

Teamwork in an online environment

Advantages

Learning to solve problems collaboratively, to analyse data and present solutions to peers, and to work collaboratively is a crucial skill sought by employers.

Distance students can be encouraged to work independently and collaboratively in a web-based learning environment.

Research strongly supports the advantages of cooperative learning over competitive individualised learning across a range of contexts (McLoughlin 2001). The dialogue and interaction scaffold cognitive change and understanding is greater compared with learners working independently. Online communication technology allows students to share information, divide a task and assign sub-tasks and combine parts for a joint product. Teamwork can be taught in a progressive way building to complex tasks.

Steps

1. Provide your rationale for use of teamwork and explain its alignment with the unit aims. Provide instruction in skills that you expect students to learn as part of the team activity. Teams don't just happen. Instruction about team skills can be provided by:
 - Guest lecturer
 - Videos of teams in action
 - Case studies
 - Guidelines about team effectiveness, learning style, communication styles conflict resolution etc in line with the particular skills you want to encourage. There are many instruments available to allow students to determine their own styles, which can inform their interaction in the task ahead.
 - Role play with students assuming a role in a given team scenario.
2. Define the activity. Are there some likely scenarios from work environments that could be used to stimulate ideas for tasks? Could professionals in your field act as clients with an authentic team project? All members should be involved and motivation for everyone to carry out an equal share of the work is critical, so choose a task that can be divided into the appropriate number of sub-tasks. Give guidance on procedures (i.e. team skills such as division of labour, roles, timeline, group interaction, monitoring progress). Ensure students are clear about the format and content of the final product and the marking scheme. Allow a question and answer session so that students can voice their concerns about teamwork at the beginning.
3. Provide a simple non-threatening task (similar to the icebreakers used in face to face groups) for the first task of the newly formed group. An example might be to introduce themselves and then to develop a set of rules of operation or a team charter (a pro forma is provided later in this book which includes instructions for students). Online chat is a good tool for this initial exercise. The teams can submit their rules for a group grade. This could be re-submitted at the end of the team task with additions as a 'lessons learned' reflective task for individual marking. Several examples of self-reflection or evaluation sheets to determine the team's effectiveness are provided at the end of this resource book. Reflection is an invaluable tool for students to understand and demonstrate what they have learnt about working in a team.
4. Allocate students to teams to save time in the online environment. The length of semester doesn't allow for performance issues of individual members to be dealt with quickly in an asynchronous environment, therefore set down explicit rules at the start, and have a

contingency plan for members of dysfunctional teams. Encourage students to contact you early if there are problems rather than waiting until submission deadlines.

5. A group mark combined with a grade for individual work and participation in team activities is the best assessment option. Base the participation grade on the quality of participation required, taking into account excessive input, and allowing for a right of appeal. Peer assessment for portions of the activity is very effective in large class situations providing the criteria are clear.

Elements of success

- have an odd number of team members
- ensure students have an opportunity to develop a sense of group (This is the most important element for success in the online medium.)
- ensure students are familiar with all aspects of the technology
- nominate a team coordinator at the start
- allow team coordinators to make decisions unless overruled by majority
- give every team member the same grade for the final product to encourage collaboration and mutual accountability
- ensure the workload is manageable for the objectives of the activity
- stagger the submission of tasks so that everything is not due at the end of semester as this will help teams keep on track
- include a reflective element on team processes
- provide novices, with well-structured tasks.

Possible online activities for teamwork skills (and other skills) development

- introductions (familiarisation and building of learning community or sense of group)
- brainstorming rules for team work
- reading summaries
- 'work in progress' submissions
- literature reviews (research skills)
- quick polls of relevant 'debates' in your field
- group debates (communication skills)
- students creating questions from the class material
- 'fieldwork' assignments including case studies
- short research projects
- project definitions
- proposal writing
- peer review (critical evaluation)
- role play (attitudes)
- critical reflection questions (application of knowledge and meta cognition)
- provision of personal examples of concepts (reinforcement, contextualising)
- problem based learning

What learning objectives can be achieved in online interaction groups?

- Usage and application of terminology
- Foster reflective practice
- Develop skills in debate and discussion, develop and sustain an argument
- Develop written communication skills
- Foster collaborative teamwork
- Application of theory to practice through student submitted examples
- Critical analysis of peer research papers
- Develop research skills through team research projects

- Develop problem solving skills