

# GROUP WORK ONLINE

## MAKING IT WORK FOR STUDENTS

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### 1. Introduction

Group Work is fundamental to online learning. It contributes to building a learning community in your classroom, allows students to interact in ways that increase their learning, and enhances their psychological well-being.

Yet recent feedback shows that students view Group Work as time consuming, full of conflict, imposing unwanted burdens on conscientious students, and permitting disengaged students to do little or no work. Once in their Channels or Breakout Rooms, students tell us that many “groups” simply parcel the work out and do it independently, rather than truly collaborate in a group. Some students turn off their cameras and disappear. Because of previous bad experiences in Group Work, one student rep at JAC recently said she had PTSD.<sup>1</sup>

### 2. Building a Learning Community

Before the discussion, it’s a good idea to attempt to ease students into community formation in some way. Play a game (see the Icebreaker video URL at the end of this handout) or do an exercise that fosters trust – if the classroom feels like a safe place, Group Work will go more smoothly. Teenage students aren’t confident risk-takers, yet risk-taking is a big part of the educational experience. If you can get them comfortable with seeming silly, taking chances, and moving “outside the box,” their learning will benefit.


Taking time away from content allows you to set students up for success. Modelling what it looks like to be a learner that can take risks and go outside your comfort zone is even more important online than in the traditional classroom.

### 3. Group Work is a Skill that Must be and Can Be Learned

Students tend to think they know everything about Group Work already, hence the PTSD comment. Yet, according to feedback received about their online classes, many students do not know how to make Group Work function well. They tend to take a passive stance in

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<sup>1</sup> All feedback from the SSC Student Feedback Forum, January 2021, or from committee meeting follow-up.



regard to group disfunction, rather than actively setting up group norms and procedures that will foster success. In most cases, we will have to sell them on the idea that these Group Work skills will be prime requirements for their success in life, as well as in your class. Changing the idea that Group Work is something that happens to students into the idea that Group Work is something that students can make happen is not a quick or easy task. It takes time, constant repetition, and practice.

#### **4. Teach and Re-Teach How to Make Group Work Function for Students**

Even though most students have experienced Group Work in Elementary and High School, all students will benefit from:

1. a discussion (or discussions) of Group Work
2. a lesson (or lessons) about how to make Group Work “work” for them
3. clear directions concerning all tasks they must accomplish within the group
4. an explicit list of what we want from them (i.e., the behavior, knowledge, and outcomes) in Group Work
5. understanding how their work in groups will help them acquire course competencies


Content is central to our preoccupation as teachers. We have so much content to deliver that we are often reluctant to set aside synchronous class time to teach Group Work. Belinda and Genevieve, amongst many other colleagues, are convinced of the value of spending sync time (videoconference time) carefully educating their students to work productively in groups: This is an invaluable transferable skill in any job and at university as well and getting it right will set students up for future success.

#### **6. Ideas for Discussing/Teaching Group Work**

- In Breakout Rooms or Channels, allow groups of students to share their experiences of group work.
  - What worked, what didn’t work.
  - Best experiences, worst experiences.
  - Their ideas on how to make the group function well.
- Consider giving students a “personality inventory.”<sup>2</sup> This lets the students get to know one another, gets the conversational ball rolling, and sets up the personal reflection

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<sup>2</sup> Belinda gives her students a business-oriented personality inventory (she teaches in GWD, a Career Program) and Genevieve (a French teacher) gives her students a custom-made form to fill in, indicating students’ strengths (example: I’m a good reader, I’m detail-oriented, I hate Group Work...) that correspond to a role within the team.



and introspection that students need to learn in order to become effective college students.

- Bring the students back into the General Channel to allow a large-group discussion of Group Work that you can moderate and add to.
  - Reporting back can be done by asking one member of each team to report, getting the team to co-write a paragraph or a one-slide PowerPoint about their findings.
  - You can ask groups to respond to structured questions instead (sometimes more efficient and less boring). Student feedback tells us this works best when the questions are open-ended (don't require a Yes or No answer).
  - Some teachers write their own list of "Group Work Best Practices" gleaned from the discussion and share it with the students.
  - Emphasize your reasons for group work, so that students understand it means much more to you (and them) than "busy work".
- Career Program students appreciate it when Group Work is closely and directly linked to the experiences they will have on stage and on-the-job.

## 7. Setting Up the Groups

Everyone has their own favourite way of setting up groups. For example:

- Belinda often uses a Randomizer app that assigns students to groups automatically. She can tweak the groups afterwards.
- Susan used to have students count off from 1 to 5 in a class of 25, creating 5 groups of 5 students each.
- Some teachers ask students to send them an MIO giving the name of a student they'd like to be in a team with, to build their confidence and comfort level.
- Other teachers build their teams strategically, like Genevieve. She points out that gender, ability level, specific skills, maturity, etc. can govern your choice of team members.
- Some teachers vary their groups each time. This is a good way for students to get to know each other and, hopefully, make friends or study partners.
- Other teachers keep the same groups for a long time, to let deep relationships develop amongst students and also allow for students to use their Group Work skills to hone their team into a smoothly-running learning machine.
- Both Belinda and Genevieve assign roles within each team. The team leader is responsible for regular check-ins, and all other team members have distinct roles and responsibilities.

## 8. Group Homework: Pros and Cons

A common criticism of group work during the pandemic is that it takes far longer than individual work. In general, it is recommended that most (or all) of the group work takes place within the hours regularly scheduled for your course. Given that students must work together on Teams, and not at their local coffee shop or in the JAC library, it can be extremely difficult to arrange for a common time to meet for Group Work outside your course's regular hours.

Susan notes that, particularly during Covid, the third number in your course *ponderation* should be taken as a mild suggestion only. Given that many programs have their students in class for almost 35 hours per week, it makes sense to severely limit the amount of work that has to be done as homework, outside the first two numbers in the *ponderation*.

During FOST sessions, some teachers have noted that it works well when their students are given Group Work during the asynchronous hours of their course. One teacher pointed out that her students ask her to remain available in the "General" team on Teams, while the students work "privately" in their channels or breakout rooms. This allows the students to goof around, while knowing that the teacher is easily accessible for advice when required. Too much goofing around, of course, means that the tasks must be completed as homework (involving much logistical arranging and extra effort by the students themselves). It's great to have an incentive to offer the students that stay on task.

## 9. Specific Group Work Skills to Teach Your Students

The following incomplete list describes common sources of discontent within a group. You may possibly wish to ask students to role-play some of these situations, or discuss them within their breakout groups and report back. As a young teacher, Susan gradually became aware of "group dynamics" for the first time, as she observed her student groups functioning (or not functioning). There is a lot of information online about group dynamics and a lot of suggestions as to how to resolve these situations.

- How to get non-participants to do something useful.
- How to get shy people to speak out and contribute.
- How to deal with someone who dominates the discussion.
- How to increase the chances that all group members will contribute.
- How to divide up tasks and assign them.
- How to make sure stereotypical gender roles and other prejudices are not undermining successful group work.
- How to reach consensus.
- How to explain your ideas to others.

- How to listen and evaluate the ideas of others.
- How to delegate responsibilities.
- How to defuse conflict situations.

## **10. What If a Student Wants to Opt Out of Group Work?**

Genevieve’s experience with Group Work has shown her that she must express total commitment to Group Work, and not permit any student to opt out and do the work on their own. The more unsureness you show about your commitment, the less buy-in and engagement you will get from students. If you let one student back out of Group Work, the others will lose trust and develop resentment.

Other teachers are less committed to the Group Work model. They are more flexible in permitting students to work on their own. The choice is up to you – and it depends on a variety of factors, including your teaching area and the type of course you are teaching.

## **11. Tasks and Techniques that Can Work Well in Groups**

Some of the learning tasks and teaching techniques that you might want to experiment with are the following:

- Jigsaw: A cooperative learning strategy that assigns each group (or individual in a group) to become responsible for a small part of a larger topic, report on it, and teach their section of the larger topic to the class.
- Ask a (contentious) open-ended question, and ask the group to come to consensus.
- Ask a (contentious) question and ask for a list of Pros and Cons
- Pair students in a language class and ask them to make up a skit in the target language and video it or perform it for the class.
- Give part of the mark for individual accountability. Students have a difficult time with “one group, one mark for all”.
- Some teachers are very comfortable with competition, and assign tasks that pit one group against another.
- You might want to try a “team contract”

As you know, “best practices” are not cookbook recipes with guaranteed success as a result. Nevertheless, we hope that this handout gives you some ideas to experiment with. To extend the foodie analogy, as the saying goes, “The proof of the pudding is in the eating” and your

FOST team is keen to hear how your Group Work is going!

**Contact us at [FOST@johnabbott.qc.ca](mailto:FOST@johnabbott.qc.ca).**

## Useful Links

<https://web.microsoftstream.com/video/56591ab7-d081-4e1a-9c0a-a5f5a690d9b0>

FOST Group Work Video

<https://web.microsoftstream.com/video/90afd967-72ed-4ba5-80f9-04ea98d97842>

FOST Icebreaker Games Video

[The Journal on Excellence in College Teaching \(miamioh.edu\)](http://www.miamioh.edu)

Interesting articles

<https://uwaterloo.ca/centre-for-teaching-excellence/teaching-resources/teaching-tips/alternatives-lecturing/group-work/implementing-group-work-classroom>

Advice from University of Waterloo; many different strategies

[The Jigsaw Method Teaching Strategy - TeachHUB](http://www.teachhub.com)

Jigsaw Method

[Group Project Tools - Eberly Center - Carnegie Mellon University \(cmu.edu\)](http://www.eberlycenter.org)

Includes a sample team contract and a lot of other useful forms for students involved in Group Work.

<https://iubmb.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/bmb.20511>

Recommended by Genevieve