

TEACHING IN AN ONLINE ENVIRONMENT: GROUP WORK FOR CRITICAL THINKING

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Exploring Stony Brook's Teaching and Learning Resources
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Session summary

Description: Working in groups online has a wide variety of benefits for both learners and instructors. Understanding how students' critical thinking skills benefit from group work can motivate us as instructors to create group projects specifically for online learning situations.

At the Conclusion of this workshop, you will be able to:

- Summarize benefits group work has on students' critical thinking skills.
- Recognize class activities that can be modified for group work in an online environment.
- Organize a group project online in Blackboard.

Why group work?

... or Why Students Don't Participate in Class

- Habits of passivity
- Don't see value
- Fear of criticism
- Are pushed to agree before all points of view are considered
- Feel task is to find answer instructor wants, rather than to explore and evaluate possibilities

Why group work?

... or How Groups Help Increase Participation

- Easier to “get acquainted” in small groups, reduces fear of exposure in front of strangers
- Students often participate out of a sense of responsibility to other members when in a small group as opposed to the whole class
- Shy or reticent students have a better chance to participate – they aren’t as easily “drowned out”

External driving forces

- Technology
 - ▣ Access to info and to each other
 - ▣ Synchronous & asynchronous communication
 - ▣ Tools to facilitate collaboration
- A changing, global workplace where employers want collaborative workers, and increasingly they'll want workers that can do so effectively online



Internal driving forces

... or Challenges Inherent to Online Courses

- Feelings of isolation and disconnectedness
- Issues in developing levels of trust, comfort, and confidence
- Need for increased dialogue that is focused, purposeful, and skillful



Cooperative vs Collaborative learning

- Cooperative learning can be viewed as small group work where labor is divided and individuals' components are assembled by the group to create a product.
- **Collaborative learning** emphasizes engagement by all learners in the process. The product of a collaborative learning exercise should be a synthesis of ideas, skills, knowledge, etc. from the group as a whole.

Critical Thinking Benefits of Group Work

- Students working in groups are engaged in active learning where, through appropriate interaction with their colleagues, they are able to construct rather than simply acquire knowledge¹
- If critical thinking involves the release of previous assumptions, then the opportunity to discuss alternate points of view with other group members can help facilitate the learning and practice of critical thinking skills²

¹ Palloff & Pratt, 2005

² Brookfield, 1987

Critical Thinking Benefits of Group Work

- Working in peer groups makes the thinking process public. When thinking publicly students tend to spend more time working to express themselves clearly¹
- If critical thinking is the intentional application of higher order skills such as analysis, synthesis, inference, evaluation, problem recognition and problem solving, then appropriate exercises for groups can specifically enforce practice of these skills²

¹Steadman & Cross, 1996

²See Angelo, 1995

Benefits of the online environment

- Extended time-frame and distance may enable students to consider a problem more critically than in a more immediate, f2f environment
- Asynchronous discussions give students more time to:
 - consider others' opinions, perspectives, and arguments
 - fully reflect on their own ideas
 - think more carefully about what they are going to say - and how they are going to say it - before posting
- Fewer distractions, easier to focus

Types of assignments

- Assignments that challenge students socially and emotionally, that encourage the exchange of different perspectives, that require ideas be fully articulated and defended¹
- “instruction that stresses discussion, with an explicit emphasis on problem-solving procedures, may be effective in enhancing critical thinking.”²

¹Srinivas, www.gdrc.org/kmgmt/c-learn/what-is-cl.html

²McKeachie, in Cross & Steadman

Types of Assignments



- Problem-based learning
- Consensus building
- Ethical dilemmas & decision-making
- Role-play

Notes on facilitating the process



- Be very clear in defining the problem
- Be very clear in describing your expectations
- Use examples of good work from previous classes
- The issues students struggle with as a group can be complex, but the assignment itself should be simple

Notes on facilitating the process



- Give enough lead time for students to test out the group areas
- Consider ice breaker exercises for groups to build trust and camaraderie before starting an actual assignment
- Interject when necessary, assure students you know what goes on in their areas and can see slackers
- Consider using contracts and/or peer-evaluation mechanisms

What do students think? Pros

- Able to more fully participate; easier to come to a consensus with just a few people in the group; this format made it easier to focus
- *I did think the buzz group format was optimal. In a whole class discussion, you notice that some people are quick to answer and answer every comment. By the time the rest of us get there, all we can say is, “Me too.” Four or possibly five in a group will produce someone who takes the lead, but everybody’s comments seem to count more.*

Pros, continued

- *Having the discussion saved and available to read again later was also useful. A person could read someone's post, think about it for a while, and then post a well-thought-out response to add to the discussion. In a lot of face-to-face groups I've been in, there can be a lot of sitting around staring at one another saying "So, what do you think?" "I dunno, what do you think?"*
- *...everyone HAD to participate. With face-to-face groups, it's easy for one person to kind of take over the group or, conversely, let everyone else do the work. With the online group work that we did, if someone wasn't participating, it was very obvious because there was nothing posted from them.*
- *I could get to know people better, see how another student was processing the same information I was (so very helpful to me), and to have peers that I could ask questions or have conversations about the work.*

What do students think? Cons



- Don't like group work; more limiting than discussing as a whole class.
- Some students are just “solo” workers.

Cons, continued

- *It was like a game of virtual chicken: As the deadline approached, whoever flinched first and posted a response usually completed the assignment. I find that group work is hard to pull off at a distance.*
- *No, the content was pretty controversial and the end result needed to be agreed upon, so it limited our responses. I felt that if it had been in a forum we would have had more freedom to express individual ideas and discuss them w/others w/o trying to come to one consensus - though that said, needing to come to a consensus is a good exercise as well.*

Suggestions from students



- Contracts, while time consuming and not popular in the beginning, pay off in the end.
- Short & discrete projects are better than long & involved projects. Short projects achieve goals of facilitated communication and task resolution. Long projects get overwhelming and frustrating, even for a small group.

Suggestions from students

- Keep groups the same across projects for entire semester.
- Make everything very, very clear: *“I think the best aspect of the group work in our class was that it made sense why we were doing it. So when we had partners for the reference interview and when we had discussions for the case studies, I could always see why we were doing it. That was important, especially because it took the edge off of the negatives of group work ;)”*

Creating groups in Bboard

- Create the groups
 - ▣ Control Panel | User Management | Manage Groups
- Create the content area
 - ▣ Control Panel | Manage Organization Menu | Add content area (e.g., Buzz Groups)
- Put groups in content area
 - ▣ Control Panel | Content Area | Buzz Groups

Adding more options for groups

- Groups are automatically created with a discussion board, collaborative areas (chat room, virtual classroom), file exchange, and email
- Bboard has wiki and blog tools available as well, but this is separate from the default group settings
- Bundle the default group function with other tools like wikis inside a folder in your area for group content
 - ▣ Edit view in group area | Add folder for each group
 - ▣ Edit view in folder | Add & configure wiki
 - ▣ Edit view in folder | Add group

Screen shot: group alone vs. folder

The screenshot displays a web application interface for Stony Brook University. The main navigation bar includes 'My Institution', 'Courses', 'Community', 'Library', and 'What's Happening'. A left sidebar contains various utility buttons: 'Instruction Docs', 'BB Modules', 'Knowledge Sharing', 'Admin Docs', 'Ideas', 'Staff Information', 'Communication', 'Peer Training', 'Tools', and 'Buzz Groups'. The main content area shows a breadcrumb trail: 'LIBRARY INSTRUCTION - TEST SITE (LIBRARYINSTRUCTION2) > B...'. Below this is a 'Buzz Groups' section with a list of teams: 'Blue Team', 'Gold Team', 'Red Team', and 'Green Team'. The 'Green Team' is represented by a folder icon. A blue arrow points from this folder icon to a detailed view of the 'Green Team' group page. This page has a breadcrumb trail: 'LIBRARY INSTRUCTION - TEST SITE (LIBRARYINSTRUCTION2) > BUZZ GROUPS > GREEN TEAM'. It features a 'Green Team Wiki' link and a 'Green Team' link with a globe icon. Below this is another breadcrumb trail: 'LIBRARY INSTRUCTION - TEST SITE (LIBRARYINSTRUCTION2) > COMMUNICATIONS > GROUP PAGES > GREEN TEA'. The 'Group Page: Green Team' section includes a list of links: 'Group Discussion Board', 'Collaboration', 'File Exchange', 'Send Email', and 'Group Members'. A table below lists the group members:

Name
Dana Antonucci
Darren Chase
Janet Clarke
Aimee deChambeau

Sample screen shot: start the discussion

- Announcements
- Discussion Board
- Course Documents
- Assignments
- Buzz Groups
- Course Information
- Contact Aimee
- My Grades

- Tools
- Communication
 - Course Tools
 - Control Panel
 - Refresh
 - Detail View

Thread: [Case Study 2: Merit Pay Increases](#) [Reply](#)

Total posts: 18 Unread posts: 17 [Previous Thread](#) | [Next Thread](#)

<input type="checkbox"/>	Case Study 2: Merit Pay Increases	Aimee de Chambeau	11/16/08 11:13 PM
<input type="checkbox"/>	RE: Case Study 2: Merit Pay Increases	[REDACTED]	11/17/08 12:44 PM
<input type="checkbox"/>	RE: Case Study 2: Merit Pay Increases	[REDACTED]	11/18/08 11:32 PM
<input type="checkbox"/>	RE: Case Study 2: Merit Pay Increases	[REDACTED]	11/19/08 9:45 AM
<input type="checkbox"/>	RF: Case Study 2: Merit Pay Increases	[REDACTED]	11/19/08 10:58 AM

[Refresh](#) Select All [Go](#)

Subject: Case Study 2: Merit Pay Increases [Reply](#) [Quote](#) [Modify](#) [Set Flag](#) [Remove](#)

Author: Aimee de Chambeau [Next Post](#)

Posted date: Sunday, November 16, 2008 11:13:02 PM EST
Last modified date: Sunday, November 16, 2008 11:13:02 PM EST
Total views: 13 **Your views:** 1

Buzz Group Scenario #2

Throughout the semester you have read about what reference librarians do, how they should behave, how they should evaluate and select materials, how they should manage and evaluate reference services, etc. This scenario is short, but does actually bring all of these behaviors and skills into play.

In some libraries, salary increases are determined, at least in part, on the basis of "merit." The theory behind merit increases is that the best employees are rewarded for their efforts, while those who are providing less excellent service are given an incentive to improve (B&S, p253).

Your group is the Administrative Team for a mid-size public library. You are all Department Heads or Branch Heads in rank. One of the tasks that falls to the Administrative Team is to distribute the merit pay increases for the reference librarians. Administrative Team members, combined, supervise a total staff of 15 reference librarians. Only five (5) can be awarded merit increases this year. How will your team select the five best employees? How will you explain to your entire reference staff, via a short memo, the criteria upon which they are being judged?

Your team will craft a one-page memo to your reference staff, explaining how the merit increases will be allocated this year (i.e., the criteria the team will be using). Post your team's memo to the Buzz Groups & Case Studies Discussion Board by Nov 24.

This scenario is reproduced/adapted from Bopp & Smith's Reference and Information Services: An Introduction, 3rd Ed. (2001), page 253.

Subject: Case Study 2: Merit Pay Increases [Reply](#) [Quote](#) [Modify](#) [Set Flag](#) [Remove](#)

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