Explaining the Purpose of Groups

Group activities are important instructional tools because they help students take an active role in their own learning. Sharing the rationale behind the group activities that you design helps ensure that students understand how beneficial these activities are and can help increase their motivation to participate.

The Benefits of Online Group Tasks

When you are designing each activity, you are ensuring that your teaching practices align with your course outcomes, but students may not be aware of this design process or the research behind the various instructional tools that you utilize throughout your course. Explaining the purpose and expectations for student participation brings students into the process of learning, which helps them invest in the content, material, and activities.

As you explain the rationale behind the activity, share some of the benefits of group activities as well:

- Group activities enable you to take an active role in what you are learning, resulting in improved comprehension.
- You are able to gain new perspectives from group work that wouldn't be possible through lecture or individual assignments.
- Group activities in which you are discussing your ideas with other students help you think more critically about the topic and connect the information to knowledge you may already have.
- The social skills that are developed by collaborating and cooperating in group activities help build professional skills, such as the ability to work well in groups, that most employers expect.
- Working in online groups also builds technical skills that are now necessary in the professional world, which is becoming increasingly digital and global.
- Group activities help build a community with your cohort and other students, providing support for your and their learning.

It is likely that your class is comprised of varying age groups and experiences. Some students may have just graduated high school while others have been in the workforce for over a decade. Acknowledging this as you share the benefits of the group activity will help students who may be wondering how it is relevant to them.

Rationale Explanations

Below are examples of group activities with explanations of how the activity may be relevant for students' learning and professional goals.

Activity	Explanation
Think-Pair-Share	In a philosophy class, students can be assigned a Think-Pair-Share activity to discuss ideas and perspectives related to course concepts or topics. For instance, pairs can be asked to discuss whether or not universal truths exist. Each student will have a different perspective on the topic and different examples to contribute to the conversation, which will help to broaden their understanding of universal truths.
	Regardless of a student's specific career goals, they will need to be able to think through ideas, share thoughts, and listen to the ideas of their colleagues, clients, and supervisors.

Activity	Explanation
Jigsaw	In a math class, students can be organized into groups, with each group assigned to one idea or problem. For example, a group might be asked to explain the concept of *pi*. The instructor can inform students that this activity requires collaboration with other students to understand and then to explain the concept of *pi* to the rest of the class. In addition to better understanding the concept of *pi*, students will build skills in collaboration, research, and presentation, all of which are considered necessary in today's job market.
Role Play	In an Urban Planning class, the instructor may have students engage in a role-play activity to address needed updates to the city's sewer system from a consumer, engineer, and town leader perspective. The Role-Pay activity facilitates the ability to view problems from varied perspectives and collaboratively identify possible solutions. The ability to view a problem from different perspectives and use those varied perspectives to generate a solution can be beneficial for students in their future careers or as engaged community members.

Explaining the Purpose of Groups Through Video

Group activities tend to be more complex and detail heavy, making the instructions, grading rubric, and purpose lengthy. In addition to providing text-based directions, it may be helpful to share the purpose and structure of the group activity in a video, as some students may have a hard time following and comprehending complex written directions.

Your video can include:

- directions on the activity and grading rubric,
- timeline and due dates,
- how the activity relates to the course learning objectives,
- how the method of the activity is relevant to the students' goals and future aspirations,
- how you organized the groups and why, and
- information on resources and tools that can be used for the assignment.

Sources

Boettcher, J. V., & Conrad, R.-M. (2016). *The online teaching survival guide: Simple and practical pedagogical tips* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Darby, F., & Lang, J. M. (2019). *Small teaching online: Applying learning science in online classes.* Jossey-Bass.

Nilson, L. B., & Goodson, L. A. (2018). *Online teaching at its best: Merging instructional design with teaching and learning research.* Jossey-Bass.

Creating Team Contracts

Having student groups form team contracts before starting on a project helps to ensure they stay accountable to each other and deliver what is expected of them both individually and as a group.

Your directions may include

- asking students to create the contract in a videoconference call;
- providing students with a contract template and asking them to negotiate the terms;
- requiring students to sign the contract, each keep a copy, and submit a copy to you; and/or
- scheduling progress reviews of the assignment and group adherence to the team contract.

Contract Terms

The contract may include the following terms:

- What are the roles and/or responsibilities of each person on the team?
- When and how will the group meet?
  - For example, the group will meet via videoconference, conference call, or chat room and daily, weekly, or bimonthly.
- What criteria will be peer reviewed?
  - For example, each member might evaluate the other group members' level of input upon completion or group members might pair up and review each other's work.
- What is expected as responsible and respectful behavior within the group?
- How will the team manage conflict or disagreement?
- What will happen if someone is not fulfilling their responsibilities for the group activity or is failing to honor the agreed-upon terms of the team contract?
  - It may be helpful to inform students of your expectations regarding their group processes for ensuring all team members appropriately contribute to the project, before you would be willing to step in to manage a situation where a group member is not fulfilling their responsibilities. It may be helpful to share how gaining these skills will likely benefit them in a future career or community project.

Sample Team Contract

The template below is a sample contract that you can provide to students as you assign the task of negotiating contract terms.

Team Contract
Instructions: Hold a videoconference call for your first meeting and use that time to negotiate the terms of this contract. Once you have agreed upon all of these terms, each team member should sign this contract and keep a copy. A signed copy should also be submitted to me. Note that you will be asked to complete a progress review of these terms at the end of each week as you work toward completion of this project.
A.   List the specific roles or responsibilities assigned to each team member.   1.   2.   3.   4.

B. What criteria will you use to evaluate one another upon completion of this assignment? Examples include level of professionalism, leadership, timeliness of attending meetings and submitted work, and willingness to collaborate.   1.   2.   3.   4.   5.
C. What is considered appropriate behavior in terms of being respectful of one another? Examples include providing feedback without criticizing, being on time and prepared, honoring the terms of this contract, and listening to each other.   1.   2.   3.   4.
D. How will the team manage conflict or disagreement?
E. What will happen if someone fails to honor the terms of this agreement?
F. By signing below, you agree to the terms of this contract.   1. _____   NAME   SIGNATURE   DATE
2. _____   NAME   SIGNATURE   DATE
3. _____   NAME   SIGNATURE   DATE
4. _____   NAME   SIGNATURE   DATE

Progress Review

Ask each group to conduct a progress review of the group's progress and adherence to the terms of their contract. Schedule the dates of these reviews ahead of time and in intervals that make sense with the timeline of the assignment. It is helpful to schedule enough time for you to intervene if any of the groups encounter significant problems.

The progress review can be as simple as having students email you responses to the following questions:

1. Is the team making satisfactory progress toward completion of this assignment in a timely manner?
2. Is every member of the team honoring the terms agreed to in the team contract?
3. Are there any issues or conflicts the team is working to resolve?
4. Do you need to conference with me on any issues?

Sources

Darby, F., & Lang, J. M. (2019). *Small teaching online: Applying learning science in online classes.* Jossey-Bass.

Nilson, L. B., & Goodson, L. A. (2018). *Online teaching at its best: Merging instructional design with teaching and learning research.* Jossey-Bass.

Assigning Individual and Group Deliverables

Assigning both individual and group deliverables can help to ensure that students hold both themselves and each other accountable for meeting project expectations. This will allow you to assign both an individual grade and a grade for the product of the group assignment.

Individual Deliverables

Individual deliverables do not need to be lengthy or complex assignments, as the aim is to ensure participation and reflection upon the method and context of what was learned.

Examples of individual assignments in relation to a group activity include

- a self-reflection on the role the student played in the group and the skills they learned,
- a summary of the content the student learned through their involvement in the group, or
- a short essay on how working within a group setting allowed for a different perspective on the material.

Peer Evaluations

Peer evaluations are powerful instructional and accountability tools. Research has found that just telling students that their work will be reviewed by other students motivates them to try harder (Bowen & Watson, 2017).

Include peer evaluations with group activities that serve as the corresponding individual deliverable. Notify students within the instructions for the activity that a portion of their grade will be determined based on the peer evaluations that they give and receive.

Make students aware of the criteria that you will use in the evaluations. Examples of the criteria for peer evaluations include

- attendance at videoconferences, calls, or other scheduled meetings;
- timeliness of submitted contributions to the group;
- level of preparation at meetings, final presentation, or contributions submitted to the group;
- level of professionalism in communicating with the group; and
- the quantity and the quality of the students' contributions.

Divide the project into different phases or sections that will allow you to collect feedback on progress at these intervals. For example, if assigning a group paper, you can collect feedback after the thesis statement has been written, upon compiling the research, once the first draft is complete, and then again after the final draft has been submitted to you. This allows students the opportunity to use the feedback to improve their work or contributions to the team.

Group Activity Deliverables

Group activities usually receive a grade on their final product or presentation in addition to individual grades.

When designing a group activity, it is best to ensure that aspects of the assignment require students to work together interdependently. Without this type of structure, many groups will likely separate the work into different parts and piece the parts together at the end, foregoing the collaborative process.

Here's an example to demonstrate effective interdependent group work: If you are assigning a group paper that requires three students to integrate three research articles, you might have each student research one article but encourage the team to construct the thesis statement, introductory paragraph, topic sentences, and concluding paragraph together.

Sources

Bowen, J. A., & Watson, E. C. (2017). *Teaching naked techniques: A practical guide to designing better classes.* Jossey-Bass.

Nilson, L. B., & Goodson, L. A. (2018). *Online teaching at its best: Merging instructional design with teaching and learning research.* Jossey-Bass.

Forming Groups for Online Work

Below are three ways to form groups for online active learning. Instructors should choose the group membership method based on the type or purpose of the activity.

Grouping type	Uses	Methods
Random	• Provides opportunities for students to work with a variety of other students • Is quick, efficient, and fair • Is ideal for informal discussion groups and short assignments (Barkley et al., 2014)	Use simple and transparent techniques, such as grouping by • alphabetical order of first or last names, • counting off by the number of groups you want to form, or • using the LMS function to create randomized small groups.
Instructor-determined	• Allows for strategic grouping of students based on similarities or differences in characteristics such as content knowledge, skills, demographics, or availability • Is ideal for assignments that are ongoing, for project groups, or controversial discussions	• At the beginning of the course, ask students to fill in a survey that identifies their majors, career interests or experiences, digital skills, demographics, and work styles (including availability for group work). Use this information to group students according to similar interests or to enhance the diversity of a group (Barkley et al., 2014). (See suggested survey questions on next page.) • To create groups with diverging opinions about a controversial topic, ask them to reply to a question using a Likert scale to determine their opinion and group them accordingly.
Student-selected	• Provides opportunities for students to have greater agency in learning experience • Is ideal after students have had the chance to work or participate in discussions with two to three different students or groups of students	• Use the LMS or a Google Doc to create a sign-up sheet for a preset number of groups with a maximum number of spots. • Create sign-up sheets based on a particular topic or task so that students can choose their group based on their interest in the topic. • Remind students of the learning benefits they reap from working with students who are different from themselves.

Sample Email

Hello Class!

In this course, you and your classmates will be working on a group project that is expected to take a few weeks to complete. I know group projects can be challenging in an online course. However, the skills you gain from working on a long-term project with a team in a virtual environment are skills that employers in all industries are looking for in their employees. This experience will give you concrete examples of how you gained both skills and knowledge in teamwork to share during interviews for internships and jobs.

In an effort to set your teams up for success, I need everyone to complete the contact information form that can be reached by following the link below. It should take 2 to 3 minutes to complete. This form asks you to share your preferred contact information and your preferred work schedule and routine. Once all students have completed the form and all the groups are assigned, I will send each student the contact information of everyone in their group. It will then be up to each of you to initiate contact with each other. Please let me know if you have any questions and be sure to complete the form by Monday evening.

Sample Questions

1. What is your name?
2. What is your preferred method of contact? Check all that apply.
   a. Email
   b. Phone
   c. Text
   d. Social media (e.g., Twitter or WhatsApp)
3. If email is a preferred method of contact, what email address do you check frequently?
4. If phone or text is a preferred method of contact, what phone number do you use?
5. If social media is a preferred method of contact, which apps do you use frequently?
6. Would you be willing to be a group leader?
   a. Yes
   b. No
7. How would you describe your overall schedule?
   a. My schedule is a pretty balanced. I'm involved with a few activities, but I'm usually flexible.
   b. My schedule is pretty hectic. I'm involved with a number of activities, and I have limited time.
   c. My schedule is pretty open. I'm not involved in much, and I'm available most of the time.
8. How often are you on campus?
   a. I live on campus.
   b. I come to campus regularly.
   c. I do not spend any time on campus.
9. What is your preference for group meetings and collaboration?
   a. I do not have a preference and can meet in person or work together online.
   b. I prefer and/or am available to meet in person.
   c. I prefer to conduct meetings through technology/online.
10. What times of day are you most available for group collaboration? Check all that apply.
    a. Morning (8:00 a.m.–12:00 p.m.)
    b. Afternoon (12:00–4:00 p.m.)
    c. Early Evening (4:00–7:00 p.m.)
    d. Evening (7:00–10:00 p.m.)
11. What days of the week are you most available for group collaboration? Check all that apply.
    a. Sunday
    b. Monday
    c. Tuesday
    d. Wednesday
    e. Thursday
    f. Friday
    g. Saturday
12. Is there anything else I should know about your preferred learning style when creating small groups?

Sources

Barkley, E. F., Major, C. H., & Cross, K. P. (2014). *Collaborative learning techniques: A handbook for college faculty*. John Wiley & Sons

Collaboration Tools

In order to help students work together more effectively, especially if your assignment requires them to meet or do work outside of class, it is helpful for you to learn about collaboration tools to recommend to them. Consider the following resources as examples.

Trello

Trello is a collaboration tool that organizes your projects into boards. In one glance, its boards can indicate what task is being worked on, who is working on which step, and where that task is in the overall process. Trello is a whiteboard filled with lists of sticky notes, where each note is a task for you and your team. Each sticky note allows you to include photos, documents, and attachments from other data sources (e.g., Bitbucket or Salesforce). You can also comment and collaborate with your teammates in each sticky note. You can take the whiteboard anywhere you go on your smartphone and access it from any computer through the web.

Source: https://trello.com/

Google Docs

Google Docs brings your documents to life with smart editing and styling tools that help you easily format text. Choose from hundreds of fonts and add links, images, and drawings. Click "Share" and let anyone—friends, classmates, coworkers, family—view, make suggestions that you can accept or reject, or edit your document directly. When someone is editing your document, you can see that person's cursor as changes are made. Chat with others directly inside any document, or add a comment with their email address and they will receive a notification.

Source: https://www.google.com/docs/about/

Slack

Teamwork in Slack happens in channels. A channel is a single place for messaging, tools, and files. On Slack, you can share channels; communicate via voice or video calls with a screen-sharing feature; and drag and drop PDFs, images, videos, and other files for easy sharing.

Source: https://slack.com

Skype

Skype is software that enables conversations through free video and voice calls either one-to-one or in groups; instant messaging; and file sharing on your mobile phone, computer, or tablet.

Source: https://www.skype.com/en/about/

Use Think-Pair-Share for Discussion and Thought

To promote discussion and thought about new topics or concepts, consider using an online version of Think-Pair-Share.

Assign

1. Assign students an article or chapter to read or a video or microlecture related to a new topic or concept to watch. Be sure to explain the purpose of the assignment.

Think

2. Provide a clear prompt to help focus students' thinking, such as the following:
   - How does this connect to previously learned content?
   - What more do you want to learn about this topic in terms of your own learning goals?
   - Write down two to three questions that you still have about the new topic or concept.
   - Write down two to three things that you found most interesting about the new topic or concept.

Pair

3. Create pairs or trios of students. Have each group share their responses, insights, and/or questions via chat, text, or email by a set deadline.

Share

4. Assign one student from each group to post the questions and insights from their shared discussion to a full-course forum (by a specific deadline) with a prompt, such as the following:
   - What do you wish you understood better about this topic?
   - What do you think is most interesting about this topic?

Summarize

5. After all student pairs and trios have posted to the full-group discussion, instructors should follow up on the discussion forum or use the LMS's announcement tool to:
   - answer questions,
   - clear up points of confusion,
   - summarize discussion (highlighting important themes or insights),
   - provide additional insights, and
   - connect the discussion to the next topic or activity.

The Jigsaw Method

The jigsaw method helps students develop mastery through the process of teaching their peers. This method of establishing expert groups allows students to develop in-depth knowledge about a specific topic and helps to keep them engaged throughout the course.

1. **Create small groups.** Depending on the learning objectives for this assignment, you may want to create either random or intentional groups. For instance, if the desired learning outcome is for students to develop expertise on a topic that is entirely new to them, you may choose to group students intentionally based on their backgrounds and experiences in relation to the assignment topics.

2. **Assign a core concept and set of resources to each group.** Provide each group with its assigned topic and the resources which the students will then research to become "experts" on the assigned topic. You can also encourage research outside of the resources you provide. This amount of structure is great for guiding students while simultaneously allowing them to learn and grow independently.

3. **Instruct each group to develop a video presentation to teach the rest of the class about the concept.** Set checkpoints to review the progress and accuracy of each group's presentation. This may include calling upon students in regular intervals as "experts" on a specific area of the assigned topic. Ask student groups to create a video presentation or to present live during class time, teaching the rest of the class their expertise on the topic.

4. **Instruct each group that it will field questions from classmates at the end of the presentation.** Each member of the group should be prepared to respond to the questions asked by their peers. By making each student responsible for topic expertise, all students will have to participate and collaborate. This question-and-answer period can be accomplished either through a discussion forum or by providing additional time at the end of a synchronous session.

5. **Assess understanding after the presentations.** You can accomplish this by assigning students a minor task, such as taking a quiz or summarizing their understanding in a post.

Optional addition: Give students the responsibility for becoming "experts" on the concept. Let students know that they may be asked to discuss the topic in an online forum or through a posted video periodically throughout the module or the course. This will encourage them to do research and collaborate regularly with their group. Create a forum or discussion board specifically for each group or encourage students to create their own depending on the LMS and other tools that you have available.

Sources

Boettcher, J. V., & Conrad, R.-M. (2016). *The online teaching survival guide: Simple and practical pedagogical tips* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Simulating Career-Based Scenarios

Simulating career-based scenarios can provide your students with opportunities to work with the course content in ways similar to how they would outside of the course. This not only helps students understand the relevance of what they are learning, it also helps them prepare for the workplace. Activities and assignments that simulate the types of scenarios students are likely to encounter in the workplace offer them opportunities to practice skills and obtain feedback for improvement before they enter the workplace.

Career-Based Group Assignments

As you design group assignments, create scenarios that are representative of teamwork tasks within your discipline. For instance, business students simulate negotiations, law enforcement trainees simulate crisis intervention, and customer service representatives simulate deescalating a situation with an unhappy customer.

The steps below outline the process to create a career-based group assignment.

1. **Identify typical scenarios.** You can create either one scenario that each group will simulate in its own way or create multiple scenarios so that each group will simulate a unique scenario. These scenarios should be representative of situations that professionals in your discipline encounter.

2. **Include relevant roles.** Each scenario should include corresponding roles so that each student in the group is assigned a different role in the simulation.

3. **Provide background information.** Students need to receive enough background information on each role to help them simulate the scenario accurately.

4. **Provide students with instructions.** As with all assignments, students need to know the instructions, activity timeline, and relevant due dates ahead of time.

5. **Debrief.** Have students who played different roles share their experiences by posting in the online forum, submitting a brief summary to you, or presenting during synchronous learning.

Sample Career-Based Group Assignments

Below are sample scenarios and roles created for a psychology class with 12 students who have been organized into three groups of four. Each group will simulate a different scenario with varying roles. The students of this class are training to become marriage and family therapists.

Notice that each group has just one therapist role even though the students are all training to become therapists. By engaging in a typical professional scenario in roles other than the professional, students are given the opportunity to expand their understanding of the profession from different viewpoints.

Scenario	Roles
In court-mandated therapy for domestic violence, both spouses want to stay together. The spouse accused of domestic violence denies the behavior. The spouse reporting domestic violence is attending therapy only because it is mandated by the court.	1. Spouse who is accused of domestic violence 2. Spouse who has reported domestic violence 3. Court-mandated social worker 4. Marriage and family therapist
Two adults are voluntarily seeking therapy to assist in divorce planning. The couple has an 8-year-old son who has been brought to the session because they do not want him to feel left out of the process. Neither adult wants to remain in the marriage, and both are coming to therapy in the hopes of having an amicable divorce.	1. Spouse who is open and direct with thoughts and emotions 2. Spouse who is reserved and has difficulty sharing emotions 3. Eight-year-old son who does not want to be at the therapy session 4. Marriage and family therapist

Scenario	Roles
An adult female is attending family therapy with her older parents. She has recently completed a substance abuse treatment program and wants to improve communication with her parents.	1. Adult female who has asked parents to come 2. Parent who has begrudgingly agreed to come 3. Parent who has agreed to come and wants to be supportive in any way possible 4. Marriage and family therapist

Sources

Boettcher, J. V., & Conrad, R.-M. (2016). *The online teaching survival guide: Simple and practical pedagogical tips* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Assigning Group Member Roles

Assigning group member roles lends a more structured approach to group collaboration and often works well as it gives students a purpose for participating and ensures that various aspects of the task get addressed. This method also gives students practice in assuming group roles common in the work environment.

Facilitating the Group Activity

1. Begin by selecting either one topic for all groups to focus on or different topics so that each group works with a unique area of focus or scenario.

2. Then form groups of five or six students each, depending on your class size and the roles that are most appropriate for your assignment.

3. Within each group, assign each member to a specific role, such as the proponent, critic, illustrator, skeptic, or summarizer.

4. Provide students with instructions on how the work is to be accomplished. For example, be sure to include any recommendations for the number of times the group should meet and if you expect students to provide documentation of their meetings.

5. Develop a clear set of expectations or rubric outlining the project deliverables. Keep in mind that providing individual and group deliverables can be helpful to ensure accountability and encourage student ownership.

6. Debrief with students through a survey or individual deliverable at the end of the activity.

Common Group Member Roles

Example roles	Descriptions
Proponent	The proponent plays the role of someone who lists points of agreement with supporting evidence. This role can help group discussion stay on topic and connected to the assignment.
Critic	The critic plays the role of someone who lists points of disagreement with supporting evidence. This role can help the group expand its understanding of a topic and round out its ideas.
Illustrator	The illustrator plays the role of someone who identifies the most relevant and persuasive examples. This role can help the group strengthen its overall argument.
Skeptic	The skeptic plays the role of someone who prepares substantive, challenging questions. This role can help the group approach its understanding of the topic from different perspectives.
Summarizer	The summarizer plays the role of someone who recaps the key points and crafts a conclusion. This role can help the group stay organized and present its argument clearly.

Sources

Boettcher, J. V., & Conrad, R.-M. (2016). *The online teaching survival guide: Simple and practical pedagogical tips* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Barkley, E. F., Major, C. H., & Cross, K. P. (2014). *Collaborative learning techniques: A handbook for college faculty*. John Wiley & Sons.