



Embedding Group Work in your Course

"One of the most important reasons for using team learning is that the growing complexity of our various work environments makes it much more difficult for one person to deal with or research issues and make decisions alone. Team learning, therefore, attempts to introduce students to real world experiences in the classroom." —R.F. Stein and S. Hurd, *Using Student Teams in the Classroom*. Bolton, Massachusetts: Anker Publishing Company, 2000, p. 4.

Group work can take many different forms, from brief group discussions in class—to engage students' interest in a topic, identify questions or areas of confusion, reinforce concepts, review notes or share impressions—to large-scale group projects that run for the duration of a course. Whether incorporated on a small or large scale, group work gives students the chance to practise group skills relevant to the discipline in authentic contexts, and encourages social interaction among students.

This page also addresses some key questions that arise when you are embedding group skills into your course: How do I design a task that lends itself to group process? How can I balance course content with the development of group skills? What emphasis should I give to the processes and products of group work? And how can I progressively develop students' group skills? Assessment is the last step in the process, but it is important to start thinking about assessment from the beginning. More ideas for assessing group work are provided on the page [**Assessing by Group Work**](#).

Where do I start?

Embedding the development and assessment of group skills into your course might seem daunting at first. You might find, however, that you are already doing things in your course(s) that lend themselves to the learning and teaching of group skills. When starting the process, you might like to consider the following tips for embedding the development and assessment of group skills into your course.

When embedding group work skills into your course:

1. Decide what is meant by group work skills and collaboration in the context of your field of study.
2. Remember that students develop skills most effectively when they are linked to (or part of) what they are already learning in their courses.
3. Tell students explicitly when and how group work skills are being developed and assessed.
4. Give students time to practise working in groups and reflect on their development of group skills.
5. Assess the development of group skills appropriately and give students timely and meaningful feedback on their progress.

How do I design a task that lends itself to group process?

As suggested by Stein and Hurd (2000), simply assigning a group report or other task to a group does not guarantee that group members will exchange ideas and share responsibility (p.7). The following elements (adapted from: Stein & Hurd, 2000, and Johnson, Johnson & Smith, *Cooperative learning: Increasing college faculty instructional productivity*, Washington, DC, School of Education and Human Development, George Washington University, 1991) can be used to increase the level of cooperation and collaboration involved in group tasks:

1. **Encourage positive interdependence.** Team members are obliged to rely on each other to achieve the goal. If any team members fail to do their part, everyone suffers the consequences.
2. **Design tasks so that students are individually accountable.** All students in a group are held accountable for doing their share of the work.
3. **Design a task that requires students to engage in frequent face-to-face interaction.** Provide sufficient time for interaction (group discussions and meetings, brainstorming sessions, sessions devoted to feedback etc.), appropriate seating arrangements, and a suitable level of supervision and encouragement. Team activities can be structured to require specific forms of discussion. For example, students discuss the nature and purpose of a new topic of study. Brief outlines of their conclusions are submitted to the instructor, who refers to them during lectures and class discussion.
4. **Design a task that involves the development of collaborative skills.** For example, identify the collaborative skills that students are expected to learn (e.g. constructive feedback and active listening); allow time and support for the development of group roles and responsibilities (e.g. team leader, trouble shooter, recorder etc.); rotate group roles so that students have the opportunity to practice different skills; and monitor and assess students' development of collaborative skills.
5. **Build in opportunities for structured reflection on group processes.** Give groups the opportunity to regularly review their performance, reflect on the interaction of their members, and make plans to improve coordination. This involves: providing the time necessary for effective processing; explaining the purpose of reflection; structuring the process by specifying questions to be addressed and procedures to be employed; sharing the results of reflection among groups and facilitating class discussion.

Integrating course content with skills development

Many academics have commented that group work can be very time consuming. That is, it takes time for students to settle into their groups, prepare students for group work, assess the processes and products of group work appropriately, and allow opportunities for reflection. The challenge is to identify areas of course content that lend themselves to group processes.

As suggested in the tips above, students develop skills most effectively when they are linked to (or part of) what they are already learning in their courses. As suggested in *Assessing Learning in Australian Universities (AUTC)*, there are three good reasons for incorporating group learning:

- Peer learning can improve the overall quality of student learning.
- Group work can help develop specific skills sought by employers.
- Group work may reduce the workload involved in assessing, grading and providing feedback to students (pp.1-2).

Allocating class time for group processes

When designing group activities or projects for your course, it is important to build in class time for new groups to become acquainted, allow time for group meetings and planning sessions, and for structured reflection on group processes. This helps to avoid situations where students find it difficult to arrange meeting times outside of class, and allows you to monitor the progress of groups and provide support where needed.

Process vs. product

When designing group tasks you will need to consider the importance given to the processes and products of group work. For example, does your task aim to develop the skills involved in:

- adoption of group roles and responsibilities
- negotiation
- delegation
- leadership
- questioning and analysis
- creative problem solving
- reflection and evaluation
- conflict management and resolution
- constructive feedback and reflective listening
- organisation and time management
- group facilitation

Similarly, what type of group product is best suited to your desired outcomes and demonstrate the processes of group work and the development of students skills? Is it a group:

- written report
- oral presentation
- poster presentation or exhibition
- portfolio or logbook
- design
- performance
- viva?

For information on assessing the processes and products of group work, see the page [**Assessing by Group Work**](#).

Developing students' group work skills progressively

It is important to give students the opportunity to develop their group skills progressively. For example, you could ask

students to participate in a number of small, non assessed, group tasks, and provide them with specific feedback (peer, self and from you) on their performance. This allows students to reflect on their performance and work out how they would like to improve in later tasks. Increasing the complexity involved in group tasks over time helps students to build their understanding gradually.

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