



Virtual Group Work

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A few years ago, I wrote a book called [*Successful Group Work: 3 Activities to Teach Teamwork Skills*](#). The activities were all classroom based because I didn't have a crystal ball to predict what would happen in 2020! When the global pandemic struck, teachers and students needed to quickly find ways to continue classes using technology either synchronous or asynchronous. With little training or time, teachers were forced to teach classes online and students had to adapt as well.

I believe that teaching online and communicating virtually in team meetings is here to stay. Preparing students to efficiently and effectively function in a virtual group environment will be another important skill for students to develop. Even if you go back to teaching face-to-face, getting students used to communicating in a virtual environment is a good idea.

In this short guide, I have provided some key considerations if you have students meeting virtually as part of a team. I enlisted the help of my son Andrew, who is a college student. In order to finish his semester, he needed to work with classmates on a few group projects and in his final semester, they are completing a Capstone Project

requiring many hours of working well together on online. Since Andrew had firsthand experience being part of a team in a virtual environment, he seemed like the perfect resource.

Here are some key points to help students engage in group work successfully in a virtual environment outside of class (on group projects, assignments and presentations)

1. First of all, find out what the requirements are for your school or institution. I use a variety of platforms depending on the course, and school. If students are unfamiliar with video conferencing software, have a practice lesson with each group first. This way you can help answer any questions that may arise and sort out potential problems in advance. Zoom, for example, has uploaded resources and some short videos to help both teachers (e.g., setting up polls) and for students (sharing your screen).
2. Students should have a choice of software or programs for their private planning sessions. The most popular choices are Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Skype.

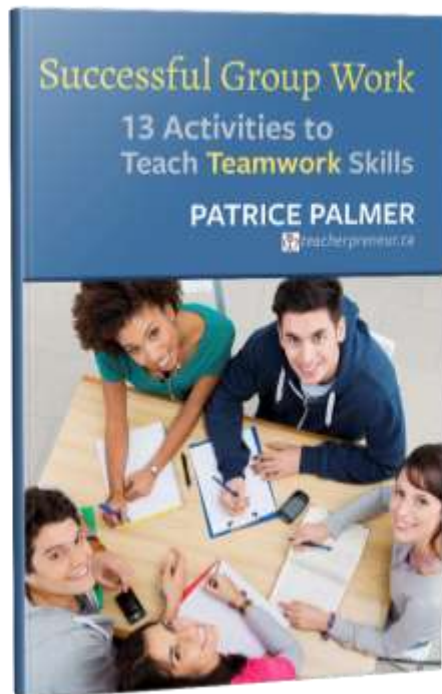
Learn more about *Successful Group Work* and download free resource at

<https://www.alphabetspublishingbooks.com/book/successful-group-work>

3. Most likely students will be online in their groups outside of class hours and unable to reach you (since we need breaks from technology), so make sure there is a way for students to get tech help, if needed. There is a helpdesk available at one college where I teach, and provides access to faculty and students.
4. Ensure that students use privacy settings for all meetings. Also, remind students that they should not take photos or screenshots of the online meeting.
5. Setting ground rules for online meetings is practical. My son's Capstone project includes sending warnings to students to consistently are no-shows and don't get their section of work in by the due dates.

6. When setting up a time to meet virtually, students should be respectful of appropriate meeting times. Many students are night owls but some are not. Make sure that all students are comfortable with the meeting times. Also, many students have part-time jobs that might prevent them from certain meeting times.
7. Students should set clear objectives ahead of the meeting as well as an agenda. For example, decide what will be discussed in a planned session.
8. Assigning a chair or facilitator for each virtual meeting will help facilitate discussions. All students should take notes, re-cap at the end and develop an action plan to move forward on the project. You may want to ask students to send you a copy of their minutes/action plan.
9. There has been a lot of controversy on social media about the forcing students to use their cameras. This should be negotiated by the student groups.
10. Virtual meeting etiquette includes the following: mute your microphone when you are not speaking, speak up when it's your turn to talk, don't eat while in virtual meetings, stay seated and reduce movements and background distractions. Of course, we should be prepared for pets jumping in!
11. Ideally, meetings should take place in a quiet environment but that might not be possible for all students. We may have experienced our own issues with noise and interruptions while working from home.
12. It is important that all students participate. The chair or facilitator can call on students virtually by "going around the table" to ensure that everyone has a chance to speak. Some software packages have a "raise a hand" feature. Teach students to use this feature when you conduct your practice session.
13. You may wish to have a de-briefing session with groups after their first virtual meeting to address any issues or concerns communicating in this type of forum. In face-to-face meetings, people receive important cues from facial expressions, tone of voice, and body language however, these are often lost in virtual meetings. This is why it's important to emphasize the need for active listening skills.
14. The desire to multitask while being part of an online meeting is tempting (many of us do it) but it's important to focus during the meeting.

The move to online instruction and communicating virtually has been a big adjustment for everyone. It's important to understand how students are affected so extra guidance and encouragement may be needed. There is also a concern that students and faculty will become burned out by excessive online teaching and learning. Being mindful of this is key to students' success. Consider changing some aspects of the online project, presentation or task.



"An efficient guide to teaching teamwork skills to pupils." —*Kirkus Review*

"...a wonderful course that makes complete sense and has a clear purpose. It is a must for any teacher and every resource room". – **Chris Mares**

"Highly recommended!" – **Hall Houston**

"I will definitely use after my next group project with my teen classes." – **Peter Clements**, British Council

"...thoughtful, comprehensive approach to ... the number one employability skill." – **Mary McGee**

"Practical, clear, and flexible... user-friendly format" – **Julie Vorholt**
