

How to Design Effective Online Group Work Activities

By: [Mary Bart](#) in [Online Education](#)

There are many reasons why students don't like group work, and in the online classroom the list of reasons grows even longer as the asynchronous nature of online courses not only makes collaboration more difficult but almost counterintuitive.

In addition, there may be another issue at play that you haven't even thought about, and it has to do with how group work is designed in the first place.

"Too often we give students an activity and call it group work when in reality it's something they could do on their own," says Jean Mandernach, PhD, associate professor of psychology at Grand Canyon University. "Then we get frustrated when they don't work together and just do the work on their own."

In the recent online seminar [Online Group Work: Making It Meaningful and Manageable](#), Mandernach provided tips for adapting proven face-to-face group work strategies to the online environment. The key is to design tasks that are truly collaborative, meaning the students will benefit more from doing the activity as a group than doing it alone.

Effective online group activities often fall into one of three categories:

1. There's no right answer, such as debates, or research on controversial issues.
2. There are multiple perspectives, such as analyzing current events, cultural comparisons, or case studies.
3. There are too many resources for one person to evaluate, so a jigsaw puzzle approach is needed with each student responsible for one part.

Online collaboration tools

While Skype and other real-time collaboration tools make it easier for dispersed students to "get together," Mandernach cautions against overusing synchronous tools. Instead, she says, you should encourage your students to take advantage of the many asynchronous collaborative tools inside your course management system or some of the new Web 2.0 tools. Some of her favorite Web 2.0 tools include: [Tokbox](#), [VoiceThread](#), [Creately](#), [Google Docs](#), and [Teambox](#).

These tools are relatively easy to use and help build a sense of community in the online classroom. They're also another way to get students to buy into group work activities and using them makes the students more marketable upon graduation.

“If you can use the collaborative environment to really bring them into your classroom and get connected to you and connected to their peers you’re going to see a lot of benefits besides increased test scores,” Mandernach says. “Many employers and graduate schools really view online learning as learning in isolation, and I think it’s important for students to show that they are capable of collaborative work — that they can work independently and with others.”

Online group work checklist

As part of the seminar, Mandernach provided the following checklist for creating and implementing online group projects:

Preparation

- Students understand the value of both the process and product of the collaboration.
- Students have guidance concerning how to work in an asynchronous team.
- Group size is small enough to allow for full participation of all members.
- Course provides numerous opportunities for community building prior to group projects.

Assignment

- Assignment is an authentic measure of student learning.
- Assignment will benefit from collaborative work.
- Students have clear guidelines of the expected outcome of the collaborative assignment.
- Assignment creates a structure of positive interdependence in which individuals perceive that they will succeed when the group succeeds.
- Assignment is scheduled to allow adequate time for preparation and communication.
- Assignment is designed in a manner to allow students a level of personal control.

Technology

- Students are provided with tools and instructions to facilitate online communication.
- Each group has a collaborative workspace within the online course.
- Students have technology skills relevant for asynchronous communication.
- Back-up procedures are in place to deal with technology failure.

Evaluation

- Grading and/or evaluation strategies differentiate between the process and the product.
- Strategies are in place to monitor interaction processes.
- Clear grading rubrics are provided at the start of the assignment to guide student work.
- Self and peer evaluations are included in the process to monitor individual involvement and accountability.