

Group Work Online

By Jane Nguyen

Students often cite group work as one of their most disliked aspects of classes, whether in-person or online. Their reasons include the difficulty of scheduling & coordination, having to rely on others to complete work, and imbalanced participation. Faculty often dislike *assigning* group work because of the obstacle of assessing students fairly, not knowing how much time and effort any given student put in.

Despite the challenges, the benefits of having students work in groups cannot be overlooked. They include, according to research cited in Blackboard's "[Group Work improves critical thinking, problem-solving, adaptability, and communication](#)," longer retention of information, improved social skills, and multiple perspectives that render content more meaningful. Higher education increasingly recognizes these benefits, as more and more degree programs are following the [Cohort Model of Learning](#), wherein students with common goals, interests, and motivations share in a learning experience for an extended period of time. This timeframe for cohort or group learning does not have to be for an entire degree program, however; it can also be for the duration of a single class.

As Inside Higher Education points out, "[Online Students Don't Have to Work Solo](#)," students and faculty alike should consider that group work (discussions, projects, daily assignments, collaborative writing, information gathering, blog entries) does not have to mean a massive endeavor involving numerous stages, unnumbered meetings, and a heavy grade weight. While a professor can choose to have students do such work, she can just as easily choose to have students work in groups for smaller, discrete tasks, like weekly discussions, daily assignments, brainstorming ideas, etc., that are not heavily weighted, can be performed asynchronously, and are grade-independent from other students.

The [groups feature in Blackboard](#) is versatile and dynamic, allowing faculty to put students in groups (or have them choose their own groups, either staying in one indefinitely or weaving in and out of various groups to participate in different tasks and discussions). The instructor has the option to assign *only* a group grade, a group grade *and* an individual grade, or just an individual grade. If the instructor does not wish to carefully scrutinize who did what in a group task, the assessment can be more informal and subjective; students can, at the end of the semester, write a page-long reflection (based on a few instructor-provided questions) about challenges & successes of collaboration, what they learned from the experience, and what they will do differently next time.

If you are interested in developing a 'groups' component in your online class but would like assistance in getting started, please do not hesitate to contact the instructional design & technology team. We are happy to help.

Other resources related to group learning in online courses:

Eduflow: "[7 Online Collaborative Learning Strategies to Keep Students Engaged While at Home](#)."

Columbia University: "[Collaborative Learning Online](#)."

University of Connecticut: "[Collaborative \(Group\) Learning, Examples Uses and Supporting Technologies](#)."