



THE TOOLBOX

A Teaching and Learning Resource for Instructors

WORKING TOGETHER: USE GROUP WORK AS A PIVOTAL LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Employers consistently cite the ability to work as part of a team as a skill they value in college graduates and future employees (along with communication skills, adaptability, creativity, and consensus building). A survey by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (2017) echoes this, with 82.9% of participating employers ranking teamwork as a critically important skill set. In a separate survey of college students, however, only 51% of the respondents felt their experience in higher education had effectively prepared them to be effective group members and leaders (McGraw-Hill Education Future Workforce Survey, 2018).

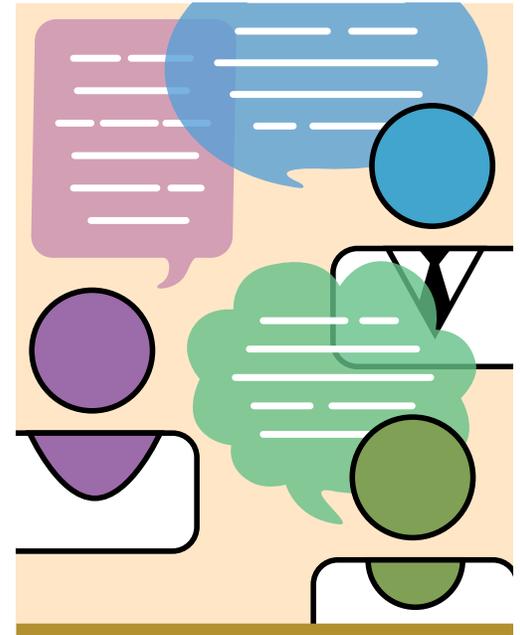
It is logical, then, to consider ways to systematically embed group-based activities into the existing curricula of academic programs. In this way, students can gain valued skills through group-based projects while also actively engaging with course content.

When asked, students will often roll their eyes and recount their negative experiences while working in a group. Payne, Monk-Turner, Smith, and Sumter (2006) surveyed students about their concerns and recommendations for designing group-based projects. Their observations included:

- » the need for group members to communicate with one another,
- » the importance of designating leaders of group work projects,
- » the critical importance of all team members to fully understand the goal of group work, and
- » the need for all participants to understand mandatory meeting expectations (including time spent in class to meet in groups).

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“

Teamwork begins by building trust. And the only way to do that is to overcome our need for invulnerability.

”

— *Patrick Lencioni*

“

None of us, including me, ever do great things. But we can all do small things, with great love, and together we can do something wonderful.

”

— *Mother Teresa*

A Checklist for Creating Group-Based Projects and Assignments

Creating and deploying group assignments requires careful planning by faculty members. Time spent planning and communicating effectively with students will reduce the likelihood of problems and challenges later. Here are some things to consider:

- » **Reality check**—It is helpful to remind students that throughout life, they will work with small groups of people to meet identified goals and outcomes (e.g., jobs, community groups, churches, advocacy activities). Learning how to manage and work with others in a group is a valuable skill that will serve them well.
- » **Allegiance to learning outcomes**—As with other forms of learning, it is always advisable to reference how a group work project or assignment connects directly with course and program learning outcomes.
- » **Group formation**—Consider how students are assigned to work groups for the purpose of completing an assigned task. Typical options include assigning students randomly, creating groups using designated criteria (e.g., leadership skills, collaborative abilities, academic prowess), or simply allowing students to pick their own groups. The literature is mixed regarding which of these approaches is most productive (Chapman, Meuter, Toy, & Wright, 2006; Mushtaq, Murteza, Rashid, & Khalid, 2012). Faculty, therefore, should choose a grouping approach that best matches the assigned group task.
- » **Shared expectations**—It is important to fully inform students of the criteria that will be used to evaluate the final products created by their groups. Included in this issue of *The Toolbox*, on pages 4-5, are two rubrics: one that faculty can use to evaluate a work group's final product, and one that lets students evaluate their own (or others') performance as members of the group. As part of this process, faculty should announce the level that the final product and/or the overall performance of group members will contribute to their final grade.
- » **Defined roles**—For students new to this process, it may be helpful to assign roles to group members (e.g., chairperson, recorder, energizer, information seeker, harmonizer). Faculty may wish to provide descriptions of these roles and ask groups to designate role assignments.
- » **Accountability**—A key variable in the success of a group project is the level that group members are accountable to one another and to completing the assigned tasks. The terms *social loafing* (Aggarwal & O'Brien, 2008) and *free rider* (Pfaff & Huddelston, 2003) have been used to refer to members who contribute little to the overall work of the group but are quick to take credit for the final product. One accountability strategy is requiring groups to submit weekly reports that summarize their progress toward identified outcomes (e.g., a checklist of specific milestones, group meeting attendance).
- » **Public expectations**—Chang and Brickman (2018) recommended creating a formal list of expectations for group members (e.g., attend group meetings, contribute to the final product, demonstrate respect for others' opinions).

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- » **Use of collaborative digital platforms**—We live in a digital age in which it is increasingly common for group members to work remotely and asynchronously. For this reason, it is helpful to provide students with an asynchronous experience as an additional way to engage in group work. As an example, groups can create a collaborative workspace (e.g., Google Docs), allowing members to contribute to the overall work of the group as their schedules permit. As an additional bonus, faculty can observe this process and monitor the level that individual group members are contributing to the final product.

Help your students boost their skills through working as part of a team.

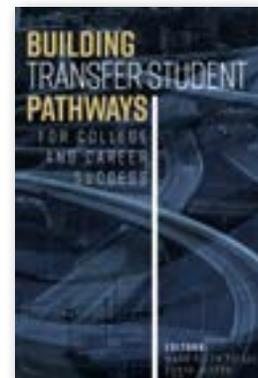
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Additional Resources

The educational rubrics on pages 4-5 were created using the free digital tools available at <http://rubistar.4teachers.org/index.php>

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Self-Evaluation Rubric

Category	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor
Attitude	Never is publicly critical of the project or the work of others. Always has a positive attitude about the task(s).	Rarely is publicly critical of the project or the work of others. Often has a positive attitude about the task(s).	Occasionally is publicly critical of the project or the work of other members of the group. Usually has a positive attitude about the task(s).	Often is publicly critical of the project or the work of other members of the group. Often has a negative attitude about the task(s).
Working With Others	Almost always listens to, shares with, and supports the efforts of others. Tries to keep people working well together.	Usually listens to, shares with, and supports the efforts of others. Does not cause "waves" in the group.	Often listens to, shares with, and supports the efforts of others, but sometimes is not a good team member.	Rarely listens to, shares with, and supports the efforts of others. Often is not a good team player.
Monitoring Group Effectiveness	Routinely monitors the effectiveness of the group and makes suggestions to make it more effective.	Routinely monitors the effectiveness of the group and works to make the group more effective.	Occasionally monitors the effectiveness of the group and works to make the group more effective.	Rarely monitors the effectiveness of the group and does not work to make it more effective.
Preparedness	Brings needed materials to group meetings and is always ready to work.	Almost always brings needed materials to group meetings and is ready to work.	Almost always brings needed materials but sometimes needs to settle down and get to work.	Often forgets needed materials or is rarely ready to get to work.
Problem-Solving	Actively looks for and suggests solutions to problems.	Refines solutions suggested by others.	Does not suggest or refine solutions, but is willing to try out solutions others suggest.	Does not try to solve problems or help others solve problems. Lets others do the work.
Focus on the Task	Consistently stays focused on the task and what needs to be done. Very self-directed.	Focuses on the task and what needs to be done most of the time. Other group members can count on this person.	Focuses on the task and what needs to be done some of the time. Other group members must sometimes nag, prod, and remind to keep this person on-task.	Rarely focuses on the task and what needs to be done. Lets others do the work.



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Work Group Outcome Rubric

	4	3	2	1
Writing— Organization	Each section in the brochure has a clear beginning, middle, and end.	Almost all sections of the brochure have a clear beginning, middle, and end.	Most sections of the brochure have a clear beginning, middle, and end.	Less than half of the sections of the brochure have a clear beginning, middle, and end.
Writing— Grammar	There are no grammatical mistakes in the brochure.	There are no grammatical mistakes in the brochure after an instructor's feedback.	There are 1-2 grammatical mistakes in the brochure even after feedback.	There are several grammatical mistakes in the brochure even after feedback.
Spelling & Proofreading	No spelling errors remain after one person other than the typist reads and corrects the brochure.	No more than 1 spelling error remains after one person other than the typist reads and corrects the brochure.	No more than 3 spelling errors remain after one person other than the typist reads and corrects the brochure.	Several spelling errors in the brochure.
Writing— Vocabulary	The authors correctly use several new words and define words unfamiliar to the reader.	The authors correctly use a few new words and define words unfamiliar to the reader.	The authors try to use some new vocabulary, but may use 1-2 words incorrectly.	The authors do not incorporate new vocabulary.
Writing— Mechanics	Capitalization and punctuation are correct throughout the brochure.	Capitalization and punctuation are correct throughout the brochure after an instructor's feedback.	There are 1-2 capitalization and/or punctuation errors in the brochure even after feedback.	There are several capitalization or punctuation errors in the brochure even after feedback.
Content— Accuracy	All facts in the brochure are accurate.	90-99% of the facts in the brochure are accurate.	80-89% of the facts in the brochure are accurate.	Fewer than 80% of the facts in the brochure are accurate.
Attractiveness & Organization	The brochure has exceptionally attractive formatting and well-organized information.	The brochure has attractive formatting and well-organized information.	The brochure has well-organized information.	The brochure's formatting and organization of material are confusing to the reader.

Submission Guidelines for The Toolbox

For complete guidelines and issue dates, see www.sc.edu/fye/toolbox/

Audience: *Toolbox* readers include full-time and adjunct faculty; academic advisors; and administrators focused on faculty development, teaching and learning, academic success, and the first college year.

Style: Articles, tables, figures, and references should adhere to APA (American Psychological Association) style.

Length: Original articles should be no longer than 1,500 words. The editor reserves the right to edit submissions for length.

You can also submit your article online by using our [submission form](#).

Please address all questions and submissions to:

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About The Toolbox

The Toolbox is an online professional development newsletter offering innovative, learner-centered strategies for empowering college students to achieve greater success. The newsletter is published six times a year by the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition at the University of South Carolina.

The online subscription is free. To register for newsletter alerts and access back issues, please visit www.sc.edu/fye/toolbox.

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