

How Can I Help My Students Be Successful in Virtual Group Work?

Cooperative learning and collaboration skills are important components of learning. Most courses are enhanced when designed to purposefully include these opportunities. Although many students are hesitant about group work, it can, if structured well, promote the intellectual and social skills necessary for students' academic, personal, and professional success. Moving these activities to a virtual setting requires careful selection and familiarity with available technologies and pedagogical best practices.

Benefits of Virtual Group Work

- Virtual collaboration:
 - Supports authentic learning in that it mimics real-world, global collaboration.
 - Develops communication and teamwork skills important for professional fields.
 - Fosters a virtual learning community where students may find support, encouragement, and a desire to continue building shared knowledge beyond the individual activity community.
 - Provides opportunities for students to explain their reasoning to one another to promote the cognitive restructuring that leads to learning (Wilson, Brickman, Brame, 2018).
- Many online collaboration tools allow for revision history, allowing faculty to see student participation.
- Students engaged in group work, or cooperative learning, show increased individual achievement compared to students working alone (WSU Center for Teaching and Learning, 2016).

Challenges of Virtual Group Work

- Monitoring equitable distribution of and participation in an online activity may be more difficult than in a physical classroom.
- Scheduling times for group meetings across time zones and individual schedules can be complicated.
- Recognizing and addressing conflict among group members in a timely manner may be difficult when it occurs online.
- Supporting students who encounter technical difficulties when completing the activities.

Instructional Strategies for Successful Virtual Group Experiences

- **Design group work tasks at higher levels of [Bloom's Taxonomy](#).** Effective group tasks should challenge groups to solve problems that require the collaboration of the group (Wilson, Brickman, Brame, 2018).
- **Decide which technologies will be used for your group activity.** Select tools that will allow students to meet the objectives. (See table at end of document for tool options.)



- **Set up group communication and collaboration tools and/or provide guidance for group choice of technologies.** Tools such as the CoursePlus Discussion Forum and Wiki can be set up to work with the CoursePlus Course Groups tool to allow for interactions limited to group members.
- **Consider the balance of synchronous and asynchronous group work tasks.** Synchronous group activities may most closely simulate on-site classroom group interaction. Asynchronous group tasks allow flexibility in schedule and self-paced engagement.
- **Create groups randomly or assigned (e.g., by interest, topic, or degree program).** Or allow student choice (e.g., topic selection) to support easier meeting scheduling. You can gather this data through a CoursePlus survey or use CoursePlus Signup sheets.
- **Choose appropriate group size depending on the project.** A small group of 3–5 students is ideal for a collaborative paper. Larger groups may be better for discussion-based activities. Be wary of diffusion of responsibility by making certain all students in a group have an equal investment in the activity (Hale & Grenny, 2020).
- **Break group projects into smaller assignments.** Scaffolding the project by providing milestones and smaller assignment parts that lead to a whole will help students manage their time and resources.
- **Consider requiring a group contract.** Give the students a group contract template that includes goals, expectations for participation, frequency of communication, group roles, and process for conflict resolution. Let the group discuss, customize, and submit their contract to a CoursePlus Drop Box.
- **Provide clear and concise instructions.** Give groups a specific, structured task. Use a rubric. The major reasons for group work failure are a lack of organization and specificity in the assignment and student confusion over its purpose and expectations (Nilson, 2010).
- **Use peer assessment to evaluate the group project contribution and performance.** Use a rubric. All members should be held responsible for their own learning as well as their group contributions. Assign grades to improve equity in collaboration by ensuring the peer evaluation holds weight.

Group Work Technology and Tools

There are a variety of options for group work that can be selected based on the goals of the learning activity and the students' own availability (e.g., synchronous vs. asynchronous):

Guides

<i>Asynchronous Activities</i>	<i>Tools</i>
Assign students to groups	CoursePlus—Create Random Groups and CoursePlus—Create Groups Manually
Let students choose their groups	CoursePlus—Signup Sheets
Groups' private discussion forums	CoursePlus—Discussion Forums
Peer assessment and evaluation	CoursePlus—Peer Assessments and Rubrics
Groups collaborate using wiki tool	CoursePlus—Wiki
Group peer assessment	CoursePlus—Peer Assessment Tool
VoiceThread: group collaboration, presentation	VoiceThread

<i>Synchronous Activities</i>	<i>Tools</i>
Group work breakout rooms	Zoom—Breakout rooms
Group presentation	Zoom—Presentation
Meet with group members for assignments	Zoom—Student use

References

Hale, J. & Grenny, J. (2020). [How to Get People \(Students\) to Actually Participate in Virtual Meetings \(Classes\)](#). Harvard Business Publishing: Education.

Nilson, L. (2010). *Teaching at its Best: A Research-Based Resource for College Instructors*. 3rd ed. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons.

Washington University in St. Louis, Center for Teaching and Learning. (2016). [Benefits of group work](#). Washington University in St. Louis.

Wilson, K. J., Brickman, P., & Brame, C. J. (2018). Group work. *CBE Life Sciences Education*, 17(1), fe1. <https://doi.org/10.1187/cbe.17-12-0258>