

# Teaching Tips/Notes



## Ten Steps for Creating a Great Environment for Positive Group Work Experiences

### Introduction

Group projects are often a source of anxiety and much groaning from students and professors alike! Many students would prefer to complete a project on their own and not have to rely on other students for a portion of their grade, yet some class projects are not conducive to allowing a single individual to complete. The real world and future workplace of many of these students demands that students work as a team. Researchers determined that teamwork and ability to communicate effectively were ranked highest in a list of soft-skills potential employees should have (Crawford et al., 2012). Therefore, group work is an important component of a well-rounded undergraduate curriculum.

### The Ten Steps

Create the “right” group. Do not let students pick their own group members. Inevitably, some students will feel like an outcast at this opportunity, and others will select their ‘friends’ and fail to work with others that may possess new ideas they haven’t heard before. Instead, develop a tool that will score students in different areas that are important to your assignment. Additionally, addressing the idea that ‘everyone hates group work’ up front can get that stigma out of the way, and gives the instructor an opportunity to reiterate the complexity of the project and ensure students they are better off working with a group to complete this project.

1. Give students a questionnaire where you ask them a few important questions about themselves. Allow students to opt-out of a group with a certain individual. You never know when a bad relationship of some kind will negatively impact a group, so give the students an option to write the name (one) of another student in class they could absolutely not be in a group with. This will save you a headache later, and students really appreciate this opportunity. Make sure to shred this paperwork so no one knows besides you and the student. Ask questions that will indicate if the responder is quiet, outgoing, etc. when working in a group Example questions can be found in Figure 1.

Figure 1. *Example questions for group placement*

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**When you work in a group on a school project, how do you like to get started?**

- Ask everyone their ideas
- Take the lead and start assigning responsibilities
- Tell everyone about your ideas first
- Quietly listen to everyone’s ideas and go with one of those

**What kind of group members do you want and work best with?**

- People who have good ideas and help me when I get stuck
- People who follow orders
- People who are willing to work hard
- People who will get the work done without my help

**Which of these is the most important quality you will bring to the group?**

- Creativity
- Good listener
- Staying positive
- I’m smart
- Organization

**Are you okay with a group member turning in an assignment for the group that you have not seen since the final version of?**

- Yes
  - No
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- a.) A funny saying or picture on the questionnaire will remind students that group work is warranted if not always popular
2. Group students so every group has a leader, a quiet/shy member, a go with the flow member, etc. If your project is discipline specific, and you have non-majors in the class, try to incorporate majors and non-majors in each group
3. Once students are grouped up, discuss the assignment in detail with them. Have a hand-out where they can follow along. Have a detailed hand-out that students can take with them and refer to.

Group work creates an opportunity for real-world practice unlike others available in higher education. It is important to build in accountability for each student and each group, as well as walk students through a goals setting assignment. Further, devote class time to reviewing and updating group/individual goals and helping students discuss various scenarios where group-work isn't going perfectly (team-work conflict resolution). This will create an open dialog between students and assist them to be open with each other. Students working toward one common goal can be facilitated with the group goals and participation agreement.

4. Have students complete a Personal Goals Performance Agreement (PGPA; Figure 2). Include a section where students can describe scenarios where things might go poorly, and how they will react to right the ship. Once completed, have students discuss their PGPA with each other and finalize their own.

Figure 2. *Personal Goals and Performance Agreement worksheet*

**GROUP GOALS & PERFORMANCE AGREEMENT**

**What is my academic goal?**

**What can I do to ensure I meet this goal?**

**How will I act and contribute to meet this goal?**

**What if I do not \_\_\_\_\_?**  
(ie: show up to a group?)

**What if I do not \_\_\_\_\_?**  
(ie: complete an assignment on time?)

**What if I do not \_\_\_\_\_?**  
(ie: respond to a group member to help with part of their project?)

**How will I handle it?**

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- Have students brainstorm a Group Goals Performance Agreement (GGPA; Figure 3). Include a section where the group can describe scenarios where things might go poorly, and how they will react to right the ship. Have students work independently, then discuss and complete their GGPA as a group.

Figure 3. Group Goals and Performance Agreement worksheet

**GROUP GOALS & PERFORMANCE AGREEMENT**

**What is the Big Picture?**

**What if \_\_\_ happens?**  
*(ie: someone doesn't show up to a scheduled meeting and doesn't care?)*

**What is the group's academic goal?**

**What if \_\_\_ happens?**  
*(ie: someone doesn't show up to a scheduled meeting and doesn't care?)*

**What if \_\_\_ happens?**  
*(ie: someone turns in a portion of the project & the quality is not up to groups standard?)*

**What if \_\_\_ happens?**  
*(ie: someone doesn't complete an assignment they agreed to?)*

**How will the group handle it?**

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- Have each individual turn in a PGPA and each group turn in a master GGPA. Keep these documents in a binder with details about the project so students can refer to them during the semester. This will help you keep students and you on track!
- Once a week have the students look over the PGPA and the group look over their GGPA. Allow students to revise as they see fit.

Finally, you must hold students accountable for participating. Since the instructor cannot be at every group meeting, having students peer review each other is essential.

- Allow students to self-evaluate and peer evaluate half-way through their project so students can get an idea of how they are performing. This allows students to discuss and correct any inconsistencies so everyone has the potential to earn the grade they want. Do this anonymously, but share the results with the students, so they know where they stand. Have the group discuss ways to get back on track if a member has strayed.
- Have students self-evaluate and peer evaluate at the end of the project and make sure this counts toward their grade in some way. Ensure students know they will be graded by their peers and how their project grade and subsequent final course grade will be affected by their peer reviews.

10. Have a culminating event for the major project. Allow students a big event, rather than just turning in an assignment. For example: create a poster session where students can show off their work. Invite industry professionals to interact with students and discuss their project. Or, have students in an upper level course present information to a lower level course in the same discipline.

### **Conclusion**

Group work can be a rewarding experience for students and instructors when the project is well thought out and steps are taken to ensure everyone can be successful. This 10-step method has been perfected and utilized for five semesters in an upper level equine management course with rave reviews from students. Use this guide, adapt it to fit your needs and Group-work On!

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