Tips for online group projects

Quick reference guide

Oregon State
University

Overview

Many experts tout the importance of group projects for their benefits in stimulating critical thinking and for their relevance to modern workplaces. Many educators successfully use classroom time for group projects, but they struggle to transition group projects to remote or online environments.

The following tips will help you successfully make that transition.

1. Teach students why and how to work together

Before assigning the project, spend some time explaining to students why you think group work is beneficial for them, for this discipline and for their ability to learn. What do you hope they will gain from the experience? What do you want them to learn about the topic? What do you want them to learn from working together?

Describe what good group work looks like from your perspective. You might say that good group work means communicating frequently, making sure that all members are able to contribute and that conflicts and differences of opinion are to be expected and can even be beneficial.

Ward off common group work problems by naming them in advance and discussing strategies for overcoming them. Spend some time discussing common group work problems, such as:

- When individuals miss deadlines

- Leaving group members out of decisions

- Appreciating conflict for how it improves learning and the project outcome; managing conflict constructively

- Balancing responsibilities and contributions: why freeloader and control-freak approaches to group work are both problematic

- When and how to bring problems to the instructor: should one person send an email, or should a group meeting be called?

2. Be specific about the project requirements

When assigning a group project in the classroom, educators are automatically working in a time- and space-limited environment. Online, the time and space students use to complete group projects needs more structure. To help group projects succeed, educators need to specify several elements:

- **The learning outcomes of the group project:** What do you want students to be able to do as a result of participating in this exercise in terms of the course content and in terms of working with others?

- **The deliverable the team needs to create:** Is it a paper, a presentation, a video, etc.? How long should it be? And how will the deliverable be assessed?

- **Milestones:** Break the project into parts and tell students when each part needs to be due. This will help students follow an effective process and will help them and you monitor progress. For example, for a group presentation, the milestones might be the presentation proposal, the outline, different parts of the presentation fleshed out, the visuals, practice sessions, and the presentation itself – each with its own due date. (Depending on the course, it may make sense for the instructor to supply the milestones, but in some cases, it may work better for the students to identify the milestones.)

- **Roles:** Identify which students are responsible for performing various roles. Who is responsible for which tasks?

- **How and how often students should communicate with each other:** Specify whether they should use email, a group discussion forum, web conference or other tools. Be sure that all students in the group have access to the communication tool needed.

3. Track and monitor progress

The group members and the instructor should be aware of the group's milestones and whether adequate progress is being made. If a group gets off track, it is better to identify and remedy the situation sooner rather than later to help the group achieve success.

4. Grade transparently

From the beginning, provide a rubric that states the grading criteria. Consider whether you will grade the final deliverable, the group's effectiveness, individual or group reflections on the learning experience, or other aspects of the project. State the criteria and describe what sorts of evidence would be needed to show that each criterion is met.

Group projects offer students the opportunity to collaborate, to think critically, to be creative, to communicate, and to enjoy student-student interaction. Careful attention to setting the project up, monitoring progress, and grading transparently can help students get the most out of collaborative learning experiences.