

## Designing Student Collaborative Projects for Online Courses

Dr. Patricia Delich [pdelich@elearningnetworks.com](mailto:pdelich@elearningnetworks.com)

To address questions I receive about how to design student collaborative projects for online courses, I outline some of my ideas and processes in this article. The perspectives come from my experience participating in online collaborative projects as an online student, online instructor, and instructional designer helping faculty design their collaborative project assignments.

Collaborative group projects, whether online or in-person, can cause students to feel fearful about participating. There are ways to design collaborative projects to help minimize or eliminate these fears. I outline here the most common fears, and provide tips to help alleviate them.

### Common fears

Because many students may not have experience working online in group projects, they may conjure up the worst that could happen before they even begin. Compounding this, students may have had bad in-person collaborations in the past, which may make them hesitant about participating. Prior bad experiences can negatively color how students feel, making them resist the idea of a collaborative project assignment. Low technology skills can add to this fear. Students may fear they will receive a low grade if some group members don't participate. Some may fear they have to do all the work, while others sit back and do nothing. Some may have different expectations about the process, timelines, and quality of work.

### Tips for creating the project

The first time you design a collaborative project assignment for your online course, keep it small and simple. Once you feel more confident in managing group projects in your online course, then add to the assignment. When you feel comfortable, it helps your students feel comfortable. If you create a consistent course design, this can add to their comfort level. Providing a clear structure on timelines, expectations, and deliverables also can help students feel more at ease. Use consistent language in describing projects. Create a rubric for the collaborative assignment and grade on group process, individual contributions, and end product.

Provide **guidelines** for the collaborative process and what is expected for the final product. Be fastidious about using consistent, accurate written language throughout all documents.

Break down the project into **phases** and name each phase. Describe each phase and list deliverables with a timeline. I create both individual and group deliverables. The individual deliverable, which is graded, is a written reflection submitted through a form I create. Students report on what they contributed during certain phases of the project. I ask the following in each reflection:

- Student name and group name
- What student's group accomplished during this phase (from his/her perspective)
- What student contributed/accomplished during this phase
- Student's assessment of the project and process so far (ask student to provide ideas for productive solutions to any problems)

I ask for this reflection early in the project, usually at the end of the first two project phases. The reflections should help you take a pulse on how students feel about their contributions and how the group is operating. Asking for more than two reflections is overkill. These reflections are part of students' individual grades for the group project.

Provide a **timeline** when deliverables are due: small deliverables after each phase instead of one big deliverable at the end. Having small deliverables along the way, you can gauge students' progress and help groups adjust if you detect any problems. Each small deliverable is part of the completed end product.

Use the **Group Manager** Tool in Blackboard to create groups. Private discussions for each group are created automatically when using this tool. Here's how to create groups: Teach Tab --> Instructor Tools --> Group Manager --> Create Groups. For more information on how to use the Group Manager Tool, click the Help link in the upper right corner and search for Group Manager.

Wait until at least the second or third week of the course (or later) to begin collaborative projects. I often wait at least a month into the course. Starting later helps minimize the issue of students dropping out, which impacts group structure. In the weeks prior to the start of the collaborative project, build in activities for students to get to know one another, personally as well as skill-wise. This will help students feel more at ease when projects start.

In each group's private discussion, encourage discussion of content, not just process.

When problems arise, ask students to try working out the issues first as a group before asking you to step in. I don't view group problems as a problem; rather, I see problems as an important part of their learning. Learning to work online in teams is a valuable skill to acquire. Students may not appreciate this assignment during your course, but when they start working at a company and need this skill, what they gained through this assignment will help them.

Create a rubric that conveys standards and essential components of the project. Share the rubric with your students. I have found that by providing a rubric, students relax into the project a little more because they understand what is expected of them.

Here is an idea for one of the first project deliverables: Groups submit a document that provides information about the project they will work on. Because this document should be easy to create as a group, it may give them some confidence in working together. It's designed to help them think through what the project is and who will do what. Here is an example of some of the things I ask in this document:

- Project name (could also serve as the group's name)
- Team members (list names, roles, and responsibilities, and ask them to match specific tasks to team members)

- Project description

I like to provide structure for the projects but have the group come up with what the project will be. This helps promote creativity and create ownership.

### **Creating groups**

Having three or four students per group is ideal. It's a balancing act: You don't want groups to be too large; some students might "hide" and not do any work. If the group is too small, there may not be enough skills in the group to get the project done. I prefer to assign students to groups instead of students deciding this themselves.

While designing this collaborative project assignment, I create a list of the kinds of roles the project needs. I then analyze the skills each student can bring to the project. Because there is often a disparity of technology knowledge and skills among students, you may want to create a list for yourself of who in the class has which skills. I try to spread the skills and technology levels throughout each group. Let me explain this with an example: If three students are expert at creating web pages, I would not place them in one group; I would spread them out among the groups. I also would not place three students with low technology skills all in one group. If you spread out technology skills in each group, students will naturally help and learn from one another.

### **Assessing the project**

Use the rubric you created to assess each project.

Show that process is as important as product by grading both process and product accordingly.

Grade both the individual and the group.

Provide ongoing feedback throughout the project, not just at the end.

Another way to take a pulse on how the groups are doing: regularly check postings in each group's private discussion area.

Provide time at the end of the project for all groups to present their project. I provide a separate rubric for the presentations.

### **This may seem like a lot**

When you're ready to try adding a collaborative project to your course, remember to keep it small and simple the first time you design one. Collaborative projects can be fun and educational for all involved, and can bring a new level of interactivity to your course. I hope you give it a try!