Student Group Work Guidelines – Phase 1

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Background

During the 2000-2001 academic year, the University Committee on Academic Policy (UCAP) was asked by the Provost to develop a set of recommendations (faculty guidelines) regarding criteria for group projects and grading at MSU[1]. The need for guidelines has emerged in the context of an increasing use of group assignments, coupled with a growing recognition of a need for additional faculty and student guidance concerning the structure, process, and evaluation of student group activities. At the UCAP meeting of September 14, 2000, UCAP members outlined several dimensions relevant to the Provost's charge concerning guidelines development for student group work: (1) student evaluation in group assignments; (2) how to establish group projects for greatest effectiveness; and, (3) effective use of groups in the classroom. During the 2001-2002 academic year, additional discussion of the Provost's charge occurred in UCAP, and the following guidelines were developed.

Introduction

Student group assignments have increasingly-documented advantages for student learning. For example, through group assignments utilizing cooperative learning, students may build skills in working interdependently in teams, as well as developing other skills (e.g., interpersonal and conflict resolution) that are important to their learning and daily lives. The need for guidelines for group work has emerged in the context of an increasing use of group assignments on campus, coupled with a growing recognition of a need for additional faculty and student guidance concerning the structure, process, and evaluation of student group activities.

> **These guidelines are advisory as opposed to formal policy, and are intended to provide MSU faculty with general guidance regarding the structure, process, and evaluation aspects of group work. The attached Appendix includes selected websites for faculty development and additional resources on this topic.**

Student Group Work Guidelines

Structure: Establishing group projects for greatest effectiveness.

1. Course planning factors. In course planning, faculty might consider the following factors in course development, as relevant/where appropriate:
    ?? careful advance consideration of the circumstances in which student learning is likely to be

best fostered by an individual or a group approach;

??   clear statements in the course syllabus or other written materials about the intended purpose(s) of assignments, which are explicitly linked to both class and course objectives;

??   inclusion of the rationale for the choice of learning approach (individual or group) in course syllabi or other written materials

??   potential concerns of students about the implementation of group assignments in course planning.

??   provision of detailed information in the course syllabus for how students can contact the appropriate course faculty later on, for any additional questions or concerns about their assignments;

??   provision of information in the syllabus or other written materials about the specific steps students can take to address problems in accomplishing either individual or collective tasks for group assignments;

??   relevant timelines for student actions in accomplishing groups assignments and addressing problems in accomplishing tasks;

??   the range of possible steps that faculty may take to address problems.

2.   <u>Detailed Expectations</u>. Expectations for what students are to do for group assignments might be specified in a sufficient level of detail in writing. To avoid unreasonable ambiguity, the expectations could be stated in terms of what students are to do both individually and collectively, explicitly relating the expectations to the intended purpose(s) of the assignment.

3.   <u>Course Orientation Discussion</u>. Expectations for group work might be reviewed with students as part of course orientation activities, with ample opportunity provided for students to ask questions to clarify the written expectations.

4.   <u>Contracts with Students</u>. Consideration might be given to use of either informal (oral) or formal (written) group contracts, specifying the individual contributions of group members to the project. The procedures for use of contracts and copies of any forms to be used could be included in writing.

5.   <u>Training in Group Work</u>. Training in general concepts and specific skills for group work might be provided for students as part of any course activities that include group work, taking into account the nature of the group assignment(s), and the developmental phase, level of educational attainment, and motivational level of students. Commonly-occurring issues in the context of group could receive special attention; e.g., group conflicts about how to do tasks, assertiveness and communication skills, strategies for dealing with individuals who do not meet their group obligations, etc.

<u>Process</u>: Effective use of groups in the classroom.

1.   <u>Student Work Expectations</u>. As noted for the Structure section of these guidelines, expectations for how students are to work individually and collectively in group might be specified in a sufficient level of detail in writing, such that unreasonable ambiguity regarding expected work processes is reduced or eliminated.

2.	Monitoring Process. Faculty might consider assuming primary responsibility for implementation of an adequate monitoring process for group work, that is well-matched to the specific group assignment(s), the context of instruction, and which holds individual students and groups of students fully accountable for meeting expectations for group assignments. Information about the monitoring process, relevant timelines, and contingencies could be included in writing, and reviewed with students as part of the course orientation. The faculty monitoring process does not preclude assignment of students to share responsibility with faculty for monitoring group processes.

3.	Factors Affecting the Monitoring Process. The context of instruction might receive careful consideration in course planning for group assignments; e.g., the size of the class, level of students, type of class content, etc. In instances where it may not be feasible to implement a fully sufficient monitoring process for a given type of group assignment within a given course, one or more of the following strategies could guide course activities involving group work, as appropriate:
	??	a different type of group assignment might be made for which it is feasible to have a sufficient faculty monitoring process;
	??	faculty could assure that student grades, individually or collectively, are not adversely affected on the basis of the outcomes of the group assignment;
	??	consideration could be given to use of individual assignments in place of group assignments.

4.	Checking the Value of Group Work. When feasible, principles of evaluation research might be incorporated into the course, going beyond measurement of end-of-course outcomes only. For example, baseline (pre-course) and interim (in-course) assessments of student knowledge of, skills for, and motivation for group work could be done, and faculty approaches adapted accordingly during the course of the semester, based on the assessed student needs. The interim assessments might be incorporated as part of a group work monitoring process.

Evaluation: Student evaluation in group assignments.

1.	Individual Contributions to Group Assignments. Group assignments should be structured so that the contributions of individuals can be evaluated in a sufficient, valid fashion. Therefore, students might be provided with a detailed written description of how they will be evaluated and graded on the basis of their individual contributions to group assignments.

2.	Faculty Evaluation. Faculty have ultimate responsibility for the evaluation and grading of students on group assignments. Students should not be solely responsible for evaluating other students' contributions to group assignments, nor should students be solely responsible for assigning grades to other students.

3.	Peer Evaluation. Student peer evaluation data might be considered by faculty members as part of group assignments. If peer evaluation data are used, course information should include a description of how faculty will use student peer evaluation data in faculty evaluation and grading of students. The contributions of students to peer evaluation could be clearly described in course syllabi or other

written materials, including copies of any forms to be used. Procedures for how discrepancies in peer evaluations are to be resolved might also be outlined in course syllabi.

4.   Caution for New Projects. Newly-implemented group assignments merit special caution in student evaluation and grading. Especially for untested group assignments, faculty might give careful consideration to the weight of these assignments in individual students' course grades.

5.   Student Feedback. Student input about group learning experiences might be sought on end-of-course measures of satisfaction and learning. The measures could include standard SIRS forms, but may also include Unit or faculty-developed measures that may be more sensitive to outcomes for specific courses. Planned evaluation research that links course objectives to group assignments is desirable, as a more objective way of evaluating the usefulness of group assignments.

[1] Per Section 4.5.4 of the Academic Governance Bylaws, UCAP advises the Provost on policy related to methods and evaluation of instruction.

Appendix – Selected Websites and Other Resources Regarding Group Work

Michigan State University Faculty Development Home Page. Available at:
http://www.provost.msu.edu/facdev/. Cooperative learning link in this web site is currently under construction.

The Cooperative Learning Center at the University of Minnesota web site. Available at:
http://www.clcrc.com/.

Strategies for Energizing Large Classes: From Small Groups to Learning Communities – Web Resources.
Available at: http://www.ce.umn.edu/~smith/.

Johnson, D.W., Johnson, R.T., & Smith, K.A. (1996). *Academic controversy: Enriching college
instruction through intellectual conflict*. ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education, the George
Washington University, in cooperation with ASHE, Association for the Study of Higher Education.
Washington, DC: Graduate School of Education and Human Development, George Washington University.

Johnson, D.W., Johnson, R.T., & Smith, K.A. (1998). *Active learning: Cooperation in the college
classroom (2nd ed.)*. Edina, MN: Interaction Book Co.

Johnson, D.W., Johnson, R.T., & Smith, K.A. (1991). Cooperative learning: Increasing college faculty
instructional productivity. Washington, DC: School of Education and Human Development, George
Washington University.

Smith, K.A. (2000). Project management and teamwork. Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill.