



## Working with Small Groups

### Why Small Groups?

As noted in the topic on the Best Online Instructional Practices Study, students expressed satisfaction with collaborative activities that were well-structured and purposeful. Such collaborative opportunities include the use of small group activities. Given some of the doubts that some faculty still express about the worth of small group activities, let's examine why an instructor might want to use them, how and when they might be used to advantage and finally, how one can ensure that students get the most out of the experience.

### Some Advantages in Small Group Activities

Despite the best efforts faculty might make to encourage participation in whole-class discussions, many students will feel more comfortable participating in a smaller group environment. If you have 20 or more students in a classroom, by breaking your class up into smaller discussion groups, you can provide more opportunity for students to participate. However, remember that interaction does not depend only on you. It can and should also include interaction among classmates. Using small groups can help you manage your workload by ensuring that interaction is not only a matter of instructor-student communication.

Small group activities may also provide your students with opportunities to practice team-building skills, gain leadership and management skills and simulate real-life collaborative situations. When working in online groups, students must negotiate agendas and priorities, choose roles for their group members, manage their workload, and collaborate with each other in solving problems and accomplishing their tasks.

Group projects can end up being the highlight of the course, but it is essential for the instructor to facilitate the process by carefully designing the assignment and providing clear structure and guidelines. It's relatively easy to lay a foundation for students to interact with each other while it's relatively hard for an online student to take charge of this activity. By varying the mix of activities in a class--discussion with the entire class, small group activity, as well as individual work, you can provide students with a more satisfying classroom experience.



## **What Kinds of Activities Can Student Groups Do Online?**

Group activities can range from informal small group discussions to a highly structured project. Depending on the size of groups, students can collaborate on assignments, create projects, conduct brainstorming sessions, discuss readings, work on case studies, critique each other's work, or just about any activity which may be enhanced by an exchange of view among peers, collaboration or debate. For example, in a business class, each group might be asked to research a major corporation, using a specific set of criteria for analysis. They might then be asked to write up a report to present to the entire class. More informally, small groups might be assigned subtopics of a major textbook chapter or various Website resources for discussion, and then summarize the subtopics for presentation to the entire class.

By providing an organized rubric or simply a series of guideline questions for evaluating assigned readings or for actual writing, you can help students establish a framework for judging their own work. This will help your students know how to proceed and they will appreciate this level of guidance.

## **How to Create a Space For Groups in the WebTycho Classroom?**

The Study Groups area in WebTycho will allow you to divide students up so that each group or pair will have its own conference area, collaborative writing area, and chat. The work that each small group produces can then be posted in the main Conferences area for the entire class to read, pose questions, or critique.

## **Strategies for Working with Groups**

### **Provide Motivation**

The key to getting your students to participate in small group discussions and activities is to make these activities an integral part of the course. It's important to let your students know that their group project/exercises will be graded and that their group collaboration/interactions will be counted as part of their grade. There are a variety of strategies you can use to evaluate your students' individual and group performances in their group activities and motivate them to do their share of a collaborative assignment. Examples of effective evaluation strategies for groups include assigning points for participation, peer assessment, self-assessment, and grading rubrics or checklists.



## **Set Expectations**

In the section of your syllabus where you describe your expectations for student participation, clarify that you expect them to participate in both the class level conferences and their private study group conferences.

## **Group Size and Duration**

The ideal size for a group depends on the task students are asked to accomplish. A group formed only for the purposes of discussion can easily accommodate ten students. When the group's task is to collaborate on an assignment, a group of four is probably the upper limit. For online collaboration, any number larger than four risks creating problems of organization and communication that will consume precious time.

Try to maintain the composition of the group for the duration of the course. If your course is 15 weeks long, you can perhaps change the composition once midway through, if the tasks assigned will accommodate this change. Remember that it takes time for groups to develop a working dynamic. Changing the groups just as members are getting familiar with one another means that time must be expended in adjusting to the new team.

## **Choose Teams Carefully**

Depending on the goal of the study group activity, to help ensure that a group will work well together, you might want to assign students to groups based on similar interests, disciplines, etc. as expressed in their self-introductions during the first week of class. Students can also choose their own groups using this same method. However, many online instructors mistakenly underestimate the difficulty and awkwardness involved in students trying to form or join groups on their own in the online classroom. Be aware that when students do the selection, you will have to play a role facilitating the process--for example you may have to help stragglers find a team. One way to minimize the confusion while giving students some measure of choice in forming their groups is to ask them to email you their preferences so you can take them into consideration.



Assigning students who live in the same time zone to work together can be helpful; deadlines are more easily met when the participants live in closely related time zones. In most cases, a difference of a few hours will not have a great impact on the ability of students to get together, but when the time difference is 5 hours or more--say, one person is in New York, another in Tokyo, one in California and one in Ireland--this might make meeting deadlines rather challenging, even if all communication is carried out in the asynchronous conferences. However, at other times even this inconvenience might be overlooked when you seek to deliberately mix students from widely different backgrounds in order to make sure that students incorporate international or inter-regional perspectives into a group project.

Other factors that might be considered in forming a group are that you may want to select both men and women, whenever possible, to form each team. Some students feel uncomfortable when they are the only one of their gender on a particular team. It is also a good idea to mix your most active and quiet students together as well. This tends to make teams more dynamic. However, make sure your most active students have at least one other of the same type in the group or you risk having a situation in which everyone leans on one teammate.

### **Set a Timeline and Sequence**

Since most communications take place asynchronously, teammates will be logging in at different times during a day. That means a simple conversation where consensus needs to be reached could take two days or more. The best thing an instructor can do is to assign group projects with ample time to complete them. Sometimes group projects will need to span multiple weeks or more during your course. Give students a specific timeline for each stage in a sequence of tasks they will have to accomplish together. Students will need clear guidelines as to the number of days they should spend for each step of the group assignments.

### **Provide a Warm-up**

Consider creating a small non-graded "ice-breaker" activity that your students can do in their small groups during the first week of the class. This will help them get accustomed to posting in their Study Group area, so when the time comes for them to do their work, they will know what and where to do it.



## **Create Clearly Defined Tasks with a Schedule**

To ensure the success of the groups, give them a clearly defined task where they will have a deliverable product. Make the project streamlined enough so the group only has to contend with a limited number of tasks to accomplish together. The project should be doable in "chunks," meaning that each team member can be responsible for a part, but then come together and blend those parts into a whole where revision by fellow team members is necessary in order to produce a polished product. Where appropriate, provide tools students can use such as critiquing guidelines in the case of a peer review activity, discussion questions, or links to resources they can use as they work together.

## **Group Roles**

As part of the structure of your small groups, consider requiring students to organize themselves according to specific roles, based on the nature of the assignment. In a discussion group that is asked to reach consensus on some questions, you may simply want to ask someone to volunteer for the role of editor. Asking students to assume roles is an effective method for ensuring true sharing and cooperation. It allows students to choose roles based on their strongest skills.

For example, you might request that each group appoint one member to lead the discussions or allocate portions of the work (an organizer), another to summarize (editor/recorder), and yet another to present the group's conclusions to the rest of the class (presenter). If your course is more than eight weeks in length, consider requesting that these roles be rotated during the duration of the course if more than one group project or activity is assigned. The rotation might give each member a chance at assuming more than one role. However, if such rotations are too frequent, they interfere with the continuity and cohesion of the group.

## **Observe Group Interactions**

Let your students know that although you will not participate in their group discussions, you will be observing and you will be available to chime in if they need help. Request that your students use the Conference area in their private Study Group area for their communications about group projects so you can observe their collaboration. If they want to use email to communicate, they should cc you on all their correspondence so you can see what's going on. A common anxiety voiced by students about small group work is that they may not be recognized for their individual contributions. Knowing that the instructor is observing provides reassurance to these students and also helps motivate everyone else to do their part.



Being able to observe the small group will also allow you to step in when there are personality clashes. Generally speaking, the faculty member should allow students to work out their problems but there are a few situations in which the faculty member needs to intervene. One occurs when students are musing aloud in the conference about the group task and are clearly confused about what to do. At such a point, you might want to post a clarification and then post that clarification in an announcement to the whole class as well. The second situation occurs when students are not making any progress or nearly all are absent from the Study Group area. In this case, the instructor should email the members of the group to try to resolve any obstacles or simply to remind them that this activity is taking place.

Another reason to intervene occurs when you notice that one or more groups are getting off target with their discussions, or that their discussions lack clarity and need some direction. In that situation, you might need to jump in and redirect their conversation or help them get off to a better start. One way to do this is by interjecting some questions that will get students thinking in a more productive direction. If more than one group seems to be having this sort of difficulty, you can simply address the entire class, "Some of you seem a bit confused about the direction this assignment should take..."

Finally, when there is a personality clash severe enough to cause bad feelings, you will need to step in to calm the waters. Occasionally, it is necessary to re-assign a student who has antagonized the rest of the group.

### **Encourage Non-Participants**

Once the groups get underway, email any group members who are not participating and ask them to check in with their group. You can use this opportunity to clarify your instructions so that the student knows what to do.

### **Help Groups Stay on Task**

Do not use groups to the exclusion of class-level discussion or activities. Create a balance in your class so there will be some times when students come together as a whole to participate in discussions in the main class-level conference discussion. Make sure that at least some of the group activities are presented to the entire class for discussion, critique, etc. by all class members. This will get your students interacting on the more global classroom level as well as privately in their small groups. Including a mix of different types of activities keeps an online class lively, accommodates more learning styles and provides a dynamic learning experience for all.



## Assess Individual Participation in Online Group Projects

In the Assessment, Feedback, and Rubrics topic the importance of giving an individual as well as a group grade was emphasized. You may also want to have students assess the performance and contribution of each member of their team, including their own self-evaluations. Give students a rubric or some other clear criteria for rating their teammates. If you ask for student comments, make sure that students explain the rationale behind their evaluations of their teammates.

The following is an example of a very simple rubric for peer evaluation in small groups:

1 = member participated at minimal levels

2 = member's individual work, participation in discussion, organizing, editing or presenting role was significant

3 = member's individual work, participation in discussion or organizational/editing/presenting role greatly influenced for the better the quality of group interaction and product.