

Why Work in Teams?

You might choose to work or write a paper in a team rather than individually for many reasons. Some of the reasons include practical experience while others highlight why team work might provide a better learning experience. *In this course, team-based learning is the central learning/teaching approach. Since it is a fact of life here, it is a good idea to consider elements that lead a positive team experience. Not all of the ideas suggested in this article will apply to our situation. Please use what is useful.*

- In team work, you can draw on each team member's knowledge and perspectives, frequently giving you a more well thought out paper at the end or a better understanding of the class material for exams, labs, etc.
- You can also draw on people's different strengths. For example, you might be a great proofreader while someone else is much better at organizing papers.
- Teams are great for motivation: they force you to be responsible to others and frequently, then, do more and better work on a project than you might when only responsible to yourself.
- Team work helps keep you on task. It's harder to procrastinate when working with others.
- Working in teams, especially writing texts together, mirrors working styles common outside school. In business, industry, and research organizations, collaborative work is the norm rather than the exception.

What to Expect in Team Work

Several factors we may not always think about when working in a team are vital to a successful team project. You should always establish how your team will handle each of these.

Agreement

Although we might assume productive teams will always be in complete agreement and focused on task, the reality of teams, as we have probably all experienced, is much messier than this. "Ideal" productive teams do not exist. In fact, some of the most productive teams will disagree, spend a lot of time goofing around, and even follow many blind alleys before achieving consensus. It's important to be aware of the rather messy nature of team work.

Conflict

Student teams will fight--in fact, they should fight, but only in particular ways. Research shows that "substantive" conflict, conflict directed toward the work at hand and issues pertaining to it, is highly productive and should be encouraged. "Personal" conflict, conflict directed toward team members' egos, however, is damaging and unproductive. The lesson is that students need to respect each other. Some teams decide to negotiate respect by making rules against inappropriate comments or personal attacks. When a damaging instance arises in a certain situation, any team member can immediately censor back the comment by saying "inappropriate comment."

Socializing

Of course, teams will not continually argue nor will they continually stay on task. Socializing, joking around, or telling stories are a natural part of team interaction and should be encouraged. It is primarily through "goofing off" that team members learn about each other's personalities, communication styles, and senses of humor. Such knowledge builds trust and community among the members. Although teams should be counseled not to spend inappropriately long amounts of time simply gossiping or telling stories, they should also realize the importance and influence such interactions can have on achieving a team identity that all members come to share.

Wrong Decisions

Finally, team members should be aware of and comfortable with the frequently frustrating reality of making the wrong decisions. Making mistakes, trying out options that don't work, and so on are not "a waste of time." In any creative situation, particularly in writing, trying out unsuccessful options is frequently the only way to discover what needs to be done. Although such frustrations take place even in individual contexts, they are particularly hard to negotiate in a team context because our immediate instinct is to blame another team member for a faulty suggestion. Students should be aware that all time spent on a task is productive even if it does not lead to any tangible product.

Unequal Commitment

In a perfect world, everyone would have as much time and desire in a team as others to create the best paper possible, but the reality is some people are procrastinators or care more about their grades in certain classes. Expect this and make contingencies for it by deciding early on what the "penalty" will be for those who miss meetings or fail to pull their weight

Guidelines for Team Work

The members of student teams may benefit from keeping some common-sense rules and aphorisms in mind as they come to collaborate. To read these rules, choose any of the items below:

Rule One

Collaboration teaches us what we know how **to do**, not just what we know. Collaboration teaches method. The activities of collaboration are as important as the material results.

Rule Two

Collaboration works best when it is apparent--when you know that you are collaborating. A certain amount of formality (e.g., established meeting times, a recorder to take minutes perhaps, a team monitor) is called for.

Rule Three

Collaboration succeeds when everybody succeeds--individual members as well as the team as a whole.

Rule Four

Collaboration is a key responsibility in the class experience--it means being involved in the teaching of the course.

Rule Five

No one ever knows how a collaborative activity will turn out.

Initial Decision-Making

This section provides suggestions about the types of decisions any team should make before getting into the work on a paper itself in order to prevent future problems.

Where many teams go wrong is not being clear about expectations from the onset. Problems are much easier to deal with when you discuss their possibility in the abstract rather than when they involve individual people and feelings. As such, making the following decisions early on can help deflect feelings of personal attack later and also help organize the team.

Agree on a Meeting Format

While many teams will (and should) spend time socializing, talking about class, etc., it's helpful to set up expectations for how much of this type of talk should/can occur during a meeting. Also, because of how much typically gets said during meetings, you need a way to keep track of what occurred and plan for the next meeting. For instance, you should:

Construct Rules for Discussion

Although it usually seems unlikely in the beginning, a healthy disagreement can easily turn nasty when people are invested in a topic. Decide early on what will be considered inappropriate comments and make sure someone monitors these in later meetings. Here are some ideas to consider:

- No personal attacks on a person's intelligence, background, way of speaking, etc.
- No yelling; all disagreements should be kept in a rational tone
- No name calling
- If a person objects to a comment directed at them, the conversation stops there, no matter anyone's opinion of the objection
- Out of Line Comments: "That's a dumb idea;" "You don't know what you're talking about;" "It figures a man/woman would say that"
- **CONSIDER HOW TO ADAPT THE ABOVE TO AN ONLINE ENVIRONMENT.**

Construct a Timeline

[In our particular situation, NAHA is fast and intense. When you decide ON team meetings (whether online or in-person, please make sure that it is a time everyone can meet. In general, you, as a team should consider the class hours reserved for your class, first. For instance, choose meeting times during Mon, Tues, Wed or Mon through thurs, etc, from 8:30A to 2:50P. If you, as a team choose an alternate time, make sure that everyone on your team can live with it.]

It's very easy to get lost in people's individual schedules week to week and put off certain tasks "just this time." Also, it's easy for a team project to seem "huge" until the tasks are broken down. For these reasons, it's useful to decide what tasks need to be done and when they need to be finished in order for the team to meet its final deadline.

Make a schedule and keep to it. This will also help team members monitor each other so that someone isn't stuck with all the work at the end. Consider the following:

- When will a final decision on the topic/focus be made?
- What kinds of research do we need to do? Who will do what? By when?
- When will people report back on research? What notes should they write up for others? By when?
- When must a final decision on the major point (thesis) of the paper be made?
- When will the paper be drafted initially?
- When will the comments/suggestions for revision be completed?
- When will the revisions be done by?
- When will the final proofreading occur?

Agree on Penalties for Missing Meetings or Deadlines

Although it would be great if this weren't true, the reality is some people are going to miss meetings and deadlines; some might even try to get others to do their work by not completing tasks. Teams need to be prepared for these contingencies by constructing rules and their consequences that can be applied later if individuals "drop the ball." Consider the following:

- If someone misses a meeting, or doesn't do a certain task, he/she has to type the final paper, buy pizza for the next meeting, etc.
- If more than one meeting is missed or a member consistently fails to do what she/he is supposed to, the team can decide not to include their name on the project. (Check this one with your instructor)
- In the same scenario, the team can decide to write a written evaluation of the member's work and pass it in to the instructor with the paper.

Discuss What Each Member Brings to the Team

While you might know your other team members as friends, you probably don't know as much about them as students as you might think. A very productive topic for the first meeting, after all the logistics have been worked out, is to discuss what individual members' strengths and weaknesses are. In short, have everyone conduct a

"personal inventory" and share it with the other members on their experiences relevant to the collaborative assignment. Doing this also helps alleviate the feeling that some team members are "smarter" or "know more" than others. Everyone has strengths they bring to the team; we're simply not always aware of them. Consider the following:

- What's your previous experience with the topic?
- What do you understand best from class? What are you struggling with?
- Do you have any outside experience (job, internships, previous classes) relevant to the topic and/or class?
- What's your experience with the kind of research we're doing (field, library, etc.)
- What kinds of papers do you write best? What have teachers and others complimented you on?
- What problems do you have in writing?

Dealing With Problems in a Team

Team work is rarely flawless. Two methods for dealing with problems are monitoring the team and discussing the problems. If you agree ahead of time about how to resolve problems, you can avoid involving your instructor in the situation; however, if you can't resolve the problem it may be a good idea to ask for assistance. As a rule if you have followed the guidelines above you can have a very productive and useful team experience.