

# ONLINE DESIGN COLLABORATIVE ONLINE LEARNING

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Collaborative online learning is usually called “online teams” or “online groups.” myCourses [Groups](#) and [Discussions](#) tools, along with web-conferencing tools like [Adobe Connect](#), enable instructors to create student groups that can collaborate easily online, and help eliminate logistical problems associated with face-to-face group meetings.

By encouraging students to use these online collaboration tools, you can monitor their progress and intervene, if needed, so you won't be surprised at the end of the project when students suggest that some members weren't cooperative, didn't contribute, or that the project went off-track.

## Strategies for Effective Online Collaboration

### BUILD STRONG GROUP INTERDEPENDENCE

One design goal for any online group activity should be to build strong group interdependence. For example, offer bonus points to a group if all members score above a certain grade on an assignment, test, or paper. This can motivate better-prepared students to help and encourage members who may not meet the goal—and the less-prepared students are likely to work harder so they don't disappoint the group.

### KEEP GROUPS SMALL

Group members need to interact frequently; a good guideline is three to five members.

### ESTABLISH PEER EVALUATION

Peer evaluation helps to build team skills because it lets students reflect on their process and outcomes, and provides instructors with continuous feedback. Faculty can use RIT's [PeerEval](#) not just at the end of a project, but also 25 to 30 percent into the process, when students can learn from the feedback and make adjustments. Ask:

- Did all members of the group contribute?
- What could be done next time to make the group function better?
- What were the most important things I learned?
- What contributions did I make?

### FORM DIVERSE GROUPS

Deliberately mixing students—based on achievement level, gender, ethnicity, academic interests, learning styles, or other relevant factors—typically enables students to work constructively with others who bring different strengths and approaches to their learning tasks.

## GIVE TEAMS TIME

Keep teams together long enough to do needed team building and create a meaningful product; this may take several weeks. Establish a way to differentiate individual work, by monitoring discussions, establishing milestone "meetings" in Adobe Connect, or requiring progress reports.

Grading should include a mechanism for individual as well as group effort.

## MAKE THE IMPORTANT WORK VISIBLE

Reserve the myCourses discussion area for posting substantial work and ask students to use email for "housekeeping" details, such as chat times. This keeps the discussion substantive, makes it easier for members to locate work, and for you to evaluate the work.

## GIVE STUDENTS CONTROL

Students who say that they do not like collaborative projects may have had a bad experience on a team. Make collaborative work more attractive by giving students more control over process and outcomes. For example, allow students to select their group assignment or projects from an array of potential topics.

## SCHEDULE MEANINGFUL IN-PROCESS DATES

Provide a timeline for with milestone completion dates for meaningful deliverables.

## MAKE THE LEARNING PERSONALLY RELEVANT

Allow students to relate and apply coursework to their needs, interests, and workplace or life experience. Direct and immediate application of course concepts is motivating and enhances the learning.

## GIVE STUDENTS FEEDBACK ON THEIR CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE GROUP

Students expect timely and direct feedback, but not always publicly. Messages explaining or facilitating engagement with course content can go into to the course discussion, but send messages with either individual praise or pointers for improvement privately via email or in the comments area in myCourses Grades.

## Assessing Online Groups

Group work can be assessed as:

- a single entity
- a combination of individual and group achievement, or
- as individual achievement within the group

Your grading scheme must be clear to students, who are sensitive to receiving a lower grade than they feel they earned on a group project. Team evaluation can include both:

- how well the group worked together to produce the product
- the quality of the product or output

## ASSESSING THE GROUP AS A TEAM

When the group is assessed as a team, members can bond more closely and, where bonding and interactivity occur, the social context improves the quality of the learning experience. However, you need to prepare for the situation of the non-contributor who may reduce the team's motivation.

Give groups a mechanism to manage this problem. In the most extreme circumstance, allow the group to elect to work without the non-contributor, and arrange alternate work or a withdrawal for that student. To avoid such situations, keep the tone positive and ensure that everyone understands expectations.

#### **ASSESSING THE GROUP AS A TEAM AND AS INDIVIDUALS**

Give separate grades, weighted appropriately, to individual work and to work within the team. This way, the grade for team that produces a quality product, despite a non-contributor, will not be reduced. Only the non-contributor receives a lower grade.

#### **ASSESSING INDIVIDUALS WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THE GROUP**

You can set expectations for group performance, but assess students separately based on individual contributions to team projects, as well as the ability of members to work together effectively as a team.