How to Help Class Teams Work Virtually

We have a forthcoming book titled "Making Team Projects Work." One of the chapters describes strategies for your classroom teams working virtually. We thought this information might come in handy for so many of you who are transitioning to teaching online now!

Have an Initial Virtual Meeting
Hold Regular Virtual Meetings
Work on Team Building
Know the Available Tools
Teach to the Tools
Remain Organized
Appoint a Leader Who Understands Virtual Work

There are many recommendations that are designed to help make computer-mediated group work better. The guidelines for making your classroom virtual work better are essentially the same. Here are some of the more common guidelines to help groups succeed in their computer-mediated communication:

- <u>Have an Initial Virtual Meeting</u>. One of the most common recommendations in the literature is to start each project with a structured time for face-to-face communication. The reason for this is because it allows the group members to get to know one another and build some team culture. During this initial meeting, set your groups up for success by creating a structure for their discussion and define how they will set their group norms. In an online-only course, set up time for the teams to meet face-to-face virtually using Facetime, Skype, Zoom, or using other software. If your class is geographically diverse, finding a time can be a challenge, but it will be worth the inconvenience to get the project off on a good trajectory.

- Hold Regular Virtual Meetings. Not only is it important to have an initial face-to-face meeting, it is also important to meet face-to-face regularly. These meetings help teams to better solidify the group culture and eliminate the social loafing that can sometimes come with virtual group work (or any group work, for that matter). If your groups never meet face-to-face, make sure that they've scheduled a regular synchronous meeting using, at a minimum, a conference call but preferably using meeting software that allows them to see each one another's faces. We accomplish this in our classes by, on the first day, guaranteeing that every group has a meeting time scheduled for each week that all members can make (regardless of whether they use that time each week).
- Work on Team Building. It is really easy for groups that work virtually to ignore the necessary acculturation that builds and leads to strong teams. Make sure to allow time during class or by making sure it is at the beginning of their agenda online to build a group climate and community. Groups where members have a strong bond and team culture are typically more cohesive and more successful on the task and social outcomes than those that do not. Your students may need prompts, such as icebreakers like having each person in turn talk about their background and experience that brought them to the course, or even lighter topics like your favorite movie or TV show or what you do in your spare time. This is a way to build the group's esprit de corps and find connections with each other. (In our classes, it's sometimes sports that bind members together, such as their favorite football teams or NCAA basketball.)
- Know the Available Tools. Make sure that your classroom groups know, early in the project, what tools are available to them at your school. This means that you have to become minimally proficient (certainly not an expert) at the tools so you can give some basic starting instructions for what is available, where to find it, and how each tool might help them to succeed in their project. When a class is totally online, many schools have required orientations so students learn how to use the tools and the requirements for their computers to be able to use them. This is important since many online courses are only 7 weeks long, and that means that the group will have to move quickly through the project and can't wait for those unfamiliar with the online environment.
- Teach to the Tools. If virtual work is going to be the primary component of your group assignment, in addition to making sure that the students learn the tools, you probably want to spend some of your time in a class at the start of the project teaching about the tools and/or training your class about the importance of virtual group work competencies. Spending this time early on will solve problems later and help your groups to succeed.
- Remain Organized. Groups that work virtually really need to spend additional time on their organizational methods. Most of these fall under the skills designed to run a better meeting, including having a strong agenda, delivering minutes soon after a meeting, and having a follow-up task list with the names of the people who are responsible for each task. As the instructor, you can help your groups with reminders about the steps and deadlines of the project.
- Appoint a Leader Who Understands Virtual Work. We discussed the importance of leadership in Chapter 6. In addition to the relevant leadership skills from that chapter, it is important to have a leader who understands the virtual tools as well,

including not only how to use them but when to use them, too. Whether you appoint this leader or the group picks the person is less important than whether that leader can use and manage the virtual group work in addition to performing the other group leader tasks. And while we do see some student groups decide to share the leadership role, this is more difficult in a virtual setting, so encourage your students to pick a specific leader.

Let's be clear: we are currently facing a very unusual situation. This is not the same as teaching an online class. As many of us know, an online class is designed with online delivery in mind and then takes considerable time to properly prepare and execute. We are now at the point where we are taking classes that were running successfully in a traditional face-to-face format and forcing them into an online format in order to finish the course; it's making the square peg go into the round hole halfway through the semester.

This wasn't anything we planned to do nor wished to do. However, at Fisher as well as at many other schools, we were lucky since we had a chance to meet our classes in person for a little more than half the semester. Many of us have already covered much of the foundational course content, and we got to know our students and, in many cases, our teams. At the same time, we have to figure out how to make this unusual situation work for us, for our students, and for their teams. We hope at least some of the information provided in the excerpt from our book will give you at least a few ideas for how to navigate this challenging time. And we're happy to share more ideas for using groups and teams successfully in the coming weeks.

Timothy M. Franz, Ph.D.

Lauren A. Vicker, Ph.D.