

Navigating Online Virtual Group Work

Tips for Instructors and Students

Natalie B. Milman

Online students are often asked to work in groups to complete assignments. The skills they develop in these virtual teams are needed in today's workforce. However, working in virtual teams does not always work smoothly. For instructors, it can be challenging to determine how to best support online students because they frequently become aware of issues when matters take a turn for the worse and/or when it is very difficult to determine ways to help the team get back on track (e.g., when a teammate fails to turn in her/his part of an assignment or teammates band together against one teammate). Of course, it is important to point out that sometimes a teammate might not complete her/his part of an assignment or "disappear" because something tragic has happened such as when a student experiences a death in the family or requires hospitalization. Therefore, when a student fails to respond to e-mails and phone calls in a timely manner, especially when she or he was very responsive previously, it is key for either the instructor and/or teammates to make contact with the missing-in-action student as soon as possible. More often than not in such cases, something serious has occurred. For most other situations, though, some type of intervention by the

instructor or teaching assistant will be in order, along with a group conference call, to determine a solution.

There are myriad steps that instructors and students can employ to improve virtual teamwork to minimize misunderstanding and foster equitable distribution of work and responsibility. The following are some suggested strategies for online instructors and students.

TIPS FOR INSTRUCTORS

1. *Determine how teams will be formed:* Some students like to be able to choose their own partners but others prefer to have them assigned. I have found that giving students a choice between the partner and project works best with adult learners. However, timing can be a factor. For instance, in a summer course I teach, there is little time to find a partner; therefore, I assign students to groups in that course. If students create their own groups, require them to post in a designated area in your learning management system the membership of their team and within a certain time frame.
2. *Ensure sufficient time for forming groups and team building:* If students will be

forming their own groups, ensure they have enough time to do so. I like to give students at least 2 weeks to form groups. This way they have time to figure out which partners/projects might work best with their goals and interests, as well as provide me time to help any students who have trouble finding teammates.

3. *Avoid forming groups the first 2 weeks of your course:* Since students often drop/add courses during the first 2 weeks, it is probably best to plan group work at least a month into your course.
4. *Have a plan or be ready to create one in case of attrition:* Occasionally a student drops a course. In such instances, you should have a plan to help those students either join another group or continue without the teammate. Either might require some modification to the assignment and/or due date for the students in these teams.
5. *Provide criteria for how teams will be evaluated:* Spell out all grading criteria and expectations, including for peer assessment, if required.
6. *Build in "checkpoints" or touch base with students:* Checkpoints are an excellent way to ensure teams are working towards completing the assignment. Additionally, it helps the instructor gauge where teams are and how the team is working together. These can be formal assignments such as requiring students to turn in a formal plan with deadlines or informal ones such as sharing a time line within a lecture to remind students of milestones during various points in the course/term/semester.
7. *Require or encourage students to share contact information:* The instructor should encourage teammates to share contact information, including their preferred method of contact. This should include more than just an e-mail address and cell number because if something serious happens to one

student, having only the personal contact information might mean that the other teammates are unable to get in touch with her/him.

TIPS FOR STUDENTS IN VIRTUAL TEAMS

1. *Exchange contact information, including cell, home, and work phone numbers:* If a student is in an accident and the only contact information is her/his e-mail address and cell phone, it will be harder to find out if she or he is out of commission. As such, I also recommend the sharing of alternative in addition to preferred methods of contact.
2. *Have a synchronous kick-off meeting:* If possible, have a live video or audio conference to get to know one another and discuss plans. Often you can cover a lot more ground talking in a 15-minute conference than e-mailing one another back and forth.
3. *Establish and agree upon different roles:* Successful groups have members who take on different roles. These can rotate or remain the same the duration of the team project. Possible roles could be:
 - a. *Team leader/organizer:* This person is the leader for the team and will have a final say on major team decisions if there is a tie. This person reminds teammates of deadlines and sends reminder emails. She or he should be the point of contact between the team and the instructor
 - b. *Team recorder/communicator:* This person acts like the secretary/documentarian by recording the team's major decisions, plans, et cetera.
 - c. *Team editor:* This person does a final edit of all work to be turned in.

4. *Describe how you like to work:* Do you like to get work done ahead of time or do you work best working last minute? Do you want to be involved in all decisions, or only those for which you have been tasked? Do you like to work early in the morning or late at night? Are you easygoing or a little “Type A”? Describing your work “style” will help your teammates understand how you like to work. Occasionally, teammates’ styles are so opposed it creates friction and discontent.
5. *Develop a timeline that includes major assignment benchmarks, tasks, and deadlines:* The timeline should outline who will do what and by when.
6. *Agree on a realistic time frame to reply to inquiries:* Will you reply to one another within 24 or 48 hours? Will your reply time vary depending on the day of the week? Whatever the case, ensure you agree on your expectations for replying to your teammates.
7. *Agree to disagree:* Most teams experience some disagreement. It is important to recognize that disagreement can be good—but it can also result in a lot of frustration. Be prepared to agree to disagree, as well as compromise.
8. *Respect and value one another’s ideas, contributions, and work:* Do not delete or overwrite another’s work without her/his permission. This is important especially when working collaboratively using collaborative tools such as Google Docs or wikis. Consider how you like to be treated—and keep in mind that while you are working hard, so are your teammates.
9. *Use technology to work collaboratively:* Various tools can be used for collaborative work ranging from Google Docs to wikis. There are also many conferencing tools that allow one to communicate synchronously with and without video.
10. *Check in periodically:* Update your teammates on your progress or maintain a log of your work using a collaborative tool that all teammates can contribute to and see.
11. *Contact your teammates with any concerns:* If you find you cannot make a deadline or are really busy because you have a work or family commitment that will take all of your time or believe someone is not pulling her/his weight—let your teammates know. Often one teammate believes one thing and another something else. If we could read minds this would not be necessary, but we cannot!
12. *Contact your instructor with any concerns:* Contact your instructor to share any concerns or questions. Of course it is a good idea to seek to work out issues with your teammates, but it is also important to inform your instructor of any issues that arise. Sometimes it just takes a nudge or “check in” e-mail from an instructor for a slacker teammate to follow through and/or do her/his share.

Working in teams can be very challenging but also very rewarding. The skills developed and utilized when working in teams are valuable, not only to employers but also for functioning in today’s global world.