



Group Assessments in the Block

Why is group work so important?

Providing opportunities for working in a group is one of the key principles of the Block. Engaging in cooperative, rather than competitive or individualistic learning mirrors what students are likely to encounter in many organisations. Group collaboration also exposes students to a variety of perspectives and diverse group dynamics while clarifying their own ideas; it is a powerful foundation for promoting critical thinking.

Designing group assessment tasks: The fundamentals

It is important to design multi-faceted tasks that cannot be completed by an individual. Tasks should require students to interact with each other, developing reliance on inter-dependence for success.

Assess both the process and final product of group work

Assessing the process encourages students to contribute appropriately and to pay attention to the way their group works. It will also help to resolve potential conflict.

Demonstration of the following processes can be assessed:

- group roles and responsibilities, including the balance of contributions
- negotiation and leadership skills
- responsiveness to feedback from group members
- conflict management and resolution
- reflective listening
- appropriate organisation and time management

Structure the group work so that students must submit several items at milestone points, and require students to identify each student's contribution so that problems can be addressed in a timely way. Consider allocating marks to both individuals and groups and, for example, incorporating peer and/or self-assessment. Refer to your Design Team for advice on appropriate tools to support this.

Plan how groups will be formed

Groups can be randomly assigned, self-selected or purposefully assigned by the tutor.

If your plan is for students to form their own groups, think about why this is consistent with the intent of your assessment task. Note that if students are early in their course of study, they may be more comfortable about sharing in a self-selected group, when they feel that their group will not be making judgments about their lack of knowledge.

Alternatively, you may want to purposefully assign students to groups to take advantage of particular attributes of working in a group, e.g. give students opportunities to exhibit leadership and take on different roles, or take advantage of the diversity of knowledge backgrounds that the students have. You may also want students to develop the ability to both give and receive feedback—this can be easier when students are less familiar with each other. Working in purposefully contrived groups emulates how students are likely to operate in a workplace.

Specify the size of groups, taking into account the nature of the task. Small groups find it easier to coordinate their efforts, but may struggle with excessive workload and lack of different viewpoints. Larger groups can theoretically accomplish larger and more complex projects. There are no firm rules; somewhere between 3 and 5 is considered best.

Designing activities in class as scaffolding

While most students have worked on group projects before, don't assume they have developed effective team work skills. Students need to learn how to work with others to do things they might only know how to do individually and also how to handle issues that only arise in groups. You will need to include in-class activities in your lesson plans to build group cohesion and allocate time in class for the group to progress the task and manage the group process.

Consider incorporating activities mid-way through an assessment which provide opportunities for groups to give peer feedback to other groups and extend these activities to a whole of class discussion.

Tips for setting up effective groups

You need to provide some scaffolding so groups will be effective. This involves facilitating the groups to develop rules and procedures for dealing with problems as they arise and agreeing how these will be resolved, especially ensuring each individual's accountability.

- 1 Spend time up front clarifying why you are using group work and addressing any student concerns or misapprehensions
- 2 Allocate in class time so that students have an opportunity to engage with group work tasks that will allow for:
 - Forming groups, allocating roles, developing rules and procedures
 - Reviewing assessment criteria and seeking clarification on expectations
 - Discussing and elaborating on ideas
 - Organising and managing the project
 - Reflecting on the group work experience
 - Monitoring progress
 - Assessing individual, group, and other groups' effectiveness
- 3 Have a contingency plan in place for dealing with problems that the groups themselves are unable to resolve, or assessing students who are not able to participate in specific group tasks.
- 4 Make use of electronic tools, e.g for discussion and information sharing, to support groups outside of class.

Want to know more?

Websites

- Eberly Center 2019, Group Projects, Teaching Excellence & Educational Innovation, Carnegie-Mellon University, viewed 12 September 2019, <
<https://www.cmu.edu/teaching/designteach/design/instructionalstrategies/groupprojects/index.html>>

Related articles

- Johnson, D & Johnson, RT 1989. *Cooperation and competition: Theory and research*, Edina, MN: Interaction Book Company.
- University of Waterloo n.d., *Promoting and Assessing Critical Thinking*, viewed 13 August 2019, <<https://uwaterloo.ca/centre-for-teaching-excellence/teaching-resources/teaching-tips/developing-assignments/cross-discipline-skills/promoting-assessing-critical-thinking>>.