



Common Problems and Solutions for Group Work

The following questions and solutions were the result of a brainstorming activity with faculty in the Teaching Day special workshop “Making Group Work Work” with the keynote, Elizabeth F. Barkley.

What are some ideas for working with the limitations of the room configuration?

- Request specific rooms in advance.
- Visit rooms as soon as they are assigned, request new room as soon as possible.
- Request a larger room, even if seating arrangement is same (more empty chairs make it easier for students to move around).
- Go outside of the classroom if possible (outside, other meeting space).
- For class activities use the hallway as an extension of the classroom space.
- Let students leave the classroom for structured group activities (library, coffee shop) and return back at a specific time.
- Use the space and don't hold back. Students can shuffle around, use the walls for flipchart paper, use the corners. It may not be as easy as a classroom designed for active learning, but at least try to push it as much as you can.
- Find creative technology that helps students communicate with each other in class.
- Find ways to advocate for GW to create more active-learning conducive classrooms (if faculty are constantly requesting this it will be more salient as a University need).

How can an instructor ensure that all members of a group are held accountable?

- Use peer evaluation.
- Grade students on both individual participation (specific individual items graded) AND group.
- Assign specific roles to students in each group to structure their role and participation
- Use a team contract to establish roles and expectations.
- Teach students how to give feedback to each other.

To share additional comments or to schedule a consultation to discuss group work for your course, please contact the University Teaching and Learning Center at tlc@gwu.edu.

How do you solve the issue of teams finishing at different rates?

- Once two groups are finished have them review each other's work.
- Design group work to err on the side of having too much to complete, end earlier and discuss unfinished tasks as a whole class.
- Design activities to have prompts "if you have finished this part I'd like you to discuss the following....if not you can continue with the first section".
- Instructor reviews groups once completed, perhaps adds probing questions for them to continue to deepen learning on the activity.

How do you resolve differences in technical ability related to mastering the necessary technologies to achieve the class goals of collaborative learning?

- Create short video tutorials for students and/or find and post tutorials that already exist from that software's help desk (possibly on Lynda.com).
- Create instructional guides to walk students through the assignment step-by-step.
- Have students work in pairs with intention to varying tech-savviness.
- Allow students to choose from different formats to submit their assignment.
- Allow a "test-run" of the tool - practice in class together first.
- Offer an extra training session for students who may need help learning the tool(s).
- Include samples of final project(s) to help clarify expectations for the final product.

How do you deal with students who struggle to communicate well with their peers?

- Use "think, pair, share" with emphasis on adequate time for thinking.
- Assign roles - specifically the editor and facilitator role can help with the flow of communication.
- Let group members choose their own role in the group.
- Choose teams purposefully to spread strong communicators across teams OR to group them together so that they do not dominate other groups.
- Provide multiple formats for students to communicate throughout the project.
- Grade individual contributions as well as group overall.
- Provide campus resources such as the Writing Center to students who need extra support, as well as encouraging them to come and speak with you if they are having personal challenges with the group work.

What are some ideas for ensuring that the final product is well integrated (avoiding the “Frankenstein effect”)?

- Have one person in the group be the editor, responsible for ensuring a cohesive voice throughout the presentation.
- Provide an exemplar of finished product(s). Perhaps include one that is not cohesive to illustrate the point!
- Structure periodic check-ins for the groups so that they do not submit all of their drafts at the last minute to be compiled.
- Use tools that are collaborative in nature such as wikis, google docs or collaborative pin boards so that all of the work is happening in the same place.

What do you do when one or two students dominate the conversation?

- Assign specific roles to group members.
- Set a time limit on how long individuals can talk (e.g. make your points in less than 3 breaths).
- Use the jigsaw technique (students discuss/research a topic by group, then are mixed up so that every individual in the group has specific knowledge of a different topic and holds the role of expert on that topic).
- Assign a facilitator and clarify that their role includes making sure everyone speaks.
- Use chips or other physical indicator so that students can see the contributions visually.

How do you manage conflict in the team?

- Start with a whole class discussion on working collaboratively and outlining rules and expectations.
- Instead of breaking into groups randomly, use your knowledge of student personalities to group students intentionally.
- Use a team charter, contract, or other preliminary tool to have students discuss collaborative work before starting on the task. (*What do we need to know about each other in order to work together successfully on this project?*)
- Grade individual contributions as well as group product.
- Instructor may need to intervene and model conflict resolution.
- Instructor may need to shuffle groups if a group is having too much conflict.
- Use structured peer evaluations to give specific constructive feedback to students on their collaborative working style.