**Some Principles for Creating and Implementing Group Activities**

*The most effective group assignments promote both learning and team development. According to Michaelsen, most problems with learning groups stem from inappropriate group assignments. Here are some ways to address that.*

***Approaches to forming groups***

* Spontaneous groups.
  + *Pros*. Easy to implement. No problem if attendance is variable.
  + *Cons*. Class time needed to form groups. Students not used to working together.
* Randomly formed standing groups
  + *Pros*. Students can develop teamwork skills. Low-effort way to construct groups ahead of time. Students can continue to work out of class.
  + *Cons*. Groups may not be well-balanced. Students must find each other if the class is large.
* Explicitly planned groups
  + *Pros*. Students develop teamwork skills and can continue to work out of class. Assigned groups can distribute high- and low-performing students or students with different strengths and backgrounds.
  + *Cons*. Time-consuming to construct. Instructor must gather information for sorting (try catme.org). Students must find each other if the class is large.

***Designing productive group activities and assignments***

* *Ensure that the assignment truly requires group interaction*. Give open-ended problems on complex ideas that require “best solutions” with supporting arguments. That way, discussion among group members leads naturally to completing a task.
* *Require a product*. This may be something that is turned in, contributes directly to an assignment, or is reported out (via response systems and discussion).
* *Monitor complex projects carefully*. Complex group projects such as a lengthy paper can limit discussion and reduce group cohesiveness. Team members generally divide the work and complete pieces individually. A simple format is often better, even if students must report on complex decisions. If you use a complex project, though, make sure you have clear guidelines and frequent reporting.
* Be sure there are clear links to the learning sequence and assessments, and make those visible to your students.
* Organize projects around meaningful topics.

***Guidance and structure for group interactions***

* Assign formal roles and generate interaction guidelines or ground rules.
* Establish accountability for contributions to group such as peer reviews and grading.

***Assessing performance and holding students accountable***

* Promote a high level of accountability for team members while also rewarding good team performance. Use a combination of individual assessments (e.g., quizzes or assignments that promote preparation for class) and team assessments (group product grades or points).
* For standing teams, use peer review ratingsto encourage individual and group engagement.

**Helping students succeed at group work**

We often push our students into group work without providing guidance on how effective teams operate and what makes an effective team member. Helping them understand a few principles will reduce complaints and improve work quality. Here are a few things that successful teams do to keep projects on track.

**Establish clear goals**. Each group member must know what the group is trying to accomplish and how it plans to reach its goals. Clear goals keep team members in synch, and save time and frustration from having to redo various aspects of a project.

**Make clear assignments**. All team members must understand what elements they will contribute and when that work is due. This cuts down on duplication of efforts and helps the team complete work by a collective deadline.

**Get to know team members**. Humanize yourself and others. Learn who your teammates are and what interests and motivates them. You don’t have to become great friends, but understanding what makes someone tick can smooth the cooperative effort.

**Communicate often**. Group member need to know what others are doing, and need to keep one another updated about progress, obstacles, and changes. Regular face-to-face meetings provide a means for sharing drafts, asking questions, and solving problems. Electronic communication is good for short updates and questions.

**Do the work and do it well**. One of the biggest complaints students have of group work is that a few individuals do all the work and others just tag along. Nobody likes a slacker or a complainer. So once you know what is expected of you, complete that work to the best of your ability. If you run into problems, let others know. And don’t be afraid to ask for help.

**Treat team members with respect**. Your words and actions matter. Use respectful language. Keep your anger in check. Show up to meetings on time. Turn in your part of the project on time. Ask for others’ input and allow everyone to speak at meetings.

**Make your final product consistent**. All too often, a project from a group of six students looks like six individual projects pasted together. That helps no one. Designate an editor and make sure the project has a consistent voice and a consistent style. Also learn to provide good feedback to your peers.

**Learn to give and receive candid, constructive feedback**. This is one of the most important skills you can learn. We all need feedback on our work. When you work with teammates, talk about project work in terms of “we,” as in: “Can we make this section clearer?” or “Can we do additional research to fill in gaps in this section?” That can take the sting out of feedback and signal a joint effort.

**Learn to compromise**. You are no doubt used to individual assignments in which an instructor is the only audience and you are the only one who makes decisions. A group project requires all team members to be satisfied with the product. So learn to compromise. Your approach may not be the best approach for the group. By all means make your case, but find common ground wherever possible.

**Listen**. This is an overlooked skill, but it will make all aspects of a project go more smoothly.