

Chapter 11

Participating in Group Projects Online

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IN THIS CHAPTER WE DESCRIBE the challenges of online group work and prescribe an approach that can help you successfully meet those challenges. Instructors use group projects because they recognize that group work encourages the learner-to-learner interaction that is essential for community building, and they know that in the workplace people are often required to function in self-directed work teams.

The complexities of today's technologically supported, information-based global workplace present challenges to collaboration in business, industry, and government. It is not unusual for deals to be made or lost based on a person's ability to work across cultural and geographic boundaries. It is not always feasible for such deal-making to be conducted in a face-to-face setting. Travel budgets have been severely curtailed for many reasons, among them a declining global economy and a desire for personal safety. Technological tools are increasingly relied on to support the work of widely dispersed business partners. To prepare learners for the world of work, it is essential that our educational microcosms not only analyze the challenges to group collaboration, but also provide experiential environments in which the skills to overcome those challenges can be groomed. Online group projects are very effective tools to help learners become comfortable working with people they never see.

The goal of this chapter is to provide you with some techniques that will help you successfully collaborate with fellow learners in the virtual environment.

GETTING TO KNOW GROUP MEMBERS

One of the most important steps to being a successful online group member is to get to know the other group members as soon as possible. Once your instructor has made it clear that group work will be required, and once your group assignment has been made, waste no time communicating with your group. Even though at this point you may not have a clear idea of the details of the project you will eventually be working on, you need to establish a relationship with the people in your group well before you begin to work toward a common goal.

Why is this? When communicating online, the absence of verbal inflection and body language to help you understand a person's meaning can create a minefield of misunderstandings and misinterpretations. The sooner you become comfortable with an individual's online communication style the better. For example, a person may consistently post one-word or two-word responses to questions posed online. "What's the weather like where you are?" results in the answer, "Fine." Reading this posted to the discussion board, members of the group may think she is rude for not being more conversational, or perhaps she is hypersensitive and offended by the question itself. After a few online discussions with group members, this person happens to mention that her typing skills are really poor. Group members who thought this person would be an annoying addition to the team now realize they jumped to the wrong conclusion. Such discoveries take time and are best made outside of and prior to the actual project work.

Use all the tools at your disposal to communicate with your team members: discussion board, chat, and e-mail. Chats are notoriously difficult to schedule because they rely on everyone being online at the same time. Even when all your group members are in the same time zone, busy lives and conflicting responsibilities compli-

cate scheduling. The most effective tools are the ones that support asynchronous (time- and place-independent) interaction. I recommend you rely on e-mail and whatever discussion board tool is provided to you as part of your e-learning assignment.

As you practice using these communication tools, start informal conversations with your group members so that you can get to know them. When I teach an online course, I do something that I know many instructors like to do: kick things off with an *introduction* forum on the discussion board. I jump-start the conversation by asking a few f-and-f (friendly and frivolous) questions such as:

- “What was the last movie you saw?”
- “What did you like or not like about it?”
- “What is your favorite TV show?”
- “What are your favorite two leisure time activities?”

This is an opportunity to explore the interests, strengths, and skills of your fellow group members in a nonthreatening interchange. If your instructor fails to create such a forum, start one yourself. Your group members will love you for it.

UNDERSTANDING THE ASSIGNMENT

Once your instructor has assigned a project, it is imperative that everyone in your team understand the project goals in the same way. You best achieve that understanding by using the discussion board to post your interpretation of what must be done. If you take the lead in posting that description, amazingly enough you'll see many responses of “I agree” and “That's what I think too” follow. For those who indicate a differing opinion of the ultimate desired outcome of the project, it can be very fruitful to have a more immediate, real-time discussion by setting up a chat time or even a telephone call. After chatting, if there are still disagreements as to the nature of the assignment, a member of your group will need to contact the instructor for clarification. There is no point in proceeding until this agreement among all group members is reached.

DEFINING THE COMPONENTS OF THE PROJECT

As a group, you need to agree on how best to break the project into manageable parts. If every member of the team attempts to work on the entire project, you are most definitely doomed to failure. For example, for one of my online courses, I require that my learners create a budget for a major public-sector technology implementation. Each group must first “set the stage” by determining the nature and function of their fictitious agency. Then they must decide which needs exist that can be met via technology, choose what that technology solution will be, estimate all costs related to the project over a five-year time period, enter the data into a spreadsheet with appropriate formulas and illustrative charts, and provide a narrative justifying the choices that they made. It’s a multifaceted and complex project and one that initially causes the learners much stress. The project planning goes much more smoothly when the group members have taken the time to get to know each other *before* they start to analyze the demands of the project.

When you work with online group projects, the last thing you need is a misunderstanding caused through an inadvertent communication faux pas. As mentioned before, you need to get to know the online communication style of each individual group member. Something as seemingly innocent as typing in all caps can set off a flame war from which recovery is difficult. You don’t need that when you’re working on a deadline.

DEFINING ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Once your group has segmented the project into manageable “chunks,” you can come to an agreement on the roles and responsibilities of the various individuals in the group. Although this sounds complicated, it is often amazingly easy. You know your group members by now; you know whether anyone is an expert at using a computerized spreadsheet; you know whether anyone has experience with a technology implementation project; you may even

know who loves crunching numbers. Group members will quite often start to enthusiastically volunteer. It's not unusual to see postings like "My best friend runs the IT department, I'll talk to her about how she puts together a budget" or "I've been using Excel for years; if someone gives me the numbers, I'll plug them in" or "I'll do a Web search and see if I can find a public agency that has that kind of information online." By now, everyone is eager to demonstrate that he or she can contribute to the project. Some sample responsibility-segments might include (using my project example):

- Gathering information about typical categories of expenditures.
- Writing the narrative: describing the agency, its function, and why it needs the technology; explaining the budget categories and the rationale behind estimated costs.
- Setting up the spreadsheet with appropriate column and row labels.
- Enhancing the appearance of the spreadsheet through the use of color, borders, shading, and so forth.
- Inputting the costs and the formulas.
- Creating the charts.
- Developing a timeline for completing the project.
- Reviewing and editing the completed project.
- Serving as instructor liaison or project manager.

Obviously, depending on the size of the group, these roles and responsibilities can be merged and combined in whatever configuration best suits the interests and skills of the individual group members.

THE ROLE OF THE PROJECT MANAGER

Don't let the word *manager* throw you off. In no way is this person "in charge" in the typical hierarchical sense of the word. Instead, this is the individual you've selected to monitor the group's progress

on the project, offer reminders when deadlines are missed, function as unofficial cheerleader, and serve as group liaison with the instructor. Usually, the project manager is also responsible for at least one of the individual project components as well. It is amazing how often the group unanimously and almost spontaneously comes to an agreement on who will best serve as project manager.

Each group functions differently depending on the dynamics that have resulted from the individual personalities of group members. Still, my experience has been that the selection of the project manager is not a difficult one or one that leads to tension in the group. If there are conflicts resulting from the selection process, by all means involve your instructor. You cannot forego the option of having a project manager. The role is essential no matter what you decide to call it, because monitoring the group's progress and ensuring adherence to agreed on deadlines is crucial to your group's success.

ASSESSING THE GROUP EXPERIENCE

Out in the *real* world, there is much debate about what skills are important for a leader guiding virtual teams. Some challenges include coordinating the efforts of team members from diverse cultural backgrounds and overcoming the many logistical impediments to collaboration on a global scale. Kayworth and Leider (2002) found that effective leaders display great behavioral complexity, because they are "able to act in multiple roles simultaneously, combining relational considerations with task-oriented ones." Successful participation in group projects online requires the exercise of *people* skills at least as much as it requires knowledge and skill in the use of the technology.

When you assess your experience as an online group participant, consider the leadership skills required of each and every member of the group. Think about the elements of the experience that you found enjoyable, and develop a strategy for avoiding the ones that were not as pleasant. This meta-analysis of your online group experience should be continuous while you are in the midst of your

project. Once the project is complete, you should find that you are well prepared to tackle a similar activity in the future, whether it is learning-centered or work-focused.

Use the chart in Exhibit 11.1 to help you summarize the steps to being successful as an online group project participant.

Exhibit 11.1. Recipe for Success of an Online Group Project

1. Have informal communication with your group members well before the beginning of the project.
 2. Focus on building an atmosphere of trust within your group.
 3. Make sure every member of the group agrees on the goals of the project.
 4. Work with your group to break the project down into its component parts.
 5. Work with your group to distribute the parts based on skill and interest, and develop a timeline for completion.
 6. Offer suggestions for a project manager or volunteer yourself.
 7. Throughout the project, live up to your commitments.
 8. Assess your experience.
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CONCLUSION

In 1993, distance education researcher Otto Peters stated, “As predicted for the working process, the emergence of *autonomous groups* will become the main constituent of the learning process” (p. 51). He went on to emphasize that such groups will be social environments that are supportive and “encourage spontaneity and self-expression.” If you follow the recommendations presented here, it is likely that your experience will demonstrate the truth of Peters’ prediction. Remember that participating in group projects in the online environment is at least as complex an undertaking as being involved in any face-to-face work team activities. The good news is that, with careful attention to clarity of communication, online group projects don’t have to be any *more* difficult than any other team project you encounter in life.

Recommended Reading and Resources

- Kayworth, T. R., & Leider, D. E. (Winter 2002). Leadership effectiveness in global virtual teams. *Journal of Management Information Systems*, 18(3), pp. 7–40.
- Moore, M. G., & Kearsley, G. (1996). *Distance education: A systems view*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Peters, O. (1993). Distance education in a postindustrial society. In D. Keegan (Ed.), *Theoretical principles of distance education* (pp. 39–58). Padstow, Cornwall, Great Britain: TJ Press.
- Phillips, G. M., Santoro, G. M., & Kuehn, S. A. (1989). The use of computer mediated communication in training learners in group problem-solving and decision-making techniques. In M. G. Moore (Ed.), *Readings in distance education* (Vol. 2). University Park, PA: ACSDE.

About the Author

Dr. Carole Richardson holds a doctorate in public administration from Western Michigan University. She has held management positions in various organizations for more than fifteen years and has taught in public administration and political science disciplines at a variety of institutions, including Central Michigan University, Marist College, and the Saginaw Chippewa Tribal College. She is currently an e-learning consultant and an assistant professor at American University. For more detail, please visit her Web site at <http://home.earthlink.net/~inali52/>.