



DO-IT-YOURSELF: SIX TIPS FOR DESIGNING GROUP WORK EVALUATIONS

By Lindsey Wallgren and Robin L. Lindbeck

GROUP WORK. TEACHERS LOVE IT, STUDENTS (MOSTLY) HATE IT.

The benefits of group work in higher education are many. Groups often produce deliverables that are of higher quality than an individual could produce on his or her own. They stimulate creativity by the nature of collaborative discussion. People remember discussions better. Students are more engaged when they help problem-solve within a group, gaining a better understanding of themselves. Finally, teamwork is highly valued by employers (Burke, 2011).

Other benefits of group work might include ease of grading in large classes and peer-to-peer teaching and learning.

However, students often dislike group work for the following reasons: there may be pressure to conform to the group thinking; there may be one or more individuals who dominate the discussion; and it takes longer to accomplish tasks in a group than alone.

What's more, diligent students fear there will be one or more students in their group who will not contribute. Therefore, they are faced with a choice: pick up the slack and complete multiple portions of the group work or allow their own grade to suffer. A way to mitigate this fear and eliminate this choice is to implement a strong peer evaluation strategy in the group environment.

There are many ways instructors approach evaluation of group work. Following are six tips to consider when planning to implement a group-work evaluation strategy.

Tip #1: Set the Group Rules and Expectations

Typically in group assignments, the participants jump in and begin the work. Generally, there will be one or two “leaders” who will start the discussion on how the assignment will be handled. Because it is important to establish a team atmosphere in group work, there needs to be an opportunity for the group to determine how the teamwork aspect of the project will be managed.

There are numerous group-work assessment forms and rubrics. However, these rubrics are often devised by the instructor based on what he or she thinks is important in the group dynamic. The students themselves are rarely given ownership over the development of the criteria they will be evaluated on. When devising a group-work rubric, a portion of—if not all—the questions should come from the group members. This can be done by tasking the group with coming up with their own set of rules/expectations or “norms” they will all agree to abide by. This could be made an assignment within the group project and given to the group to complete before any work on the product/outcome is completed.

Tip #2: Establish Grading Criteria

When instructors evaluate group work, they primarily focus on the product or outcome. However, an important aspect to group collaboration is learning teamwork and how individual participants contribute in the group setting. This is why peer, self- and team evaluations are important to the process.

There are myriad forms developed to assess individual contributions in group work. Some of these forms ask students to assess themselves and their contribution to the group process, some ask students to evaluate how the team worked together to accomplish the outcome, and some ask students to rate or rank their peers on their contributions to the group project.

All three of these are important to address in group-work evaluation, with peer evaluation as a primary focus. It allows students to hold their peers accountable to group outcomes in a non-threatening way. The following tips provide additional detail on how evaluation of participants in group work can be created.

Tip #3: Include Both Quantitative and Qualitative Questions

Quantitative questions in peer evaluation are important to establish numbers related to how peers perceived the participation

and contributions of their team members. Qualitative questions in peer evaluation allow peers to give comments or constructive feedback to their team mates.

An example of a quantitative question to ask on a peer evaluation might be:

Q: On a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being the highest, how did (name of student) perform in the following areas:

- Contributed ideas to the final product
- Arrived on time to group meetings (if face-to-face)
- Met deadlines established by group
- Encouraged group members
- Had a positive attitude during the group project
- Performed assigned tasks satisfactorily

These quantitative questions and ratings can then be scored using averages of scores. It might also be helpful to calculate the mode and median of scores. There could then be an objective cut-off used in these ratings to determine grades or scores.

Qualitative questions could also be included in the peer assessment. These could include questions like:

- How did Student X contribute best to the group?
- What are some recommendations/feedback you would like to give to Student X to help him/her improve in group work?
- What other comments do you have about Student X's performance?

Tip #4: Address Anonymity in Feedback

One of the concerns in group project feedback is that there will be full transparency. Therefore, a key consideration when devising a peer or group assessment form is to determine how much, if any, of the information will be shared with the students/peers. The scoring sheet could be completely transparent where the student would receive all feedback with names attached. The advantage of this method is that the student will see all the feedback from his or her peers, which, hopefully, will lead to improvement. Disadvantages might include:

- Retaliation: The student may receive a less-than-positive comment from

one or more students prompting negative feedback on future work.

- Only positive feedback: Students, fearing retaliation, may score all peers high, even if some peers are not performing to a certain standard.

To remedy the above, consider giving a mixed assessment, where anonymous qualitative comments are given to the student, as well as the average of the quantitative scores. Encourage all feedback to be encouraging and constructive. In addition, there could be a space provided for additional feedback that is not shared with the student. This would be helpful to provide confidential communication to the instructor should there be serious instances of poor individual behavior in the learning team.

Tip #5: Consider Multiple Evaluations or Check-Ins

Peer feedback does not need to happen only at the end of a project. There are advantages to deploying multiple mini-evaluations over the duration of the project. This allows for interventions by the instructor if necessary, but at a minimum it allows the instructor to gauge the progress of the group. These could include abbreviated versions of the assessment.

Tip #6: Weight Peer Evaluation Appropriately in Final Grade

Instructors will need to determine whether or not the peer evaluation ratings contribute to the final grade of the individual. A question could be asked: Should the average quantitative ratings translate directly to a final grade, or should there be some room for interpretation by the instructor? For example, if a final grading rubric was devised where 50 percent of the grade was determined by the average overall rating of the student and 50 percent of a student's grade was determined by the group's final product, a sample might look like this:

Student X – Average group rating: 4.2
on a 5 point scale = 84%
Group Z assignment grade: 91%
Final grade for Student X: 87.5%

If the emphasis of the group work is on the final product, perhaps it is given a higher weight. If the emphasis is on team col-

laboration, then the group score could be given a higher weight. In addition, the instructor could provide a statement of scoring for the group portion as “if a student is rated a 4.0 or higher on a 5 point scale, the student will receive maximum points.”

In the context of group work, having a strong, proactive and intentional peer review/assessment process in place gives students ownership. It empowers the more diligent students to focus on the learning and not the workload, and it provides accountability to students who might be inclined to participate less. It brings objectivity into the group process, prevents the instructor from policing the group and allows for a better overall learning experience for students.

Conclusion

The tips mentioned in this article should help in creating a highly effective peer evaluation tool to use in your classroom. There are also online systems which will aid in this process. One free tool, **Peer-assessment.com**, allows for automatic deployment of assessments and immediate ratings and qualitative comments for students. While not highly customizable, it allows the user to ask general questions based on common teamwork challenges.

Whether you choose to use an online tool, or devise one of your own, a proactive approach to developing effective teams in the classroom yields a high impact learning experience for all students. **Tech**

Lindsey Wallgren is a CTE instructor in Business and IT at the College of Western Idaho, as well as a student of organizational learning and performance at Idaho State University. E-mail her at lindseywallgren@cwidaho.cc.

Robin L. Lindbeck, Ed.D., is assistant professor of human resource development (HRD) in the department of Organizational Learning and Performance at Idaho State University. E-mail her at lindrobi@isu.edu.

REFERENCE

Burke, A. (2011). Group work: How to use groups effectively. *Journal of Effective Teaching*, 11(2), 87–95. Retrieved from: http://www.uncw.edu/jet/articles/vol11_2/burke.pdf