

Chapter 6

Effectively Organizing Student Work Groups in an Online Learning Environment

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I will never forget the day when my Associate Dean asked me to teach an undergraduate capstone course online (MGMT 4500: Business Policy and Strategic Management). A number of the core business courses were going to be offered online and he wanted me to teach the capstone course. It made sense. I had been teaching multiple sections of the course on campus for a number of years at this point and therefore I was the “ideal” candidate for the job. While I could have said no, the pressure to accept his offer was very real. I remember leaving his office thinking to myself “what an absurd idea” it was to offer this specific course online. At the same time, I fully understood that online learning was not just another fad; it was an idea that was here to stay.

Although I had used Blackboard for a number of years to supplement my face-to-face courses, I thought the idea of delivering a section fully online was simply impractical. Why you ask? Well, pedagogical reasons aside (which I had many or so I thought), my main concern centered on how to effectively deliver a course online that made extensive use of group work from a logistics perspective. It was hard enough to manage student work groups in a traditional classroom; I couldn’t imagine doing it online.

When I began designing and developing the course, I decided to simply eliminate the group assignments from the online version of the course. However, as I proceeded, I quickly realized that the group assignments I was eliminating were the ones that most effectively fueled student engagement and learning as well as most effectively met the course objectives. In the end, I came to realize that it was my attitude toward teaching online that was the real problem, not doing group work online.

I am not alone though. While many educators make extensive use of team-based types of group assignments in traditional on-campus courses, in my experience many of these same instructors refrain from using these types of assignments when teaching online. In this chapter, I explain how I use student work groups in my online courses in an effort to encourage other faculty to use more team-based assignments in their online courses to build a sense of community and togetherness and, ultimately, as a means to increase student engagement and learning.

Setting Up Student Work Groups For Success

Perhaps the most important step to using student work groups is to ensure that the group assignment(s) make sense and aligns with the course objectives. After that, you must strive to provide as much structure and directions for students to help make the process as seamless as possible. Below, I outline how I setup student work groups for success in my online courses. In essence, the approach requires setting up two distinct units in a course. One unit is used for initially forming groups. In my course, I refer to this unit as the “*JOIN A GROUP*” unit. The other unit serves as an additional means for team members to communicate with one another throughout the term. In my course, I refer to this second unit as the “*GROUP ROOMS*” unit. Step-by-step

instructions and tips for setting up each of the aforementioned units and associated content items are outlined below. Please note: while I describe how I do this in eCollege (one of two Learning Management System (LMS) used at our institution), the overall process could be adapted for any LMS.

The “JOIN A GROUP” Unit

Once I have identified why I want to use student work groups in my course and aligned the assignments with the overall course objectives, I set forth to put students into groups. Over the years, I have experimented with a number of different methods for organizing students into work groups. For example, early on in my teaching career I would just randomly assign students to groups. This was a very efficient approach, but it was not a very effective one. Although every instructor has a preferred method for organizing students into groups, my preference is to permit students to play an active role in the process.

In my face-to-face course, I typically set aside one class session during the second week of the term for the sole purpose of organizing student work groups. However, using this type of participatory approach to organize student work groups in an online learning environment can be much more challenging. Nonetheless, I have developed a fairly straightforward technique that allows students to play an active role in the process. Students seem to embrace the approach, it works very well, and I am convinced that it promotes both student engagement and learning.


Step 1: Create a Unit for students to join a group.

In eCollege, I create a “Unit” for the initial task of forming groups. For navigational purposes, I recommend using a very conspicuous heading for this unit like “JOIN A GROUP” and place it second to the last unit in the navigation of your course.

Step 2: Set up threaded discussion for each group.

Under the “JOIN A GROUP” unit, I then add threaded discussions for each group. But before I can do this, I decide on the number of groups that I want to have. This is not a step to take lightly. I have found that the number of groups and therefore the size of each group can often determine the success or failure for student work groups. Since my course is typically capped at 40 students and because I prefer to use groups of no more than five students, I create eight threaded discussions (one for each group).

For navigational purposes and usability, I use a very conspicuous heading for each content item (i.e., for each threaded discussion). For example, in my course I use the following headings: GROUP A, GROUP B, GROUP C, GROUP D, GROUP E, GROUP F, GROUP G and GROUP H. (Note: I recommend labeling each content item with letters as opposed to numbers. This is because the eCollege “Group Management” tool uses letters. Also, when setting up these content items, be sure to assign “All Class Members” to them so that each student can join the group they want).

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JOIN A GROUP
GROUP: A
GROUP: B
GROUP: C
GROUP: D
GROUP: E
GROUP: F
GROUP: G
GROUP: H
 GROUP ROOMS

Step 3: Provide directions on the group formation process.

Once the unit is set up, it is time to provide students with an explanation of the group formation process and instructions for joining a group. I add the following directions (see Table 1) to the visual text editor on the “JOIN A GROUP” unit homepage in eCollege so that students see the directions once they click on “JOIN A GROUP.” Note: I also include this information in the course syllabus.

Table 1. “JOIN A GROUP” Unit Homepage

<p style="text-align: center;">JOIN A GROUP</p> <p>A team-based term project is used to facilitate learning in this course. The group formation process and associated instructions are explained in the course syllabus. For your convenience, it's shown below exactly as it appears in the course syllabus. I urge you to read it carefully.. Each student will have an opportunity to indicate what group he or she would prefer to join by the end of Week 2.</p> <p>Group Formation Process and Instructions</p> <p>Rather than randomly assign each student [you] to a group, each student [you] will have an opportunity to indicate the group that he or she [you] would <u>prefer</u> to join. To be clear, this means you will have an opportunity to let me know what group you would prefer to join; it does not mean that you will be able to decide who is or is not going to be in your group. It merely means that you will have a chance to indicate what group you would prefer to join (i.e., indicate a group preference). Simply stated, <u>within the parameters outlined below</u>, each student is free to join one of eight possible groups (each group will be comprised of a maximum of 5 students).</p> <p>Step 1: Click on the unit (in the left navigation) labeled JOIN A GROUP. This unit is designed to provide you with a convenient means to indicate your group preference. When you “expand” this unit by clicking on it, you will see 8 threaded discussion areas—one for each group (e.g., Group A, Group B, Group C, Group D, and so forth).</p> <p>Step 2: Click on the appropriate groups threaded discussion that you would prefer to join. Next, click on “Respond” and type the word YES in the “Subject:” field and the word YES in the response area. This simple protocol will indicate to me this is the group that you would prefer join. <u>Important: Please refrain from adding any additional comments. These threaded discussion areas are intended solely as a means for you to indicate to me the group that you would prefer to join; they are not intended for discussions. If 5 people have already indicated a preference for a particular group, then you must select a different group, no exceptions. If you attempt to join a group that 5 students have already indicated a preference to join, then I will delete your posting and randomly assign you to another group. Also, don't indicate more than one group preference. If you indicate more than one group preference, then I will randomly assign you to a group at the beginning of Week 3.</u></p> <p>Note: If you want me to randomly assign you to a group, then no action is required on your part (i.e., I will randomly assign you to a group at the beginning of Week 3).</p> <p>Please indicate your group preference before the end of Week 2. You will not be able to gain access to the threaded discussions associated with each group after the end of Week 2, no exceptions. Groups will be finalized at the beginning of Week 3. At that point in time, I will create 8 private discussion forums, one for each group. Note: You will not have access to your group's private discussion forum before Week 3. Check the “Announcements” at the beginning of Week 3 for instructions. In the meantime, have fun joining a group!</p>

In an effort for clarity, I also provide additional instructions in each of the threaded discussions for each group. I intentionally repeat a key section of the instructions included in the Unit Homepage (see Table 1) in each content item. I do this because experience has taught me that a high degree of redundancy is necessary when

using a participatory approach to organize students into groups. In Table 2, you can see what students see when they click on a specific threaded discussion. While this example is for the threaded discussion labeled GROUP A, students would see this same information if they clicked on GROUP B, GROUP C, and so on.

Table 2. Information Included in a “JOIN A GROUP” threaded discussion

If you would like to join **GROUP A**, then simply click on “**Respond**” (below) and type the word **YES** in the “**Subject:**” field and the word **YES** in the response area. This simple protocol will indicate to me this is the group that you would prefer join.

Important: Please refrain from adding any additional comments. These threaded discussion areas are intended solely as a means for you to indicate to me the group that you would prefer to join; they are not intended for discussions. If 5 people have already indicated a preference for a particular group, then you must select a different group, no exceptions. If you attempt to join a group that 5 students have already indicated a preference to join, then I will delete your posting and randomly assign you to another group. Also, don’t indicate more than one group preference. If you indicate more than one group preference, then I will randomly assign you to a group at the beginning of Week 3.

Note: If you want me to randomly assign you to a group, then no action is required on your part (i.e., I will randomly assign you to a group at the beginning of Week 3).

The Group Rooms Unit

After students share their group preference, I set up each group using eCollege’s Group Management tool. I then create a private threaded discussion forum in the course for each group to work together with their own group members, which I refer to as “group rooms.” The private group rooms are helpful for a number of reasons.

First, since each group room is only visible to the students assigned to it, students know which group they were assigned immediately after I finalize groups. This eliminates the need for me to communicate to each student the group to which they have been assigned.

Second, the group rooms serve as an initial place for students to formally introduce themselves to one another. Although I do not require students to use their group rooms as the sole means to communicate with one another, I do require them to use it to formally introduce themselves to each other. In this regard, it also serves as a way for me to confirm that each student in the course knows exactly who their teammates are and whether or not they have made an effort to communicate with them.

Third, each time a student logs into the course, eCollege’s “What’s New” feature notifies them if there has been activity in their group room. I have found that this serves to motivate students to regularly visit their group room and, hence, it improves student engagement in team-related work.

Finally, it serves as a means for me to quickly communicate group-related issues with each group in the course. In the end, although the group rooms are helpful for a number of reasons, I am convinced that increased student engagement in team-related activities is the most valuable outcome. The following steps outline how I actually create this space for each group to work.

Step 1: Create a Unit for Group Work.

I first add a unit called “GROUP ROOMS.” This unit is designed to serve as a place for team members to communicate with one another throughout the term. Although I do not require students to work in this space, I have found that students make extensive use of it. In fact, feedback from students suggests they prefer to communicate with each other in their group rooms versus using other course communication tools such as eCollege’s “email” or “chat” tool. For navigational purposes, I place it as the last unit.

Step 2: Add content items to the “GROUP ROOMS” unit.

After I finalize who will be in each group, I create a threaded discussion for each group. I name each threaded discussion based on the group (e.g., GROUP A, GROUP B, GROUP C, GROUP D, and so forth). Similar to the JOIN A GROUP threaded discussions, I label each one with letters as opposed to numbers. Though unlike the threaded discussions under the “JOIN A GROUP” unit (which I set up for “All Class Members”), I use the “Group Management” tool in eCollege to assign specific group members to each threaded discussion under the “GROUP ROOMS” unit.

The “Group Management Tool” in eCollege is located under the “Course Admin” button. Like similar tools in other LMSs, you need to create a group first and then select which students to add to the group. Then when you create each threaded discussion, you can assign access to the threaded discussion to one specific group. If you complete this step correctly in eCollege, you will notice that each threaded discussion is preceded by the letter of the group and a colon signifying which group has access to it. For instance, “A: Group A” is only available to members of Group A. Finally, it’s important to create a topic with some introductory text in each threaded discussion because eCollege (unlike other LMSs) does not allow students to create their own topics. See Table 3 for an example of the introductory text I add to each group.

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JOIN A GROUP
GROUP ROOMS
A: GROUP A
B: GROUP B
C: GROUP C
D: GROUP D
E: GROUP E
F: GROUP F
G: GROUP G
H: GROUP H
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Table 3. Information Included in Each Threaded Discussion

<p>This is a private room (i.e., threaded discussion area) for Group A members only. Other students in the class will not have access to this threaded discussion area. Furthermore, your group is not required to use this threaded discussion area. In other words, I will not be monitoring user activity in this threaded discussion area (i.e., activity in this threaded discussion area will not be evaluated or used to derive individual grades or Comprehensive Term Project grades). It is simply designed to provide group members with an additional and convenient way to communicate with each other. That is, it is just one of many means of communicating with each other. Successful groups will use other avenues as well (i.e., e-mail, the telephone, face-to-face meetings, etc.).</p> <p>Communication between group members is crucial. This threaded discussion area is designed to facilitate effective communication between group members.</p>

Step 3: Post an announcement that the groups are finalized.

After I have setup the groups threaded discussions—thus giving each group a private place to work together—I then use the eCollege “Announcements” tool to post an announcement informing students that groups have been finalized. See Table 4 for an example of what I post in the announcement.

Table 4. Announcement Informing Students That Groups Have Been Finalized

Course Update: Groups Finalized

As explained in the course syllabus: I will finalize groups at the beginning of Week 3. That is, at the beginning of Week 3 I will review all group preferences indicated and, if necessary, randomly assign students that did not indicate a preference (or failed to follow the instructions) to a group. Additionally, at this point in time, I will create private/secure group rooms (i.e., threaded discussion areas), one for each group.

To date, I have reviewed all group preferences indicated during Week 1 and Week 2 and, where necessary, randomly assigned students that did not indicate a preference (or failed to follow the instructions) to a group. Additionally, I created a private/secure group room (i.e., threaded discussion area) for each group. To access your group's group room, click on the unit (or navigation button in the **Course Navigation Tree** located along the left side of the **Course Homepage** screen) labeled **GROUP ROOMS**. This unit (or navigation button) is located directly below the unit (or navigation button) labeled **JOIN A GROUP**.

Note: although I recommend that each group use its room (i.e., threaded discussion area), groups are not required to use them. In other words, I will not be monitoring user activity in these threaded discussion areas (i.e., activity in these threaded discussion areas will not be evaluated or used to derive individual grades or Comprehensive Term Project grades). They are simply designed to provide group members with an additional and convenient way to communicate with each other. Remember, it is only one of many ways to communicate with group members. Successful groups will use other avenues as well (i.e., email, the telephone, face-to-face meetings, etc.).

Concluding Comments

Regardless of whether I am teaching a course in a traditional classroom setting or in an online learning environment, I use team-based assignments. Although one could generate a lengthy list of pedagogical reasons for using them, one of the reasons why I use them is because I think they are a powerful means for creating a sense of community and togetherness. I have witnessed their capacity to do this in both traditional classroom settings and online settings. In the end, I believe having a feeling of community and togetherness in any learning environment increases student engagement and, ultimately, student learning. With this point in mind, educators that choose not to use team-based assignments, especially in online instruction, are missing a golden opportunity to build a greater sense of community and togetherness in their course. Much of my success with using team-based assignments online is due to the front-end time I spend organizing and setting up the groups and later supporting them. Through following similar steps like I have outlined in this chapter, I am confident that you can reap the rewards of team-based assignments in your courses as well.

Bio

Jeffrey R. Nystrom is an Instructor of Management in the Business School at the University of Colorado Denver. He teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in strategic management and organizational theory. Jeffrey has over 15 years of teaching experience and has been teaching online since 2005. He began his career as an educator in 1995 at College America Denver where he taught courses in management and served as the program director of the management department. In September of 2000, Jeffrey joined the Business School faculty of the University of Colorado Denver. He was the recipient of the 2004 Business School Excellence in Teaching Award (Non Tenure-Track). Recently, he received the 2008-2009 Outstanding Student Organization Advisor Award. The focus of his scholarship is applied research and learning and pedagogical research. Prior to his career in education, he held a number of sales and management positions in industry. He holds a B.S. in Business Administration and M.S. in Management and Organization from the University of Colorado.