

Group Projects for Active Learning

Tips for Planning, Clarity, and Engagement

Purpose: Group projects offer rich opportunities for collaborative learning, problem-solving, and real-world skill-building. But it is important to design your project thoughtfully; we have all experienced poorly conceived group work that led to frustration and unimpressive results. How can you set your students up for a successful and meaningful group experience?

Below are key strategies for designing group projects that foster participation, accountability, and learning:

Steps for Implementation

1. Clearly Define the Purpose and Outcomes

Students engage more deeply when they understand why group work matters.

- a. Align the project with course goals. What skills or knowledge will group work help develop?
- b. Frame the task as a real-world challenge. Make it a case study, campaign, proposal, or whatever is relevant to your course, to increase relevance.
- c. Communicate expected learning outcomes explicitly at the outset.

2. Design for True Collaboration

The most effective group projects require input from all members and can't be divided into isolated "chunks."

- a. Structure projects so that collaboration is necessary (e.g., brainstorming, integrating multiple perspectives, peer editing, joint presentations).
- b. Avoid assignments that can be easily split up and completed independently.

- c. Include milestones or checkpoints that require team interaction and collective decision-making.

3. Set Clear Roles and Expectations

Ambiguity around roles leads to uneven participation.

- a. Provide or help students develop suggested team roles (facilitator, recorder, researcher, editor, etc.).
- b. Encourage students to rotate roles if the project is long-term.
- c. Offer a contract template or checklist for teams to outline who is responsible for what.

4. Scaffold the Project With Process Checkpoints

Ongoing structure helps groups stay on track and allows you to catch issues early.

- a. Break the project into phases or deliverables (e.g., proposal, outline, draft, final product).
- b. Build in opportunities for groups to check in with you and receive formative feedback.
- c. Require brief progress reports, group reflection logs, or peer assessments at key moments.

5. Plan for Accountability and Fair Assessment

Make participation and learning visible both for individuals and the group as a whole.

- a. Use a combination of group and individual grading models (see our [Grading Group Projects] resource).
- b. Incorporate peer and self-assessment where possible, using clear rubrics.
- c. Clarify how process (teamwork, effort, communication) and product (final outcome) will be evaluated.

6. Foster Group Cohesion and Communication

Good group work often depends on positive group dynamics.

- a. Set expectations (or better yet, require the team to set expectations) on effective team communication, conflict resolution, and decision-making.
- b. Provide sample communication tools (shared docs, chat platforms, project management boards).
- c. Clarity around grading will also help with group cohesion by minimizing resentment.

Instructor Planning Guide

1. **Project Purpose:** What is the purpose of the group project? How does it align with your course goals or intended learning outcomes?
2. **Collaborative Design:** Is the project structured to require meaningful collaboration, not just division of tasks?
3. **Team Roles:** What roles will students take on? Will you assign roles or let students choose and rotate them?
4. **Process Checkpoints:** What milestones or deliverables will help guide students through the project?
5. **Assessment Approach:** How will you assess both individual and group contributions? Will you include peer/self-assessments?
6. **Group Communication:** What structures or tools will support effective communication, cohesion, and conflict resolution?
7. **Monitoring and Feedback:** How will you track progress and provide formative feedback throughout the project?

Instructor Checklist

- ☐ I've defined the purpose of the group project and aligned it with course outcomes.
- ☐ I've structured the project to require meaningful collaboration not isolated contributions.
- ☐ I've provided or supported the development of team roles to promote balanced participation.
- ☐ I've built in process checkpoints, including progress reports or intermediate deliverables.
- ☐ I've clarified assessment criteria for both group work and individual contributions.
- ☐ I've offered tools or templates to support team communication and conflict resolution.
- ☐ I've planned for regular check-ins and opportunities to give formative feedback.

Resource: [Groupwork](#) (Harvard Office of the Vice Provost for Advances in Learning)