

How do your students respond when they discover that you expect them to work in groups on a project in your class? Are they excited about the opportunity to develop their skills with team work and leadership? Are they terrified that they will be a part of the “team from hell?” Instructors also regard group work with a mixture of excitement and trepidation. A dysfunctional team can make life difficult for the instructor as well as the members of the problematic team.

Cooperative learning and group projects can produce deep and enduring learning for team members. However, a dysfunctional team may actually interfere with learning (Oakley, Felder, Brent, & Elhaji, 2004). Students working on a group project for the first time frequently do not have the skills for social interaction, project management, time management, and conflict resolution needed for a successful group experience. Include activities to develop student teamwork skills as part of the course or project activities to increase the success of student learning from the project and decrease the frequency of dysfunctional groups.

What can instructors do to help teams function well?

Teams function better when they are comprised of a heterogeneous group of individuals. When students create teams on their own, they tend to congregate with friends and individuals they perceive to be similar to themselves. Collect information about the characteristics of students in your class before forming teams. Use this information to assign students to teams with an appropriate mix of talents and backgrounds.

Create an initial team activity that focuses on process issues. The activity should allow team members to learn about their individual communication styles, academic skills, and social skills.

Ask each team to develop a list of policies and expectations for team behavior. These might include statements about showing up for meetings, meeting deadlines, sharing work equitably, etc.

Hold individual students accountable for their team behavior and contribution to the group project. Create a rubric for peer evaluations of individual contributions to the final project or have the teams create a rubric as part of their policy activity. Use these evaluations to determine part of individual grades on the project.

What do students need to learn to be effective team members?

Teaching students team skills by forming groups and setting them to work is a bit like teaching students to swim by

tossing them into the deep end of the pool and hoping things work out well.

If your goal is to help students learn team skills, create a project that *must* be completed collaboratively. If a project lends itself to “division of labor” strategies, team members will simply divide the project into component parts and work independently.

Provide opportunities for reflection on the group process. Ask team members to meet from time to time to assess how well the project is moving along. They should identify obstacles (from unanticipated complications with the project to problems with social loafing) and develop solutions. Process discussions provide opportunities for timely conflict management. Give students in the group an opportunity to vent about what is not going well and identify potential solutions to the problem (Breslow, 1998).

Ask students to keep a journal in which they make observations about specific group processes. Students may need guidance in how to reflect effectively on group processes. Effective reflections should describe how the group behaves as a team and how individual members do or do not contribute to effective group function. Students should describe group communication patterns (*Who talks? Who doesn't talk? Do team members listen to one another? Do they interrupt?*), organization and planning (*How are tasks assigned to team members? How are priorities for sub-tasks determined?*), and group dynamics (*What happens if a team member misses a deadline or submits poor quality work? Describe conflicts that arise. How did the group resolve its conflicts?*). Finally, reflections should identify strategies for improving group function (Breslow, 1998).

References

- Breslow, L. (1998). Teaching work skills. MIT Teaching and Learning Laboratory.
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- Breslow, L. (1998). Teaching work skills, Part 2. MIT Teaching and Learning Laboratory.
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- Oakley, B., Felder, R. M., Brent, R., & Elhaji, I. (2004). Turning student groups into effective teams. *Journal of Student Centered Learning*, 2, 9 – 34.