

Develop group work skills

Strategy	Example
<p><i>1: Emphasize the practical importance of strong teamwork skills.</i></p>	<p>Explain the value of teamwork skills in (and outside) the workplace by offering real-world examples of how teams function and illustrating what can go wrong when teamwork skills are weak. One instructor asks students to generate a list of skills they believe employers look for. Often students answer this question with a set of domain-specific skills, such as drafting or computer programming. The instructor then contrasts their answers with the answers given by actual employers, who often focus on domain-general process skills such as “the ability to communicate clearly” and “the ability to work with others”. This activity serves to reinforce the process goals for group work assignments.</p>
<p><i>2: Address negative or inaccurate preconceptions about group work.</i></p>	<p>If students haven’t taken group projects seriously in previous courses or if their experiences were negative, it may affect how they approach assignments in your course. Consider asking them to list positive and negative aspects of groups based on their previous experiences and then to brainstorm strategies for preventing or mitigating potentially negative aspects of group work. Also explain how you have structured your assignment to minimize problems (such as the free-rider phenomenon) they may have encountered in the past.</p>
<p><i>3: Provide structure and guidance to help students plan.</i></p>	<p>Model the process of planning for a complex task by explaining how you would approach a similar task. Build time into the project schedule that is specifically devoted to planning.</p>
<p><i>4: Set interim deadlines.</i></p>	<p>Break the project down into steps or stages and set deadlines for interim deliverables, e.g., a project proposal, timeline, bibliography, first draft. In addition to setting interim deadlines, give students a rough sense of how long various steps of the project are likely to take and warn them about matters they will need to attend to earlier than they might expect.</p>
<p><i>5: Establish ground rules.</i></p>	<p>Create ground rules for group behaviour or ask students to do so themselves. Group ground rules can include things such as: return e-mails from group members within 24 hours; come to meetings on time and prepared; meet deadlines; listen to what your teammates have to say; respond to one another’s comments politely but honestly; be constructive; criticize ideas, not people. You might then ask students to formally agree to these ground rules by signing a group learning contract (Barkley, Cross & Major, 2005).</p>
<p><i>6: Teach and reinforce conflict-resolution skills.</i></p>	<p>Disagreements within groups can provide valuable opportunities for students to develop both better teamwork skills and better end products (Thompson, 2004). But conflict can also erode motivation. To help students handle disagreements and tensions productively, provide language they can use to voice objections and preferences constructively and reinforce listening skills. Structured role-playing can also be helpful: present students with a hypothetical source of tension (e.g., a domineering personality, a slacker, cultural differences in communication style) before real tensions arise and then ask them to work toward a resolution, improvising dialogue and actions. Role-playing conflict-resolution in advance can help students recognize similar issues when they arise and respond to them creatively and appropriately.</p>
<p><i>7: Alert students to common pitfalls.</i></p>	<p>Point out potential pitfalls of team projects and/or your particular assignment. Common pitfalls may include underestimating the amount of time required to schedule meetings, coordinating access to labs, computer clusters, or studio space, getting research materials from Interlibrary Loan, obtaining ethics permission for research interviews, mailing reports to external clients, preparing presentations, revising reports, etc.</p>

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<p><i>8: Foster metacognitive skills.</i></p>	<p>Encourage students to assess their own strengths and weaknesses (e.g., tendency to procrastinate, openness to criticism, strong oral communication skills) and to consider how these traits could potentially affect group dynamics. One instructor gives students a self-assessment survey and lets group members compare their answers.</p> <p>He then asks: What mechanisms could your group put in place to capitalize on these strengths and compensate for these weaknesses? Answers generated include setting hard deadlines (if a number of group members are procrastinators), developing a system of turn-taking to make sure that everyone has the chance to speak (if there are shy group members), using flow charts to represent the task (for group members with a visual orientation or weak language skills), etc.</p>
<p><i>9: Incorporate process assessments.</i></p>	<p>Ask students to periodically evaluate their own or others' contributions to the group in relation to a set of process goals, such as respectfully listening to and considering opposing views or a minority opinion, effectively managing conflict around differences in ideas or approaches, keeping the group on track during and between meetings, promptness in meeting deadlines, etc. Then give groups a chance to generate strategies for improving their group processes.</p>