Four Types of Group Work Activities to Engage Students

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Collaboration helps to develop many of the key skills that will be required of students for their future success. Students can develop many of these so-called "soft skills," or Essential Employability Skills, by engaging in group work and other forms of collaboration (Ontario Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development 2005). Collaboration leads to greater retention, improved student achievement, and increased self-esteem and metacognition, and it can be used to facilitate active learning and to promote inclusion by increasing contact among diverse groups (Bossert 1988; Bowman, Frame, and Kennette 2013; Hennessey 1999; Kennette and Frank 2010; Kramarski and Mevarech 2003; Rajaram and Pereira-Pasarin 2007; U.S. Department of Education 1992). Despite the many benefits of group work, instructors are sometimes hesitant to use it due to some of its well-known pitfalls (social loafing, disputes, individualized grading, student bemoaning, etc.).

Before you get started
Regardless of the discipline you teach, you will likely encounter some resistance from students when you introduce your group work project. You'll likely hear a few groans, and students may complain or even question the validity of your methods of instruction. Students may react this way to any assignment, but they seem to have particularly negative perceptions of group work. The successful implementation of group work will likely require an adjustment on behalf of both the students and the instructor. To maximize success, start slow and start early in the semester. If you interweave small collaborative activities into every class, a group assignment later in the semester will seem much less daunting to students. To help you achieve success with group work, below are some examples of activities that instructors use in their courses to engage students in collaboration, including many which are low-stakes or no-stakes (i.e., ungraded) and are therefore less likely to produce resistance.

Group work: Creating
A great way for students to demonstrate their knowledge is to retrieve and synthesize information. This can be achieved by collaborating with their peers to create something new: a written piece, a song, a computer program, a piece of code, a pamphlet, an infographic, or even sample test questions. Many assessments are already set up to promote creating some product (e.g., essay), so modifying it to be a group project should be straightforward.

Although students can complete these activities individually, collaboration lets them practice skills they will need in the workplace.

Group work: Investigating
Students can work together to investigate a question and report their findings back to the class. For example, the recently debunked myth of the benefits of teaching to students' preferred learning styles could be a starting point for students to explore content about learning principles or research methods. Students can find scholarly evidence to support or to refute the claim or collect personal experiences around campus in an informal survey. In this way, students help generate course content and present it to their peers. Other good examples include a case study or an investigation of a specific law, regulation, or procedure. Students can also generate their own problems or case studies using course content and/or external scholarly sources.

Group work: Critiquing
With a critique, students have to apply their knowledge and problem-solving skills, especially if the critique must include possible solutions on which the group must agree. Students not only identify what's wrong, but also potential causes and how to fix them. For example, a welding instructor can create bad welds for students to examine, bring in items with faulty welds from the real world, or use students' previous work on practice pieces of metal. Similar practices are possible in many fields: writing (grammar or prose); philosophy and critical thinking (logical conclusions, hypotheses, or ethics); computer code/programs (trouble-shooting or improvements). Peer evaluations (e.g., of an oral presentation) or peer/group editing are also examples of critiquing.

Group work: Games and more
Other ways to engage students in collaboration and group work is to include multiplayer games (these make great test reviews), which require the players to collaborate. For example, have students play charades or adapt commercial games such as Taboo (get teammates to guess a word without using four related taboo words) or Headbandz/Heads-Up! (a player holds up a card on their forehead for their teammates to see, and they give clues to guess the word) where players are part of a team. Other games that are typically based on individual performance (e.g., Jeopardy) can also be modified to be more collaborative by using groups instead of individuals for each of the players. Additionally, group testing, where two or more students work on the test together (sometimes individually first, then in pairs), has shown promising results (Gilley and Clarkston 2014).

Conclusions
Although some disciplines and industries may place greater value on individual rather than collaborative work, research has shown us that it's often better to learn with others. Using group work can be beneficial at all academic levels and in any program; it is a matter of finding what works for you, your students, and your discipline. Group work should be somewhat tailored to students' expectations of what they will be doing in the workplace, if for no other reason than to increase student buy-in. Engaging students in group work has many benefits, and instructors should ensure they find a way to incorporate this technique into each course.

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