Team Assignments Can Work!

Tamara Fudge and Eric Holmes

Purdue University Global

Introduction

Many students dislike team assignments; unresponsive classmates, grades relying on others, time restraints, and other problems can cause anxiety and apathy that lead to poor performance.

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Despite faculty's insistence that the workplace often requires teamwork, the connection of student team projects to usefulness is getting lost. The online classroom can still successfully support teamwork, however, with good communication, planning, and use of appropriate tools! Careful curriculum design, techniques in setting up teams, identifying motivation and encouraging diversity, and using ethical grading methods will be explored, along with a focus on evaluating collaborative tools and mitigating problems.

Brief Literature Review

- Teamwork is an opportunity to "develop socialized intelligence, take responsibility for their own learning" (Adam et al., 2021, p. 174).

- Improved creativity, self-esteem, and critical thinking skills can be products of team work assignments (Hogan & Young, 2021).

- Too much interdependence with other students in pandemic times may not seem fair – however, most jobs require group work (Davidson & Katopodis, 2020).

- According to Venable (2020), the ability to perform in a team is a soft skill area wanted by employers.

- Focus on (1) purpose, (2) putting students in groups, (3) task design and environment, and (4) grading (Rassoli & Brookhart, 2021).

Curriculum Concerns

- Careful course design is vital for team assignment success (Hogan & Young, 2021).

- Align the assignment details with learning outcomes (Nilson & Goodson, 2021).

- Check for your school's steps for curriculum approval

- Consider your particular student demographic

- Provide resources in the classroom where possible (Nilson & Goodson, 2021)

- Many sources suggest discussion boards as one communication venue

Curriculum Concerns

- Make sure students know the "difference between cooperation and collaboration" as well as individual accountability (Ekblaw, 2016, p. 122-123).
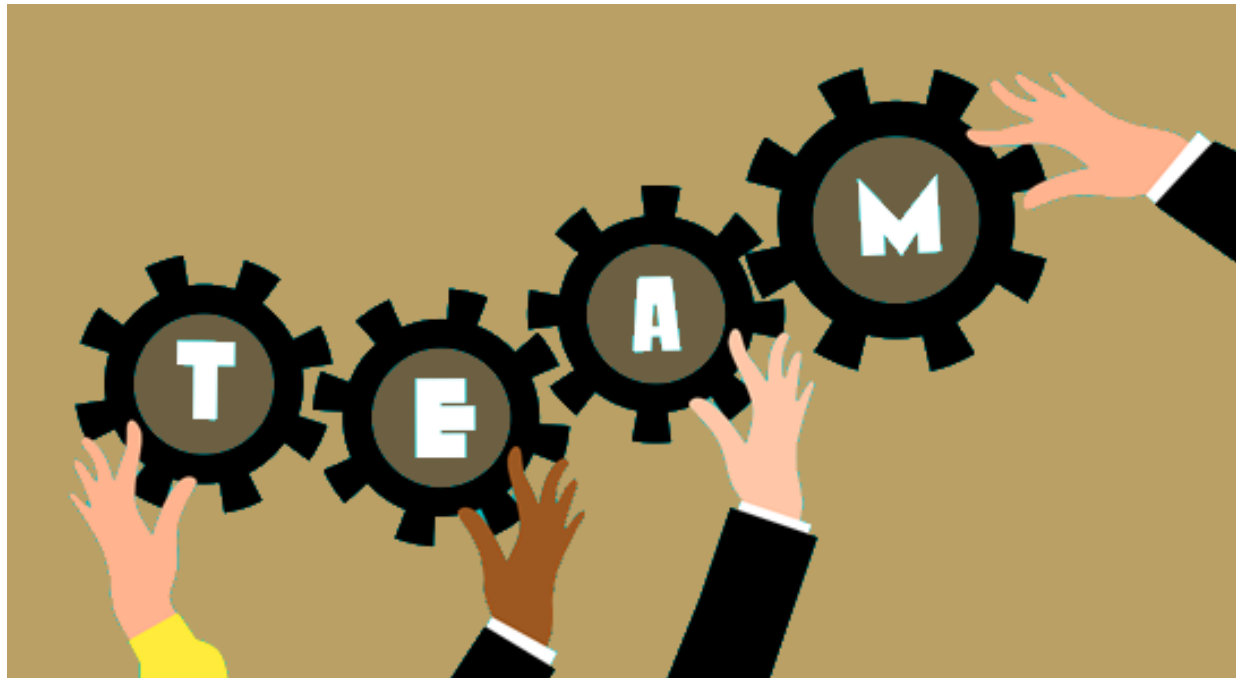
Team Assignment Types and Ideas

- **True Team** – full collaboration, shared leadership and responsibilities
- **Separate but Equal** Parts of the Whole – like "parallel playtime"
- **Assignment by Relay** (swap) – provide option if teammate does not respond
- **Role Play** scenarios (Nilson & Goodson, 2021) – example: student as teacher, courtroom roles, a debate
- **Game Play**, such as the team creating a game based on the given topic

Motivation Starts at the Beginning

- Explain the purpose (Rasooli & Brookhart, 2021)
- Make it interesting: choose topic wisely, perhaps using real-world issues (Davidson & Katopodis, 2020).
- Ensure the work is divided equitably
- Consider points or percentage of the overall grade (too big = avoidance, too small = why bother)
- Clear, complete instructions to limit frustrations
- Suggest fun, positive team names (Nilson & Goodson, 2021)
- Approach it yourself with a positive attitude

Setting Up Teams: Options

- Team size?
  - Too Small = everyone has more work
  - Too Large = someone may disappear
- Regional vs. varied time zones
- Gender, age, culture mix
- Personality mix if possible
- Consider a "pretest" to define skill sets (Ekblaw, 2016).
- Problems when students set up their own teams

Next Steps:
Decided by Prof or Team?

- Synchronous or asynchronous team meetings
- Pick roles – Belbin, Team Management Profile, or a set of roles you devise
- Shared leadership – determined by the group rather than the professor – may lead to better motivation and learning (Darban, 2021)
- Set milestones and deadlines

Idea for Initial Setup

- Team could set up a "contract" with the following information:
    - Group roster … including roles;
    - Member skill inventory;
    - Ground rules;
    - Communication plan;
    - Project timeline;
    - Conflict management plan;
    - Acknowledgement (Venable, 2020)

Grading

- "Perceived fairness" is crucial (Vander Schnee & Birrittella, 2021).
- Three levels of grading:
  - **Self**;
  - **Individual**;
  - **Group** (Adam et al., 2021)
- Ungraded activities might not be completed.
- Journaling might be included (Hogan & Young, 2021).

- Plagiarism: deal with individuals, not teams.

Peer Grading

- Assessment by peers: can "have a positive impact on student behaviour and attitudes" (Adam et al., 2021, p. 174).

- Peer assessment needs established criteria. It also promotes reflection on their own participation (Vander Schnee & Birrittella, 2021).

- A choice: team participation as part of the rubric or penalty?

What If …

- The class cannot be divided into equal-numbered teams?

- Someone drops out after the teamwork started?

- Personalities clash or someone violates rules?

- Teammates disagree on something that happened?

- A student is still enrolled but not active when you have to assign teams?

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Thank you

- Eric Holmes
  - Eric.Holmes@purdueglobal.edu

- Tamara Fudge
  - tfudge@purdueglobal.edu