

Group Oral Communication Assignments - Enhancing Effectiveness

The purpose of this teaching guide is to provide some assistance toward strong group projects and oral communication presentations. Three key principles from which to begin:

1. Taking care in how the assignment is crafted, including providing clarity about how work will be evaluated, will make a positive difference in student learning and performance.¹
2. You may need to think of yourself as a partner-leader, or at least a leadership coach, for each of the project groups in your course.
3. Be aware that many students already dislike group work because they have been left to flounder in the past, have ended up carrying undue portions of a group's work, and/or resent that group work may take more time than something they could complete as a solo project. Given that team-work² is a very important skill for students to develop, can you articulate why you have elected to include a group assignment in your course?

Patton and Downs, in *Decision-Making Group Interaction: Achieving Quality*, 4th edition (2003), summarize that research literature supports several characteristics that help groups achieve quality decisions (bulleted items quoted directly, p. 19):

- The members *listen* to one another. Each idea is given a hearing and people are not afraid of being considered foolish by suggesting even extreme ideas. Disagreements are examined with attempts made to resolve them, rather than suppress them.
- The *atmosphere* tends to be informal, comfortable, and relaxed. There is a great deal of discussion in which everyone participates and the discussion remains relevant to the subject at hand.
- The *objectives of the group are well understood and accepted* by all members of the group and assignments to the members are clear and accepted. Members feel free to express their feelings, as well as their ideas, not only on the decision to be made, but also on the group's operations. The group is likely to be self-conscious about its own expectations.
- Most decisions are reached through *consensus* in which there is a general willingness to accept the decision. Formal voting with a simple majority is unlikely to be the basis for decision.
- The *group leader* does not dominate, and there is no evidence of a power struggle as the group attempts to achieve tasks.

¹ Reminder of transferrable skills: John Bean's suggestions in "Chapter 10: Using Small Groups to Coach Thinking and Teach Disciplinary Argument," while focused on writing, contains many practical suggestions for formulating small group tasks, including group oral communication projects. In particular, he notes that the use of small groups "is a goal-directed form of teaching that places heavy emphasis on task sequencing and overall course design. Planning a good small group tasks demands articulation of course goals, identification of a particular goal to be addressed in the task, design of the task, and placement of the task within a sequence of learning activities . . . (p. 199). Here is the [eBook](#) link to *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom* (John Wiley & Sons, 2011), which is available at no cost via Collins Library.

² See <https://www.aacu.org/research/2018-future-of-work>

A tall order for 18-23 year olds! The foregoing items could be the basis of your check-in meeting with each group early on (and/or periodical written reflections) in the assignment completion time period to see how they are doing. As you “lead-from-the side” or coach each group, you will yourself employ and model good team leadership skills.

Patton and Downs also identify the following steps as useful in producing quality decision-making in groups:

- Identification of a group problem, including determination of the nature of concern shared by the group members;
- Analysis of the nature of the problem, including contributing factors, restraining factors, and the degree of intensity of the difficulty;
- Critical evaluation of the possible ways of trying to resolve the difficulty; and
- Development of a plan for group action designed to implement the problem solution agreed on by the group (ibid., pp. 57-58).

Steps such as these could serve as guides for your crafting of the assignment prompt, particularly if the group task includes problem-solving. The group’s presentation on a recommendation or recommendations for belief or action could then be guided by persuasive speaking guidelines.

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