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| **[Five Steps to Improving Online Group Work Assignments](http://ww1.facultyfocus.com/out/?ET=facultyfocus:e262:166954a:&st=email&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.facultyfocus.com%2Farticles%2Fonline-education%2Ffive-steps-to-improving-online-group-work-assignments%2F)** |

By Gregory Wells

Online Group Projects – Yikes! You can hear the moans and groans of students echoing through your computer monitors as you start the first week of your online course. The reasons for requiring a group project vary from one discipline to another, but there are educational and career motives for requiring group projects. Students will have an opportunity to develop team skills, improve communication skills, and leverage their own personal interests and experiences to contribute to a group project.   
  
The skills learned by participating in a group project are applicable to nearly any career that a student is currently interested in or will be interested in at a future date. It is rare in today’s global economy that an individual will work independently on a project. Therefore, it is important that opportunities are provided to students to not only learn content, but to apply that content in a practical, near real-world environment.   
  
Group projects may also cause both students and instructors additional work due to the potential issues that may arise during the course of the project. Issues often involve questions and concerns around grading, equal distribution of work, communication pitfalls, and managing expectations. The following guidelines offer some ways to manage online group projects and establish clear objectives in order to facilitate a robust and engaging experience for each member of the group. These guidelines are based on past experiences as an instructor in computer information systems. You may need to adjust the guidelines based on the specific project you assign.   
  
**1. Define the Project** – The project should be integrated into the course objectives and not be viewed as an extra assignment or busy work. The project should allow students to practice specific skills based on the objectives of the course and demonstrate the ability to apply learning to a specific project.   
  
**2. Establish Milestones** – The project should include specific milestones during the course. For example, require an outline, a project scope, a requirements document, and other pertinent deliverables. This will provide students with the opportunity to work on the project during the course, offer instructors an opportunity to gauge progress and provide feedback, and reduce student stress in terms of submitting one large project at the end of the course without any incremental deliveries and feedback.

**3. Use the Learning Management System (LMS)** – As part of the group project encourage the use of your LMS. You can offer private group discussion areas, chat areas, and other collaboration tools that will encourage both communication and participation. You can choose to monitor these as well if needed. This promotes the use of the LMS features and offers exposure to different tools that the students may use in future online courses.   
  
**4. Simplify and Clarify Grading** –This is perhaps the most difficult item to address. Groups are made up of individuals and each individual brings a set of expectations and values to the group. It is imperative that you establish clear grading expectations for the group project. You may choose to grade each participate separately or provide one grade for each project deliverable and apply that grade to all participants. The approach to providing one grade to all participants is my preference. I would also recommend periodic team evaluations to be completed. You can require this as the group delivers the incremental components of the project to gain insight as to how each member is contributing. The peer evaluation may also be used as a percentage of the grade.   
  
**5. Provide Encouragement** – This may be the first time students have participated in a group project, and it is important as an instructor to encourage and communicate the specific details of the project. You should also encourage each member of the group to utilize his/her strengths. Perhaps there is a member who has strong technical or writing skills and the group should recognize this early in the project and make use of those strengths. Finally, as an instructor you should encourage each group to select a project that each member is able to contribute to and gain valuable lessons from the project. You can require that each group submit an outline or summary for approval as well.   
  
Following these guidelines will not eliminate all of the potential issues that come into play with an online group project, but these guidelines will certainly minimize the issues and turn those moans and groans into excited and energized students that can apply the group project to future projects in their careers.   
  
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