Why Students Hate Group Projects (and How to Change That)

Too many faculty members assign ambitious team projects and then leave the students to their own devices.

By James M. Lang June 17, 2022

Image by Joyce Hesselberth for The Chronicle

In May, when one of my daughters returned home from her sophomore year, I asked her to sum up how she felt about college life at the halfway point. Socially, after months of disruption caused by the pandemic, she was building a circle of friends and finally getting a taste of residential life. Academically, she was thriving, too, and feeling confident about her choice of major. But there was one glaring exception to her rosy reports:

Group projects.

Two professors in her sophomore year assigned major group projects that constituted a significant portion of her grade. In both cases, initial efforts to work together as a team quickly devolved into a mess of collaboration failures. As the daughter of two teachers, she takes school work seriously. In both groups she volunteered to schedule meeting times, help distribute the workload, and collect everyone's phone numbers.

What happened next was pretty predictable. In each group, some members quickly realized their good fortune in having a go-getter on the team, and decided they didn't

have to do much work as a result. They ghosted my daughter and the other active group members, ignored texts, and were routinely absent on days when the group was supposed to use class time to work on the project. Other members had good intentions: They promised to complete certain tasks by specific deadlines. But then, they didn't — and had an endless supply of reasonable excuses.

I asked my daughter if she had approached the faculty member in either course for help. Of course she hadn't. She didn't want to get anyone into trouble, and it was just easier to do the work herself, albeit frustrating and unfair.

"But if the teachers were giving you time in class to work on your projects," I said, "didn't they circulate among you and ask questions about how things were going? Didn't they have some mechanism for checking on the distribution of the work within the group?"

"Nope," she said, shaking her head. In both cases, the instructors "sat at the front of the room and did something on the computer while we were working on our project."

Is it any wonder that students despise group projects and/or don't take them seriously?

I like to consider myself a pretty level-headed person, but hearing that pushed me to my boiling point as a teacher, an education writer, and a parent. The next morning I was still angry and jumped on Twitter to post the following:

> My daughter in college has had two terrible experiences dealing with group members on group projects — in both cases the professor offered NO help in addressing group dynamics or checking in with individual groups. If you assign group projects, this is part of your job. #teaching

Readers here and followers of my Twitter account know me (I hope) as someone who likes to post helpful teaching resources, spark friendly conversations, and amplify other voices. I try not to scold people who are doing their best in a difficult profession. But I'm going to stand behind the spirit of this tweet.

If you are assigning and grading group projects and: (a) not giving your students any explicit guidance or resources for how to work together effectively, and (b) not checking in and intervening when groups show signs of dysfunction, then you are engaging in pedagogical malpractice.

The Twittersphere clearly agreed. In addition to more than 400 likes, I heard from a few dozen faculty members — some recounting their own terrible group-work experiences as students and others who had never assigned group projects or had stopped doing so to avoid exactly the kind of negative academic experiences that my daughter had encountered.

One of the most salient replies came from Regan A. R. Gurung, a psychology professor at Oregon State University, and the author of many books and articles about teaching and learning in higher education:

> “There are so many activities that many faculty do not provide enough guidance on. ‘Work as a group.’ ‘Study More.’ ‘Read.’ ‘Now Discuss.’ ‘Write a paper.’ So easy to say, not so easy to really do using evidence-informed strategies. We assume meaning and process [are] clear. NOT SO.”

Perhaps as instructors, we take for granted that students already know how to do all those skills that Gurung mentions. Surely they know how to read when they come to college, right? Of course, but do they know how to read college textbooks, as opposed to a beach novel or a BuzzFeed article? Do they know the best ways to read for long-term learning? Do they know whether they should be reading in print or on a screen?

But you might object: “I have no time to teach reading skills. I have so much material to cover already! They should have learned to read, write a paper, and study in high school. Or they should go to the tutoring center.”

But even if students have already been exposed to such core skills, they are so crucial to academic success that they deserve continual reinforcement. None of us should assume that other college teachers have done the work that we should be doing to help students succeed. Safe to assume that if you aren’t reinforcing these skills in your courses, your colleagues aren’t, either.

Which means nobody is.

Most colleges and universities provide student-success resources — tutoring, academic-skills courses, first-year seminars. So our students can go to campus centers to learn how to improve their essays or study better. But learning how to work effectively on group projects is its own special skill. Whose provenance is it to teach students to conquer the many challenges of working as a team on a high-stakes project?

And undergraduates need more help than ever in that area. Digital communication has offered new ways to coordinate group work but has also reduced the amount of real time that students spend working with other humans in a physical room or via videoconference. Even when students do seem to work well together on a successful project, I often find out later that they used the in-class time I set aside for group work to do logistical tasks — like dividing up the work or setting deadlines. Then they each completed their portion separately, with little or no actual collaboration.

The good news is that more and more ideas and resources continue to pile up in the field of teaching and learning in higher education, including about how to build a better group project.

A little searching will lead you to plenty of theories, models, and techniques on how to help students master the skill of working together on a project. As quite a few replies on Twitter pointed out, we shouldn’t necessarily abandon group projects — we should make sure we are doing them well. After all, group work is a skill most people use throughout their careers as we participate in meetings, serve on committees, work with colleagues, and more.

I'll get you started in your research by pointing you to a resource that was recommended in response to my Twitter post. The University of Minnesota's Center for Educational Innovation has a "Faculty Guide to Team Projects" that offers excellent overviews of the issues - with plentiful references to relevant research and further reading on the effective use of group projects. That includes an article that provides evidence for the hunch many of us have about how students feel about group projects. (Hint: They don't like them.)

The Minnesota guide encourages instructors to think about why you are using group projects at all. It provides questions to help faculty members design an effective group project. And it explains how expectations for group projects should be laid out at the beginning of the course. The guide offers model syllabus statements that you can use to inform students about the reasons for group projects, and how they will be managed.

In spite of such online resources, it seems clear that many of us are not doing enough to help our students learn from group projects. When you assign a low-stakes or no-stakes group activity in class, perhaps it's enough to give students a few pointers, and then observe and intervene as needed. But if you are giving students extended group assignments, and making them count for a substantial portion of their grade — I'm putting my stake in the ground here — you need to do a lot more than provide a handout or a five-minute lecture before you send them out on their own.

My daughter will start her junior year in the fall, and I hope she will have better experiences with group projects going forward. But the last two of my five children are starting college this fall, so I still have four more years to work myself up into a lather about any poorly managed group project assignments. I'm expecting everyone to step up their game. Don't make me tweet at you.