Group work

Why use group work? Peer learning can improve the overall quality of student learning. Group work can help develop specific generic skills sought by employers. Group work, if structured well, may reduce the workload involved in assessing, grading and providing feedback to students. The University of Wollongong assessment policy (2002) states that “group work, under proper conditions, encourages peer learning and peer support and many studies validate the efficacy of peer learning”.

Group work does have educational benefits and can allow students to clarify their ideas and concepts through discussion, develop communication skills, and take control of their own learning in a social context. From a pedagogical perspective, tools such as Blogs, Chat, Discussion Boards, Virtual Classroom and Wikis, promote a group or learning community approach by:

- providing opportunities for feedback
- promoting critical and creative thinking
- increasing access to information and connections between sources
- fostering exposure to diverse perspectives
- encouraging connections
- supporting interaction (with peers, Instructors and community)
- promoting active learning

(Duffy & Bruns, 2006; Ferdig & Trammell, 2004; Minocha, 2009)

Strategies for teaching and learning

The following are suggestions on how to utilise some of the collaborative tools in vUWS to encourage and foster group work amongst students.

Blogs

- Use a role play scenario with each group adopting one role; have them write their character profiles individually, then negotiate a single joint profile to be used in the interactive stage of the role play.
- Use Blogs for analytical and reflective documentation to record a group’s creative processes. Students post their thoughts and comments into a Blog and respond to postings of others within the group. In addition to this they can provide references to other resources or readings to substantiate creative ideas or to support their argument allowing other group members to critique and provide comment.
- An Instructor can create a class Blog and post weekly questions or comments to encourage the sharing of ideas and thoughts amongst cohorts. It also allows the Instructor to gauge the level of students understanding of key concepts or theories.
• Give each group of students a very brief narrative of a problem or situation to which they must respond to using a group Blog. They need to develop a team response to the situation, usually within a given time frame e.g. a week. Other groups can then provide comment on the group’s response.

Chat

• Students can sign up to a Study Group or they can be assigned to one by an Instructor. Each student can be allocated a particular question or topic for their “virtual study group”. The chat tool encourages collaborative synchronous communication and the chat logs can then be shared with other student groups in the course to review.
• In groups students can use Chat to brainstorm ideas in regards to an assignment or task. The sharing of ideas in this way can initiate thought processes and aid in the mapping or planning of drafts for the task. It’s a collaborative exercise that can be used as a launch pad to commence a task or assignment.
• Set up a chat room for widely-separated groups working on projects, presentations etc. so that they can communicate real-time with each other. This could help the group make decisions, plan or clarify ideas or issues quickly.

Discussion Boards

• Problem solving: Discussion Boards can be used as a forum for groups to brainstorm or decipher a problem as set by the Instructor. It allows them to assume responsibility for supportive mentoring of one another in order to complete the problem solving exercise as a group.
• Group Assignments: Assign group projects by providing each group with its own Discussion Board forum. Students can collaborate in a Discussion Board and post documents to share amongst the group.
• A role play activity where students contribute to a discussion from the perspective of a particular ‘player’ for example, a community forum about a local environmental issue might include the mayor, developer, local council representative, environmental activist and a concerned citizen.
• Formal debates where students are divided into teams to present opposing viewpoints where some act as either respondents or judges.

Virtual Classroom

• Instructors can share software applications (e.g. Microsoft Word, PowerPoint) or files from their desktop so that students can work together collaboratively on a
This can then lead to “break out” rooms that enable small groups to continue working online on related tasks.

- Have the group use the Chat/Whiteboard to concept map their project - participants can visually link their contributions by drawing out concepts and ideas and linking them to one another graphically, at the same time revealing misconceptions and conflicts in the use of terms.

**Wiki**

- Students work together on a task or problem which culminates in the development of a collective essay or report, e.g., a medical diagnosis, a product review or a legal brief.
- Producing collaborative resources e.g., web site, glossary of terms, annotated bibliography.
- Set up a group Wiki where the group documents their progress on a project. The group could add the minutes of their meetings, agendas, decisions, draft documents etc to their collaborative Wiki. This makes the process more transparent for later debriefing, as well as encouraging contributions by sharing and making them available to their peers.

**Planning for effective group work**

It is important when planning group work projects in vUWS to consider the following points as described by Mandernach (as cited in Bart, 2010).

**Preparation**

- Students understand the value of both the process and product of the collaboration.
- Students may require guidance on how to work as an asynchronous team.
- Group size is small enough to allow for full participation of all members.
- Students may need opportunities for community building prior to group projects.

**Assessment**

- Assessment is an authentic measure of student learning.
- Student learning will benefit from collaborative work.
- Students require clear guidelines of the expected outcome of the collaborative assessment task.
- Assessment creates a structure of positive interdependence in which individuals perceive that they will succeed when the group succeeds.
- Collaborative tasks are scheduled to allow adequate time for preparation and communication.
Assessment tasks are designed in a manner to allow students a level of personal control.

Technology

- Students are provided with tools and instructions to facilitate online communication.
- Each group has a collaborative workspace within the online site.
- Students have technology skills relevant for asynchronous communication.

Evaluation

- Grading and/or evaluation strategies differentiate between the process and the product.
- Strategies are in place to monitor interaction processes.
- Clear grading rubrics are provided at the start of the assignment to guide student work.
- Self and peer evaluations are included in the process to monitor individual involvement and accountability.

Want to know more?

Bart, K. (2010). How to design effective online group work activities. Faculty Focus. Retrieved from, [http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/online-education/how-to-design-effective-online-group-work-activities/](http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/online-education/how-to-design-effective-online-group-work-activities/)


