

Growing Great Groups: Considerations for successful student partnerships

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Group work. Those two simple words can create a strong response (both positive and negative) from educators and students alike. Advocates favour group assignments because “In the real world, students need to know how to work with others”; however, pre-service education has marked differences from professional practice. This translation may not be as clear-cut.

Though the terms are often used interchangeably, there is a difference between group work and collaborative learning. Essentially, product vs. process. Though the two are not mutually exclusive, understanding the subtle distinction is useful in facilitating successful learning opportunities for students.

We have all seen it... the risk of academic honesty concerns when some students do the bulk of the work while others seemingly coast along. Even including group contracts and peer assessments may not negate this risk, as peer ratings may be skewed by social connections and fear of repercussion either from group members or in the assigned grade. So, how do we provide opportunities for collaborative learning and prevent some of the challenges that may naturally arise? The first step is for us to be clear of the purpose and objective of the group exercise. Is it linked to an assessment **of** learning or **as** learning?

If the group work relates to an assessment **of** learning (summative), is the intention to also assess the collaborative **function** of the group? If this is the case, the group **process** needs to be included as part of the learning outcomes. Consider aspects such as:

- How are groups formed? How may this influence the overall group function?
- How is equal distribution of the work ensured? Monitored?
- Is class time allotted to work on the project due to competing demands outside of class hours and the natural geographic distribution of students?

- How are students held accountable for their individual performance in supporting the group functioning? Is individual effort assessed?

Is the group work intended to provide an opportunity **for** learning (formative)? If so, consider aspects such as:

- How is the task structured in a way that ensures authentic collaboration?
- Is risk taking encouraged to allow for low risk skill development in areas of need?
- How are students accountable for their own learning?

With careful planning, collaborative learning and group work can provide excellent opportunities for student growth and development. The Teaching & Learning Centre has a wide range of resources available to help you plan and navigate formative and summative group work with your students! From contemplation to completion and everything in between, visit [The Teaching & Learning Centre](#) website: [Groups](#).

View the [March 2018 issue of the Academic Newsletter](#).

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