

COLLABORATION

Building Community in Online Classes through Group Work

By Roxann Humbert, EdD

Students' sense of isolation is often cited as one of the reasons for low retention rates in online classes. One way to combat this is to build group work into your online class. When built properly, group projects will also require students to use higher-level critical-thinking and problem-solving skills.

Creating the groups

Deciding on how to group the students can be very important to the groups' success. Students may be randomly assigned to groups or assigned based upon their interests, their skill levels, their learning style, or their participation levels.

Assigning students to groups based on a common interest is a great way to have students tackle controversial issues. To group students with common interests the instructor could provide a list of topics and have the students sign up electronically or through email for the topic they wish to discuss. To encourage critical thinking, assign students to take the opposite position on the topic.

Giving students a technology skills assessment and grouping them by similar skills for group work is a great way to lessen the intimidation many students feel when their skill level isn't as high as that of their classmates. On the other hand, if the group were to develop some sort of technology-rich product as part of the group work, e.g., a web page or brochure, grouping students with a range of technical abilities would make for a more successful group project.

Grouping students by learning style is a great way of giving students the opportunity to develop

projects that best fit specific styles. In a nutrition class the instructor could have a group of kinesthetic learners develop a Web page on one of the vitamins, have a group of auditory students develop and record a jingle about one of the vitamins, and have a third group of visual learners write a paper or create a flyer for one of the vitamins.

In addition to these methods of creating groups, instructors can use data provided by their learning management system (LMS) to group students. Most LMS packages track student participation. Assigning students who participate early and often to the same section can circumvent the problem of random groupings that result in one or two group members doing all the work.

Developing group projects

The following are three group projects used in an educational technology class to encourage community building.

Group Project 1: Online Discussion

As a future teacher it is important that you become familiar with key issues affecting technology in public schools. Using the discussion guidelines, tips, and rubric, accomplish the following:

1. Locate the topic that has been assigned to you.
 - a. Do schools need more computers or more teachers? **John, Maria**
 - b. Is technology further widening the gap between rich and poor? **William, Julie**
 - c. Is technology further

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widening the gap between males and females?

Jessica, Scott

d. Should technology resources be focused on basic skills or higher-level thinking?

Shannon, Pat

2. Decide if you agree or disagree with the statement.
3. Locate two web sources that support your position.
4. Write a brief essay (approximately 200 to 400 words) expressing your point of view.
5. Identify, by quote, the point or points from the Web resources that support your position and elaborate on your point of view.
6. Go to the discussion board and select the Assignment 2: Discussion Questions topic.
7. Please put your name, the letter of your topic, and a brief description in the subject line of your message, e.g., Julie's Topic B: Rich or Poor.
8. List the hyperlinks for the two websites you found.
9. Write out the topic question before you write your answer in your posting. This will help us focus on the content and keep things in order. **(This is due by April 21.)**
10. Reply to at least three other students' postings, one for your assigned topic and one for each of two other topics. For instance, John will respond to Maria's posting and to one person in topic c and one in topic d. Review the responses of your fellow classmates. Ask questions to clarify any of the information that you don't understand. Post your comments, questions, and reactions as appropriate.

Group Project 2: Group Justification

For this assignment you will become the expert on a computer input or output device, develop criteria for selecting a computer

input or output device, and write a justification to your school board for purchasing this device. Use the device assigned to you:

- Scanner—Richard
- Graphics Tablet—Joyce
- Digital Camera—Victoria

Part 1: Locate two Internet

sources of reviews for your device.

Part 2: Develop at least a 12-item rating instrument to evaluate your device.

Part 3: Use your instrument to evaluate two brands/models of your device. Record your results in an Excel spreadsheet.

Part 4: Write a two-paragraph justification to your school board for purchasing the device. Post your spreadsheet and justification to the Input/Output Device forum.

Part 5: Select the justification for the classmate listed below you and decide whether or not you would allow them to purchase the device and why. Post your response as a reply to their original posting in the Input/Output Device forum.

Group Project 3: Paired Groups

For this assignment I have divided the class into pairs.

Group 1: Richard, Jessica

Group 2: Michelle, Victoria

You will be working as a group to develop a checklist to conduct a technology inventory for a public school. Your instrument should contain the following parts:

- Part 1: Identification information, e.g., date of assessment, school name, etc.
- Part 2: Computer hardware information, i.e., number and types of computers found in the school.
- Part 3: Local Area Networks (LANs) installed in school, i.e., type and location of networks.
- Part 4: Network elements currently used, e.g., wireless, Ethernet, etc.
- Part 5: School- and countywide servers, e.g., file servers, web servers, mail servers, etc.

- Part 6: Operating systems, e.g., MacOS, MS-DOS, Windows, etc.
- Part 7: Connectivity technologies and sources, e.g., modems, T1 lines, ATMs, cable, etc.

1. You are welcome to contact each other using whatever means you feel most comfortable with, but doing the project fully online will be more meaningful and fun for you. I have set up a private discussion topic—one for each pair. Your group also has a chat area.
2. I have access to your private group discussions so I can monitor your collaborative group efforts. I will not participate in your groups' discussions unless you specifically ask for my help.
3. As a group, decide on the technology you will use to develop your checklist.
4. Post your group's collective assignment to the technology inventory discussion board on or before the date scheduled on the course calendar for review by other class members.
5. You will use your group's private discussion forum to communicate with each other.
6. The collaborative group project rubric will be used to evaluate the first 80 points of this assignment.
7. Evaluate the effectiveness of your group. There is a maximum of 20 points for this part of the assignment, and each member of your group will receive a possible 15 out of the assigned points for submitting the group project critique. The remaining five points evaluate your individual contributions to the group project. The last question in the review asks you to highlight your contributions to the group project.

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