with class schedules, work schedules, transportation issues and home obligations for students to get together outside of class time. Using online collaboration tools may solve that depending on your and your student's level of comfort in using technology. It is easier for you, as the evaluator, to observe group dynamics and time on task if they are present in the classroom.

Grading that will be fair and consistent between group members – the common issue is loafers, students who let others in their group do all the work and evaluation schemes that reward them or don't have an effective checking system to avoid that from happening. One answer can be peer evaluation so that all members of the group evaluate each other. Another idea is to have the groups split up an uneven mark so that it becomes clearer who did most of the work and who did very little. For example there are 3 people in the group and you have them divide up 10 marks amongst them, resulting in grades of 3, 3 and 4 or 2, 2 and 6 etc.

Another guard against loafing and a safeguard for hard workers can be to have all members of the group hand in or be responsible for at least one piece and they get an individual mark and a group mark. This however, may have just defeated one of your goals for group work - cutting down on marking time.

Another factor to consider in the grading of group or team work is whether the students should be assessed on their team or group skills. Is the development of team skills one of the learning objectives of the course? If so those skills could be evaluated and reported level with using group work.

Students and faculty have mixed feelings about the use of group work but most research agrees that learning occurs best when done in a socially constructed manner than in isolation. Even the poorest group work achieves a level of discussion that moves the student beyond merely reading about a topic. For faculty the two largest concerns are the time factor, (in-class time spent on group work, time taken to teach group skills, etc.) and the difficulty in grading team members fairly.

When choosing whether or not to use group projects in your course, think back to your learning objectives and whether group work is the best method to achieve the objectives you have set for the students. Secondary considerations would include time management and comfort level with using group work.

Centre for Teaching and Learning

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