What Comes Next

Chapter 12

Working Together: Facilitating Collaboration in Remote Learning Environments

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A study from Ithaka S+R on the student experience during the spring 2020 remote pivot revealed (among other things) that “Group projects and research laboratory exercises were the most challenging assignments for students to complete in the spring semester” (Blankstein et al, 2020, para. 30). “Group work,” even in the best of conditions, is often dreaded by students, with visions of unequal work arrangements, differing views on quality and effort levels, as well as (often) one grade for the whole group. Couple that with the disruption of the pandemic, with students participating from different time zones, different levels of connectivity, different levels of responsibilities, etc, and you could understand why students did not enjoy the experience of still having to complete group projects and assignments.

However, we know from the literature that “collaborative assignments and projects” are considered a High-Impact Practice (HIP) in undergraduate education. Identified by Kuh (2008), these HIP have shaped our thinking on teaching, learning, and pedagogy. Succinctly, “Collaborative learning combines two key goals: learning to work and solve problems in the company of others, and sharpening one’s own understanding by listening seriously to the insights of others, especially those with different backgrounds and life experiences” (para. 7). So, while our students might resist them, collaborative learning is an important pedagogical experience for our students, regardless of the modality.

And, in fact, it is perhaps more important than ever that our students learn how to collaborate virtually, across time zones, as well as across cultures and countries. This is the current reality of how many of us are working under the pandemic with little indication that when we are able to return to work that we will be returning to business-as-usual (see Senz, 2020). That our students struggled with and generally disliked group work in a remote setting is not a reason to eliminate this proven HIP from our teaching. But we do need to create the conditions to ensure that our students can have a successful experience with collaborative assignments and projects. This chapter provides some strategies for helping students successfully collaborate in the remote classroom setting.

Building Community
The first step in successful collaborations in a remote environment takes place before the assignment is even introduced and the groups are formed; from the first day, the focus needs to be on creating community with and for the students. We know from the research that our students’ engagement in our courses is crucial as it leads to behaviors and dispositions known to increase student learning. In particular, levels of engagement impact students’ sense of belonging, levels of motivation and achievement, and levels of enjoyment (MacLeod, Yang, & Shi, 2019). Without this base, students will begin group work and collaborations already feeling disconnected from one another, while fostering a sense of community will set students up for successful collaborations.

Some strategies for fostering community:

- **Icebreakers**: Particularly early in the course, icebreakers are important tools for students to get to know each other, as well as for you to get to know them. Ensure, however, that the kinds of questions you ask do not require students to reveal parts of themselves that may be sensitive or compromising before the community has been formed. These can be done synchronously or asynchronously using a blog or discussion board.

- **Temperature checks**: Check in with your students regularly to see how they are doing. You can use anonymous polling software or other anonymous tools to capture how students are feeling/coping in the moment. This allows for them to know that you, as an instructor, care about their well-being, but they also see that their classmates are also having similar struggles or challenges.

- **Breakout groups**: One way that we create community in the physical classroom space is small group discussions. It is still possible to have those moments using breakout rooms, a feature that most video-conferencing software provides. Give the students clear directions and expectations, including the prompts, the expected deliverable, and the time when they will have their discussion.

- **Shared documents**: A shared document, like a Google Doc or some other cloud-based, shared document, can be used both synchronously or asynchronously for small group or class-wide activities. Students can make notes during breakout sessions, or a whole course could collaboratively take notes asynchronously on the weekly readings or lecture. This allows for students to share in the learning experience.

- **Informal spaces**: Encourage and create space for students to meet on their own, using the platform of their choice. You can have a sign-up sheet for them to figure out who is in a similar time zone or prefers a particular communication strategy, for example. In a virtual environment, our students won’t be running into each other on campus, so we need to create spaces for them to get together more informally in order for there to be a class community.

For more on building community in the classroom, see Mascle, 2019, and Bali et al., 2020.

**Agency and Flexibility**

In her talk “Savor the Moment: Activism and Digital Pedagogy,” Savonic (2020) posited the following:
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How can we inspire students to change the world? I realized that world changing desire is already there...now our task as educators is to nurture that desire and equip students with the knowledge and skills to keep going...

Students will be more engaged in the topic if they have agency and choice, as well as an investment in the project beyond the confines of the course (see Sample, 2012; Stanford Study of Writing). We want our students to take ownership of the project, to feel good about investing their time and energy in the work they are doing. A few strategies to help foster a sense of ownership, of agency for the students:

- **Choice of topic**: Allow students to choose the topic they will be working on. This could either be done once the groups have been formed, or the groups could be formed based on shared interests. Clearly lay out the parameters of the assignment, including the learning outcomes, so that students have some guidance as to the scope of the project.

- **Choice of modality**: Students can choose how they wish to communicate or share their project with you and their classmates. This may involve some give-and-take, where you require certain elements (a written component, a slide deck, etc), but the students can then make choices as to how else they will create their project given their skill-set, interest, audience, and purpose.

- **Choice of tools**: While your institution may have a number of supported, enterprise solutions for your students, allow them the flexibility to choose other tools that they are familiar with as well as comfortable using. This is also an opportunity to engage in a conversation around accessibility, privacy, digital safety and security, and data ownership, as well as longevity and sustainability. Allowing students to choose which tools they use also creates a more inclusive environment, communicating to students who may not have access to the infrastructure necessary to access or utilize certain tools that they can still meaningfully participate in their group’s progress.

Ultimately, we want students to derive meaning from their work, and providing space for student choice can lead to more productive collaborations.

**Scaffolding and Feedback**

The previous section doesn’t mean that we should allow our students complete free reign; our students would get lost and quickly overwhelmed, especially in a remote environment. We still need to provide clear assignment goals and outcomes, as well as additional scaffolding and feedback to ensure that they stay on schedule and make progress. Here are some additional suggestions:

- **Clear milestones and deliverables**: start from the due date and work backwards - what should each group have done at what date? Set up a timeline or schedule for the students to be able to follow, with clear deliverables for you to assess and give feedback on.

- **Terms of service/group agreements**: One of those milestones may be that each group creates a project charter or group agreement. These charters allow for students to set clear guidelines, roles, responsibilities, as well as strategies in case conflicts arise. Miriam Posner (2017) provides a model, as well as a template, for such a project charter.
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- Multiple check-in points: Along with clear milestones and deliverables, make sure that you are checking in with the groups regularly - the work itself does not necessarily reflect the reality of how the group is progressing or collaborating. Consider checking in individually with students synchronously or asynchronously to gauge how a team is working together and intervene if necessary.

- Generative feedback and peer review: It is also important to be providing generative feedback on the milestones and interim deliverables; make it clear to students that this is an interactive process, where feedback and revising are an important part of the process. Students can and should be empowered to revisit and improve their work, which will allow for more creativity.

- Focus on process, not product: By focusing on the process, it allows the groups the space to work out any difficulties they are having without the pressure of failure or a poor grade. Have students provide individual written reflections on the process, as well as their contributions and effort levels, when the project is finished, to emphasize the process part of their work.

The book *Writer/Designer* by Ball, Sheppard, and Arola (2018), while primarily directed at students, is an invaluable guide for faculty as well to help students plan and execute a collaborative project.

As put by Linder and Hayes (2018) in their introduction to the book *High-Impact Practices in Online Education*, echoing Kuh (2008), there is a “cumulative effect” that comes from HIP as students “acquire fundamental and transferable skills, gain hands-on experience, synthesize their learning, [and] apply their knowledge in real-world applications” (p. 3). Particularly under pandemic conditions, it is more important than ever that we create conditions for students to connect with each other and the materials in meaningful ways. It is challenging, yes, but the level of engagement that the students will have with the course materials and their classmates is ultimately worth it.

References


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Sample, M.L. (2012). *What’s wrong with writing essays*. Debates in the Digital Humanities. Minnesota University Press. [https://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/read/untitled-88c11800-9446-469b-a3be-3f0b36bfbd1e/section/0d537071-72ca-4ea4-ab54-cb67b042e040](https://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/read/untitled-88c11800-9446-469b-a3be-3f0b36bfbd1e/section/0d537071-72ca-4ea4-ab54-cb67b042e040)

Savonic, D. (2020, July 17). *Savor this moment: Activism and digital pedagogy* [Video]. YouTube. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l6pXLni-t8g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l6pXLni-t8g)

