Group Work Online: A Guide for Students

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BGSU Learning Community: GuideWIRE

Working in groups online can be challenging. However, as new technologies and continuously interconnected world is changing traditional work sphere, it is very likely that after graduating from college you will find yourself working with other people who are not necessarily in the same office space and they can even be in different part of the world.

Thus, it is important for you to develop skills to be able to communicate with other people via distance using different communication tools such as teleconferencing, file sharing, e-mail, calendars, and many other tools.
Here are some tips for you to consider if you find yourself working on a group project online

1. **Get to know each other.** Spend some time to get to know your group members. Learn something personal about each group member: their hobbies, their major, their schedule, perhaps some of your group members have jobs and family commitments that are good to know about when working in groups. The more you know about each person the more connected you will feel with each other even if you never meet face to face.

2. **Consider virtual meeting.** You may want to consider setting up a teleconference. Do this early in the group process so that you can chat informally before starting on actual group work.
   a. Canvas Conferences [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tnk_PVHkKZk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tnk_PVHkKZk). Please refer to Canvas Student Guides to learn more about using and setting up Conferences on Canvas [http://guides.instructure.com/m/4212/l/119674-what-are-conferences-in-my-course](http://guides.instructure.com/m/4212/l/119674-what-are-conferences-in-my-course)

3. **Share attitudes about group work.** Ask group members to share their experiences on working in groups. This will help you gauge if some group members have a negative attitude towards group work because of the past experiences were negative. Consider discussing these negative experiences and discuss ways your group can avoid these. Look for positive experience and try to implement these in your group process.

4. **Establish communication norms.** Establish rules and expectations about how your group is going to connect and work together:
   a. How are going to communicate? BGSU e-mail, outside e-mail, phone messages, facebook messages.
   b. What are the expectations to respond? 24 hours? 48 hours? A week? Keep in mind that some group members could be on different time zones and they may have schedule constrains such as not available to connect on weekends or working late at night or similar constrains.
   c. Are you going to be using Canvas area designated for the group work space? If so, what are the expectations of logging in to Canvas course shell? Daily? Weekly?
   d. Are you going to be using teleconferencing tools such as skype or Canvas conferences? They can be great tools to utilize for your group work.
   e. If you group needs to produce a written report or a joint presentation, are you going to set up a file sharing space like google doc or are you going to use BGSU’s tools like OneDrive? Perhaps you wish to explore Collaborations tools available in your Canvas course shell [http://guides.instructure.com/m/4212/l/119674-what-are-conferences-in-my-course](http://guides.instructure.com/m/4212/l/119674-what-are-conferences-in-my-course). Here you have a choice to connect directly to Google Docs or use another, similar collaboration tool called EtherPad. EtherPad has a neat feature where each
collaborator’s contributions can be tracked down, so if you need to show individual contributions for your group process, this could be a great tool for your group.

Invite people to collaborate
5. **Designate group roles.** Consider assigning group roles: leader, time/deadline keeper, information gatherer, clarifier, editor, etc. This will make sure that each group member is accountable as. Also, each member may have strengths and weaknesses. Do not assign the role of keeping the project on track to a person who is an admitted procrastinator.

6. **Rules on work process.** Establish guidelines for work process and ethics.
   a. These can include topics such as decision making. That is, how are you going to make decisions- consensus, majority rule, leader authority?
   b. Discuss the timelines for completing your work, discuss rules for what happens if a group member misses to contribute work by a set deadline. For example, can you remover nonparticipating group members from your group? Consult your syllabus and instructor about that so that you could be clear about the group’s ability to set accountability by each group member.

7. **Get feedback.** Set up a way for group members to share their concerns and suggestions related to group process. This could be a quick chat after you receive feedback from your instructor or a regular rule to ask the group members if they have any concerns about the upcoming group work. You can also use a number of self assessment tools. They can be anonymous and you can use that in your group discussion, especially, if the group senses that there are issues emerging with the group work. Sample group process assessment [https://www.cmu.edu/teaching/designteach/design/instructionalstrategies/groupprojects/tools/GroupEvaluations/GroupProcess-Assessment.docx](https://www.cmu.edu/teaching/designteach/design/instructionalstrategies/groupprojects/tools/GroupEvaluations/GroupProcess-Assessment.docx). See more at “Sample group project tools” [https://www.cmu.edu/teaching/designteach/design/instructionalstrategies/groupprojects/tools/index.html](https://www.cmu.edu/teaching/designteach/design/instructionalstrategies/groupprojects/tools/index.html)
8. **Be ready for trouble.** Consider knowing how to deal with common group problems:
   a. Indecision. The group cannot commit to a topic or is experiencing uncertainty. A good way to address this would be to reiterate what the group is expected to accomplish, you may want to assign group members to see clarification from instructor. Take a moment to get everyone’s suggestions on how the group should proceed.
   b. Dominating or reluctant participants. A good way to avoid this is to set up a norm of participation from everyone early on. Assign group members who would specifically invite non-participating members to contribute to your discussion. The same person can be asking those who have a tendency to always “speak” first to ask them to wait for other contributions.
   c. Digressions and tangents. It is a good idea to prepare an agenda for your meetings. This way you will stay on target.
   d. Getting stuck. If you feel like you are lost and not sure where to go, consider going back to the assignment description and reviewing your assignment goals. You can also contact your course instructor asking for more guidance and feedback on your ideas.
   e. Rush to work. This is common problem if a group starts work late. Consider exploring all options and hearing from all group members before committing to a specific way of going about your assignment.
   f. Conflict. Conflict may arise for many reasons. It can be conflict about the content of the project or conflict about member behavior or conflict about lack of participation. Ideally, you have set up group norms and expectations to preempt some of these issues. However, if conflict does occur you need to address it in a professional and productive manner. Do not wait until the last minute of the project to raise issues.

9. **Sign a contract.** Before jumping into work and after establishing group norms, consider signing a group contract. The contract will help you resolve some of the anticipated group problems. Here links to sample group contracts:
   a. Sample team contract
      [https://www.cmu.edu/teaching/designteach/design/instructionalstrategies/groupprojects/tools/TeamContracts/TeamContract.docx](https://www.cmu.edu/teaching/designteach/design/instructionalstrategies/groupprojects/tools/TeamContracts/TeamContract.docx)
   b. Team contract template
      [https://www.cmu.edu/teaching/designteach/design/instructionalstrategies/groupprojects/tools/TeamContracts/teamcontracttemplate.docx](https://www.cmu.edu/teaching/designteach/design/instructionalstrategies/groupprojects/tools/TeamContracts/teamcontracttemplate.docx)

10. **Complete the work.** No matter what difficulties arise in the group process, you still have to complete the work assigned to the group. If you have non-participating group members, ask your instructor if you have an ability to remove the group member from your group but also be prepared to cover the work this person was assigned. Just like in a real work, emergencies will happen, different people will have different priorities, and it is a responsibility of all group members to make sure that classroom assignments are completed. This is why it is so important for the group to set the norms, designate roles and establish deadlines. When utilized effectively, these tips will help your group to detect issues early and correct them before the work has to be submitted to your instructor.