

Group Projects in Online Learning

Collaborative learning has many benefits; however, online group work is prone to particular complications. A few students usually fail to uphold their responsibility to their assigned groups, making the learning experience difficult or unproductive for their teammates.

For example, I formerly placed students in groups of three to conduct a peer review of one another's research papers prior to the final due date. They were instructed to exchange email addresses, send each other their drafts, create an annotated copy of the papers using the review tools in Microsoft Word, and then return the edited papers to their original authors. Several of the students contacted me repeatedly to report that one or more of the members of the group had not responded to their email, had failed to edit their papers, or were causing problems in some other way. I took steps to intervene on their behalf, also attempting to contact the silent students, but to no avail.

Of course, the students who had abstained from participation earned a zero for the assignment, but it was clearly unfair to penalize the students who had been ignored by their peers. I asked these students to take screenshots of the messages they'd sent and gave them credit for the activity even though they had neither been able to edit their peer's paper nor have their paper edited in return.

This type of problem crops up often enough that I try to provide alternatives for students who find group work to be frustrating. For example, in the on campus version of *Design Thinking for Entrepreneurs*, students work in groups to complete the course project but they have the option of working alone if they so choose. In the online version of the course, however, the opposite is true: students complete the project individually but have the voluntary option to work with a group. Students who choose to work together must sign a participation contract that clearly outlines the expectations and helps hold them accountable.

Group projects and collaborative learning are worthwhile, even in an asynchronous online environment. Our ability to anticipate potential roadblocks and plan to circumnavigate them when needed goes a long way towards facilitating our students' success.