UNIVERSITY OF LIVERPOOL

A spotlight on...

Online Groupwork

Centre for Innovation in Education & Centre for Higher Education Studies

Overview

Groups bring people together who have different expectations and ways of working. This guide outlines considerations for designing and supporting groupwork that occurs at least partly online. It takes groupwork to refer to a set of 3-6 students (Wheelan, 2009) who are working together to create a product of some kind.

Benefits

Groupwork can lead to impressive benefits for learning (Morrison, 2014), especially where a discipline thrives on contrasting perspectives – but care is needed, because badly designed or supported online group work can reproduce inequalities or alienate students.

- Groupwork helps helps students synthesise knowledge from a range of sources, with online tools enabling you to integrate them into activities.
- Online connections are important if on-campus interaction is restricted. Groupwork can powerfully affect students' sense of belonging.
- Communication and online teamwork skills are key to employability.

Putting it into practice

Shaping the group task
Groupwork entails the completion of task or the creation of a product, the results of which can be shared online with others (e.g. for subsequent critique, development or showcasing):

- Specify a fully-outlined and realistic task or set of tasks (An et al., 2008), whether the production of a presentation (e.g. video, podcast, e-poster, live screenshare presentation), report (e.g. authentic artefact), case study, etc.
- Stage the work by establishing deadlines for sub-goals that contribute to delivery of the main output(s) and checklists of what is needed (Koh et al., 2010), while still remembering that groups need ownership and autonomy within this.

Establishing a sense of belonging

- Offer multiple options for communication to allow for student preferences, including both synchronous and asynchronous communication tools (Chang & Kang, 2016).
- Build in space for students to get to know each other (ideally in synchronous meetings), integrating icebreakers where students share something about themselves.

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- Ensure that students agree group roles (chair, secretary), communication methods, meeting times, and responsibilities where applicable; these may be dynamic or fixed.

Facilitating groups
Play a role in facilitating group work, clearly communicating what students may expect from you in the extent and forms of your presence (Jaques & Salmon, 2007):

- Aim your interventions at supporting learning outcomes (e.g. criticality, depth of understanding, focus of work etc.) or at keeping the group process on track, by checking regularly on progress, troubleshooting, and keeping groups focussed on milestones, tasks, etc.
- Draw attention to the importance of taking into account constraints relating to time zones, caring responsibilities, disabilities and so on.

Building students' confidence
Students vary significantly in how ready they are for handling technology and relationships conducted online (and there are cultural dimensions to this), so devote time to up-skilling them.

- An early formative reflective exercise can help students identify and address challenges, e.g. managing the online study environment, planning time independently, and handling online distractions (Xu, Du and Fan 2015).
- Asynchronous communication allows students time to make sense of what is going on. This reflexive thinking can include a social dimension, as students share how they deal with the challenges of contributing to a group.
- Provide advice on group etiquette by offering potential ground rules that could be agreed around communication (e.g. constructive criticism, no offensive language, text talk or caps lock).
- Use protocols around equitable talk-time and not interrupting to help ensure that nobody feels excluded.
- Ensure students are aware of how to access support for technology-use (e.g. guides, help desk services, FAQs) and that the groupwork itself is accessible (e.g. supporting screen readers, auto-captioning).

Assessment

There is good scope to use assessment to help head off difficulties that sometimes accompany groupwork (Roberts & McInnerney, 2007).

- Consider awarding an individual grade based on the mark for the overall product, that is adjusted for each individual student according to meeting records, reflective statements from students on the group process or from the online records of team communication.
- Assessment is an aspect of higher education that is highly regulated, so check institutional policies on groupwork.

Taking it forward

There are a wide range of technologies to support online groupwork, but (as ever) pedagogy should drive the choice of technology. Guidance on what tools/ software is available will be key to ensuring that the development time is kept within reasonable bounds (e.g. see the Digi guide to online group work).

Additional Resources & References

Can you help us improve this resource or suggest a future one? Do you need this resource in an alternative format? Please contact us at cie@liverpool.ac.uk

A full list of references are available on the Centre for Innovation in Education website.