



Group Work and Roles

Why Do This

Allowing students to self-select groups can work well in a face-to-face class for short in-class activities, but for longer projects on online classes, where students may not know each other, it's preferable for the Instructor to provide more structure. This can mean selecting the topics, assigning students to groups based on previous experience, skill levels or other criteria you deem important. Specifying roles within the group can save time at the start of a project and provide structure to students who are not experienced in group work.

Group roles

Below are some possible roles for group members. The roles can be identified by you, or established by the groups themselves, e.g., by giving groups a list of potential roles and asking them to decide on and delegate appropriate roles within their group.

- The roles you – or your students – assign will depend on the goals of the assignment, the size of the team, etc.
- Team members can play more than one role, depending on the needs of the project. Roles can be fixed or rotating.
- Consider the final product. Does it require the use of new technologies? If so, then one of your roles should include the responsibility for learning this technology, e.g. the Chief Technology Officer.

Below are some options for possible group roles, but don't be afraid to be creative. One idea is to use (and adapt as needed) the roles that might be included for a large, collaborative project within your discipline.

Of course, it's not necessary to use all of these roles and a student may play more than one role in a team. Choose roles based on group size and task. The roles you assign for shorter, in class activities may be different than those used for more permanent teams. As a rule of thumb, then shorter the task, the smaller the groups should be, to minimize the time spent on getting organized and started.

Roles

Facilitator: Responsible for getting the group started, keeping it on task, and involving all members.

Recorder: Responsible for keeping a record of what happens in the group meetings.

Spokesperson/Reporter: Responsible for summarizing group decisions for the larger class.

Timekeeper: Responsible for keeping group on task and on time (specific to in-class activities).

Reality checker: Responsible for noting group decisions and whether they are realistic.

Devil's advocate: Responsible for pointing out alternate viewpoints and asking tough questions.

Spy: Responsible for getting info from other groups when appropriate.

Prioritizer - Makes sure group focuses on most important issues and doesn't get caught up in details.

Explorer/Innovator -Seeks to uncover new potential in situations and people (fellow team members but also clients) and explore new areas of inquiry, alternative perspectives and ideas.

Wildcard - Assumes the role of any missing member and fills in wherever needed.

Materials/Equipment Manager – Responsible for distributing and tracking all materials, notes, and equipment.

Technologist – Learns any new technologies required, assists other members using the technology, ensures final product is in correct format and available for sharing.

Another Option:

This role breakdown was shared by Katherine Brown, Associate, Professor of Communications. At the start of the team project, she asks students to submit their first choice and second choice of topic and their first choice of roles. She also asks which is more important, that they get their desired topic or desired role. You can gather this information using the Cougar Courses Feedback or Questionnaire tool.

Again, you can tweak these roles to fit your project better.

Leader – fosters inclusive participation, sets agendas, tracks due dates, facilitates any synchronous meetings, sends reminders, etc.

Documentarian – puts together and maintains the record of the group’s time, drafts, meeting agendas, meeting attendance, etc. Also responsible for assembling the final presentation into the selected technology and submitting it.

Researchers – there can be one or more. The researchers gather the raw material, the sources, etc. and bring it back to the group. Assign multiple researchers to research specific aspects of a topic when warranted.

The group as a whole reads, evaluates, integrates, analyzes, etc.

References

The roles are adapted from Barkley, E.F., (2014). [Collaborative learning techniques](#). Chapter 5, forming Groups. Available as an ebook in Kellogg Library