

# The Value of Technology Tools in Team Projects

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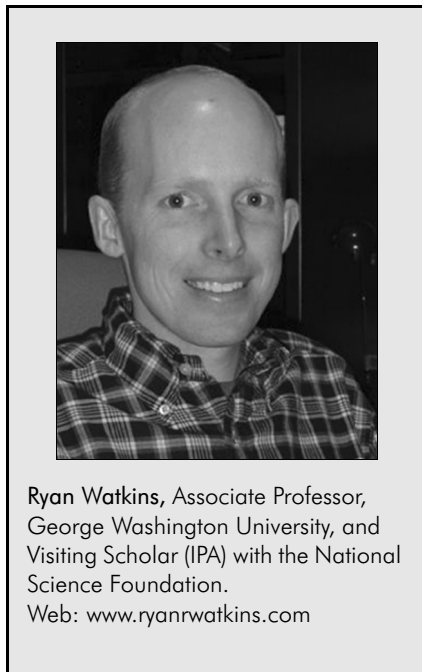
Learning activities that make use of small groups and teams are now common in many e-learning courses and environments. From college courses on science or engineering to training programs on computer security or leadership, many instructors value the dynamic roles that cooperative groups can add to student learning. By engaging learners in case studies, team exercises,

role playing, or other group activities both online and face-to-face, courses can diversify and expand the learning experience.

Instructors are, however, often hesitant to capitalize on the communication technologies that learners are using in their everyday lives, technologies such as cell phones, instant messages, the Internet, and Blackberry devices, to enhance the group experience. Although these technologies have dramatically changed how learners communicate with one another outside the classroom, most courses continue to rely only on conventional class sessions and small group meetings for the interaction of cooperative learning teams.

By integrating a variety of technologies (e.g., e-mail, shared calendars, chat rooms) into the group activities and assignments of both online and face-to-face courses, instructors can guide learners in the effective use of technology for enhancing team learning. The introduction of these technologies can also provide learners with many valuable skills they can apply in work environments where cooperative teams are often utilized.

Below are eight examples of how technologies can be integrated into group assignments and activities:



1. Instant messages to discuss project tasks and timelines;
2. E-mail attachments for sharing draft project documents;
3. Shared online calendars for setting project timelines;
4. Track-changes feature in Microsoft Word to gather feedback from group members;
5. Chat rooms in Blackboard or WebCT to have “real-time” discussions with group members;
6. YahooGroups to maintain shared files and communications within a small group;
7. Cell phones to have conference calls with multiple team members; or
8. Desktop video-conferences to communicate with off-campus learners.

Commonly, the results of introducing e-learning technologies to the small group and team activities and assignments within a course is the natural transition of the learners away from a reliance on face-to-face meetings to the more flexible use of technology to support the development of team projects. Making use of the technologies that they regularly use outside of the classroom, learners will often value the opportunity to apply technology to their efforts in college courses or training programs. From e-mailing team members about project guidelines to using YahooGroups to maintain shared files within a small group, the applications of technology to cooperative group projects is almost limitless; and with effective guidance, learners can build the necessary interpersonal and technical skills to effectively use these technologies to support their learning.

For instance, learners can improve their online communication skill when submitting to a chat room or discussion board (or sending a e-mail, instant message, or text message) by applying the following guidelines:

- Review every message you intend to send out before hitting the “submit” or “send” button.
- Don’t try to be clever with your language; your goal should be clear and concise communications.
- Use spelling and grammar checkers available in most software applications. If necessary, cut-and-paste the message into your word processing program to make use of its spelling and grammar checker before sending the message.
- Important information should be near the top of the message, not somewhere down in the fifth or sixth paragraph.
- Review the To:, Cc:, and Bcc: list of recipients before sending an e-mail.
- Within the text of the message, ask the recipient questions to verify that they are clear about the content of your message (for example, “does that make sense to you?”, “are you ok with those plans?”, “does that work for you?” etc.).
- Never include in an online communication anything you wouldn’t write on a postcard.
- Respect the copyright on materials that you reproduce (including items you find online).
- If you are forwarding or re-posting a message, do not change the wording of the original sender.
- Culture, slang, jargon, humor, idioms, and especially sarcasm are rarely effective communication strategies in online conversations (based on Watkins & Corry, 2005).

In addition, when learners receive an e-mail, instant message, or text message (or when reading a chat room or discussion board posting) the following recommendations can be of value:

- Don’t read too much into e-mails or chat discussions with other learners, or take comments too personally.
- Read the entire e-mail (not just the first few lines of each paragraph)

- Review the message more than once to ensure that you did not accidentally skip over any important information.
- Review any attached files or enclosed previous e-mails to provide the context for the message.
- If a message is upsetting, do not respond to it for at least an hour or two. Take some time to cool down and collect your thoughts.
- Ask any questions you may have about the content of the message. Cut-and-paste specific quotes from the message into your questions if there may be confusion on precise words or sentences.
- Repeat back to the sender to essentials details of the message to clarify your understanding (based on Watkins & Corry, 2005).

In creating course activities and assignments, it is therefore valuable to include elements that guide learners toward the development of useful interpersonal and technical skills for using technology to support their team efforts. From activities that identify group member roles and exercises for assigning tasks, to guidelines for sharing draft files and tips for online etiquette, through the team activities and assignments included in the course, you can promote the application of technology through all phases of team development (i.e., forming, norming, storming, performing). In addition to assist learners with developing effective group dynamics, the integration of e-learning technologies into small group activities can also help learners stay organized, share files, manage their time, communicate with group mem-

bers, document group processes, submit team products, and create comprehensive online portfolios.

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*Note:* Any opinion, findings, and conclusion or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the view of the National Science Foundation.

## REFERENCES AND RELATED READINGS

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