

Teaching and Grading Group Assignments

Group assignments are another area where faculty in our workshops raise many questions. When you assign several students to produce a major assignment together you will have to consider not only the quality of the task they complete but also the effectiveness of their interaction. If one of your course objectives is that students will learn to work altogether with colleagues, then teach them how. The steps are the same as for teaching and grading discussion:

- * Provide criteria and instructions.
- * Provide opportunities for practice and feedback.

Here are suggestions for guiding group processes:

- * Begin with instructions and guidelines for group work. Address the ways in which groups could go astray.
- * Construct a rubric by which the groups will be evaluated.
- * Have groups compose and sign a written agreement, at the beginning of their work together, that details what all of them will be responsible for (for example, being on time for meetings, completing their share of the work by certain deadlines, communicating regularly with other group members) and what each will do (Mary will research this part; John will research this part; Ling-Chi will produce the first full draft; Jamal will edit the draft).
- * Ask the group to appoint people to certain roles: record keeper, convener, and others.
- * Ask the group for frequent feedback to you and to each other. At the end of each meeting, whether online or face-to-face, group members can write to one another what they thought was successful about the group meeting and what they thought needed improvement. Responses can be shared with you, and you can step in quickly if the group is struggling.

Ask a recorder to post or submit to you a record of the group's activities. When did they get together? Who was present? What did each person do? What progress was made? What problems arose, and how did the group address them? What do they need from you, if anything?

- * Schedule a face-to-face or synchronous online meeting with each group at intervals to check the group's progress and interaction. At these meetings, anyone who feels another group member is not doing his or her share should say so right here in the group so the issue can be discussed and you can facilitate.

We find in our workshops a number of faculty who want to grade students' contribution to the group as part of their grade for the project, but the faculty members don't know quite how to structure the grading. An obvious method is to ask students to report on, or even grade, other students' contributions. But think again whether this will supply the information you are looking for. Asking students to evaluate

one another's contributions to the group can make you into the parent and the students into the tattling siblings. Group members may deliberately or subconsciously collude to cover up inequality of effort just to avoid conflict. Or the group may discount the contributions of women, historically underrepresented groups, or persons with disabilities--prejudices that turn up regularly in the research literature, so likely are present in your classroom as well. We suggest that you do not merely have students evaluate one another's group contributions at the end of the project. Spread the evaluation throughout the process, anchor it to behavior, be present as facilitator and listener, and help the group address any difficulties early on.

The guidance we have suggested helps you be the coach along the way, helps students raise workload and interaction issues while they can still be addressed, and results in ongoing, not just end point, information to you about how the groups are doing. (Resource 2.2 contains material that can help you manage collaborative and cooperative student work. Vomeaux 2005, addresses the assessment of online group work.)

What If They All Get A's?

Faculty members in workshops sometimes raise the possibility that if they teach what they are grading, more students will meet the highest criteria for student performance. You'd think this would be a good thing, but some faculty operate in environments where they fear they will be in trouble if they give too many A grades. We discuss grade inflation in general in Chapter Eight. In this special kind of case, where grades in your own class are rising because students are doing better work, you have two choices. The first is to raise the standards so that it takes more to get an A. Students are getting better teaching, so they should be performing at a higher level. A second option is to keep the standard the same, give an A to all students who reach the standard, and then, if you are questioned about it, be ready to show your department head or promotion tenure committee some samples of your assignments and tests, together with student work that earned an A and work that earned a B. You can begin a discussion on this topic in which you are open to the other person's ideas, and the other person has a chance to see what you are doing.