Group Work

Strategies for successful team learning

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letter from the director

Colleagues,

Many of us are placing students in groups for their coursework, hoping to teach the lifelong skill of how to work together. However, teaching and learning in groups does not always go smoothly. I have had occasion, just for a minute, to deeply regret the decision to use team-based learning in an undergraduate research course. Yet on the whole, I would say it works well to convey both critical content and skills.

Student writers wondered about the purpose and relevance of group work. Is it busy work? What are students supposed to get out of it? How can it be improved? One writer asked five local people — from a teacher to a business manager — whether group work is actually used in the working world? The discussion around these questions and answers is presented in articles and used as a theme throughout the issue.

You’ll read about how group dynamics plays into group learning, and with ideas for how different disciplines manage group expectations and exercises. Many of us work hard to balance individual and group accountability, and students tackled group grading and fairness. For balance, evidence from studies is provided regarding the effects of some group grading practices.

For the first time in lessons, you’ll hear the doctoral-level as well as the freshman-level student voice, and all levels in-between. I hope that in that vocal range, you hear something that speaks to you.

Stephanie Richardson
CTLE Director
Contributors

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is a sophomore who moved to Utah from Chicago, but considers West Valley City her hometown. She’s pre-law and is majoring in electronic journalism. Chamorro plans to go on to law school and eventually into private practice. On campus, she is involved in the tennis club, Phi Eta Sigma (honor society), M.E.Ch.A and is a social justice scholar in the honors college. She writes for an independent Chicano/a newspaper on campus called Venceremos.

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A smooth pathway to team learning

Overcoming the dynamics of group and finding success

by ALEX LANG, ALICIA WILLIAMS & WHITNEY CHILDERS

They sway from side to side, many arms move in one fluid motion. Feet pound and send echoes through the room. Each person is visible, accountable as they dance across the wooden floor. These are advanced jazz students at the University of Utah’s fine arts department who choreographed and performed a dance together at the end of the spring semester. “It was good,” said Shelbey Peterson, a student in the class. “But 20 girls in one room working on one project isn’t exactly easy.” In another part of campus, biomedical engineering students work in teams to find an improved method for harvesting bone marrow; to create a device that delivers medication to the eye; or to develop a patch material that supplies nutrients to diseased or damaged tissue. These projects, as well as the dance performance, share a common thread. Each of their foundations is rooted in group work—assigned and facilitated by an instructor, and carried out by students.

While most undergraduates experience team learning at least once during their college years, it’s not always a successful endeavor. Dynamics within a group—gender, ethnicity, religion, leadership styles, personality and even college major—may impede, or even implode, the group’s project. Disappointing grades, hurt feelings and teacher dissatisfaction often can be the result.

“Students automatically tend to bristle at the idea of working in a group,” said Paul White, an associate professor of psychology and ethnic studies at the U. White has studied the small group process and how it works, and he utilizes team learning in his classes.

“I have never seen a group yet that has worked perfectly,” he said. “You’re going to have personality conflicts. You’re going to have a couple of people who want to be the leader, a couple who don’t and just want to stay in the background. These can create different dynamics.”

In addition, a lot of undergraduates may never have worked toward a common goal with their peers for a grade. Oftentimes, students’ perception of group work is that it’s just another breed of busy work and it has no relevance to their future careers.

Davis Burningham, an English major, said he understands why his classmates view group work negatively, but he also thinks it’s good practice in collaboration.

“It can turn out to be potentially a lot of work for one...
“It’s not a perfect system, but it’s certainly not random,” Hitchcock said. “It’s very purposeful in the way that we assemble these teams and assign them to the project.”

He added that a key component to a group is balance. The goal is to create a team in which each person brings a certain skill set and experience to the table. There is some disagreement among university students on whether instructors should assign them to groups or let students pick their own partners. White, a social psychologist, said he sets up a self-selected structure for classes such as research methods in psychology, but the groups are not based on student friendships.

“It’s by research interest. On the first day, we would have each person introduce him or herself and talk about what they ultimately would like to do in psychology,” he said. “The groups were put together by common interest, as best we could.”

What about choosing a designated leader? White doesn’t think it’s necessary. If you need a point person, he said, it should develop within the group. But you do want to avoid having a strong leader who dictates everything.

“That could lead to problems like groupthink, where you have a strong leader who might say, ‘Here is the outcome I want. OK group, now go out and discuss it and see if you come up with the same outcome,’ ” White said. “It

**EFFECTIVE GROUPS, continued on page 4**
Students perform a duet section in Alone In This Together, a 2007 quartet choreographed by Eric Handman, assistant professor of the U’s modern dance department. “Group work is in the DNA of dance,” Handman said.

Photo by BRENT SCHNEIDER. Courtesy of the U’s College of Fine Art.
silences the opposing viewpoints.”

Finally, while like-minded students who understand the project’s purpose may end up on the same team, that doesn’t guarantee they will get along. White said common problems still occur, such as gender or personality conflicts.

“It's important not to hash out the issues, but establish what they are,” he said. “There have been successful groups that establish a coalition and once the project is done, they disband and that’s just fine.”

The bottom line, White said, is that the students in the group have to mutually respect each other. If there is no respect, that’s when an instructor might have to intervene and dismantle the group.

ACCOUNTABILITY SPURS INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY

Once teams are established in the BioDesign Program, students then develop a group plan so they know upfront what they are responsible for in the project.

Then, they create a team contract, said bioengineering professor Hitchcock, in which students hold one another accountable. He also requires weekly progress reports that help provide motivation for them to “stay on track.”

White, who has researched social loafing within groups, said people feel more accountable when they know there is an individual evaluation, whether it be by a professor, peer or themselves.

“[People] tend to work harder than when there are no evaluations,” he said.

Accountability isn’t just a component to successful group work in the traditional college disciplines. It’s evident in fine arts as well.

Dance student Shelbey Peterson explained that her jazz class’s final choreographed dance was hard work and sometimes frustrating. But the students did their part.

“They had to,” Peterson said. “Even when you’re dancing, you’re responsible for getting it right.” The nature of this type of collaboration is exposure. When these students perform, they are still being evaluated based on their individual performance within that group.

White said he has used two methods that tend to encourage accountability: students grading each other and peer reviews. In the former, at the end of the class, students would identify their group members and score them from 1 to 10 on their performance. In the latter, students would write peer reviews and look at each other’s work and give and receive critical feedback. “It also helps them learn how to work with others,” White said.

For an instructor, assigning group work—as well as dealing with issues surrounding group dynamics—may prove to be more challenging. Despite the pitfalls, team learning can be beneficial. Students learn more, get real-life experience, and end up retaining that knowledge well into their careers.

Facilitating problems that arise when different people come together to work as one, said White, will most certainly be part of the group project. But what is even more important, students agree, is the instructor’s role in conveying why they want students to learn this valuable skill.

“Not only does it make the group members accountable to each other and to the professor, it makes the professor accountable to the students,” White said.

These are three University of Utah undergraduate students’ initial thoughts related to group work. Interpreting beyond the words, it seems likely that—at least among these students—the idea of group work prompts coalesced feelings of appreciation and concern. As a doctoral student and an undergraduate course instructor, I can understand both sides of this conundrum—fairness in group work—and this story examines the student perspective.

“The biggest challenge is finding time when everyone can meet,” said Silvia Navejar, a senior in mass communication, referencing an arduous group assignment in a math class she once took. She added that logistics—balancing schedules in particular—can become such a headache that it can adversely affect the final product.

“Then the timeframe becomes more central than the assignment,” she explained, as group members frantically try to accomplish as much as they can in the duration they have together.

Adam Lenkowski, a senior with a double major in meteorology and mass communication, said he likes the idea of group work, but in the technical disciplines, it presents other challenges.

“People are on different levels of understanding,” he said as to why he thinks few predetermined group assignments occur in a more scientific major like meteorology. “Those struggling may feel like they’re slacking, and those who know more may be intimidating to work with.”

For that reason, Lenkowski believes that group work among his peers in this field originates on a more informal basis, where students collaborate knowledge and effort on a given assignment but provide individual responses to be graded.

Speaking of grades, the students also mentioned this aspect as another cause for concern with group work.

“You don’t want to get ripped off for your hard work if someone else is slacking,” said Tanelle Lindquist, a senior in mass communication. She, along with Navejar and Lenkowski, advocated for peer assessment as the primary determination for individual grades associated with a group project.

“This is still school,” Lenkowski said. “As close as we want it to be to the real world, it’s just not. Grades are different than paychecks.” While all three support individual grades from their peers, each presented different approaches to consider.

Lindquist offered a ratio: 75 percent of a student’s grade in a group project should be based on peer evaluations, and the remaining 25 percent should come from the instructor’s assessment of the final group product.

Navejar suggested that the peer assessment reflect a member’s punctuality for group meetings, his/her contributions to the project and an estimation of the amount of time he/she invested in it.

“The project can look amazing, but one person could’ve done it,” she explained.

Similarly, Lenkowski proposed that each student turn in a report that rates each other based on myriad of factors.

“You deduct somebody’s grade only if all [group members] indicate problems with this person,” he said. “You just want to weed out someone who didn’t contribute as much.”

In spite of their persistence for peer appraisal, the students still acknowledged the vital role of the instructor. All three placed instructor feedback at a premium throughout the tenure of the group assignment.

“You want to hear what [the instructor] thought was strong or weak on the project,” Lenkowski said, adding that there should be one “checkpoint” with the instructor midway through the project in order for each group to debrief their progress and address any conflicts. Furthermore, he noted that more of these “checkpoints” might be necessary depending upon the course level.

“Freshmen and sophomores have less experience with a collegiate environment,” he said. In slight contrast, Navejar believed multiple “checkpoints” should exist regardless of course level to ensure each group “heads in the right direction.”
Lindquist thought prior examples provided by the instructor also would help a group successfully achieve the objectives of the assignment.

“When an instructor’s involved, it shows that they’re interested in the students and not just kicking back,” she said.

Part of that involvement extends to the selection of groups. All three students said they prefer the instructor to arrange the groups.

“People who know each other will stick together, and that may not be how it works when you enter your first job,” Lenkowski said. “You most likely can’t pick who you’re going to work with.” Navejar agreed and added that when friends form a group, they tend to be lazier because they know whom to turn to for certain tasks related to the project.

Groups assigned by the instructor also helped these students realize some of the benefits reaped from group work.

“When you’re put in a group you didn’t choose, it forces you to work with people who approach the project differently,” Navejar said. “You learn to accept other people’s opinions and contributions.”

Lindquist added that she loves the different perspectives she experiences from group work.

“It allows more thinking and credibility from someone else into my life,” she said.

Lenkowski mentioned teamwork and more effective communication of his ideas to others as the benefits he gains from working in a group.

“These are probably most important in the work force—even more than skills,” he continued.

From the instructor’s venue, I find it prudent for us to consciously bear in mind that this is a classroom, where the primary priority should be to learn. It is impossible, however, for me to blatantly or universally outline how one attains this goal, as each course and its comprising student body greatly differs. Nevertheless, I believe students should have a voice in the learning process present in group work. To what magnitude their voice is acknowledged and implemented into the group process ultimately depends upon the instructor.

From the student’s perspective, I think we must consider that an idea behind higher education is our preparation and development into competent, self-sufficient practitioners in the discipline of our choice. And in many work environments, the reality is that not all aspects of the company product will be evenly distributed among co-workers.

Additionally, there may not always be somebody looking over our shoulder to check our progress and handle conflict that emerges. Thus, we should not overlook the importance of communicative skills—the ability to deal with people—at the expense of field-related skills, and group work can provide this equitable balance.

As close as we want it to be to the real world, it’s just not. Grades are different than paychecks.”

ADAM LENKOWSKI, meteorology and mass communication senior

When an instructor’s involved, it shows that they’re interested in the students and not just kicking back.”

TANELLE LINDQUIST, mass communication senior
The fairness factor

Connecting with students when grading individual, group knowledge

By ADAM J. KUBAN

Luke Garrott, assistant professor-lecturer in the University of Utah political science department, knows why he assigns group projects. “Knowledge is a social product,” he said. Garrott believes that dialogue between people is more important than a linear conversation, typically where the instructor talks and the students listen.

Jim Anderson, professor in the communication department, also has his reasons to employ group work in Communication 3050: Theoretical Perspectives on Communication. “It creates an atmosphere of shared expertise and responsibility,” he said. “It breaks down traditional, hierarchical structure in classrooms. Everyone is a teacher and a learner.” Grading students and assessing their comprehension of course material in this type of learning environment, however, poses challenges.

What to do about student loafers or free-riders? How to monitor the group’s activity? When to step in to “referee” problems in the group? Because of these types of issues, students often don’t feel the system of grading group work is fair and may dread, rather than look forward, to the opportunity to work with classmates.

Anderson acknowledged that instructors might prefer the “traditional” teaching approach because “lectures are under [their] control.” It is often more laborious, he said, for the instructor to conduct group work. Ironically, many students (especially undergraduates) perceive group work and group assignments as a way for the instructor to check out or to be lazy. So, why the disconnect?

“You need to be able to expend the time,” Anderson explained. This may include time to determine the parameters and objectives of the group work, assign students into groups, monitor each group’s progress and provide assessment—of the members and the final product.

ENCOURAGE STUDENT INVOLVEMENT AND EMPLOY OVERSIGHT

Garrott advocated for group assignments if they satisfy the goals of the course curriculum. His Political Science 3020: Neighborhood Democracy course epitomizes such a necessity, where he said his can students create open, conversational environments to generate what they know and to increase the quality of their learning in order to successfully finish the project.

Kelsea Snowball, a junior in political science with a minor in business, took Garrott’s service learning course in spring 2008 and said she learned the functions of various local governments and how to utilize them. Snowball recalled that her group in particular worked with the United Way to implement financial literacy and management initiatives at the U.

“I can take any class—take notes, read the text and have the professor lecture at me,” she said, “but to actually be able to participate—experience it—is more beneficial than just memorizing it.”

Still, Anderson noted that students don’t always embrace group-oriented projects.

“Students don’t like that they don’t control their own destiny,” Anderson said.

Thus, both professors encourage student involvement.

“You've got to have open communication with students,” Garrott said. “You want to strike a balance between direction and student involvement to create solidarity.”

To foster this balance and promote an understanding of the course objectives, Garrott has his students read about leadership and group processes.

“I try to have them govern themselves horizontally, i.e., democratically,” he said.

He also recommends that instructors who employ group work in their class frequently assess group productivity. For his course, a service learning coordinator [SLC] assists him as they monitor each group’s progress toward its action plan.

He explained that each group goes through some conventional steps of planning and executing their project: purpose, goals, task definition, division of labor, scheduling of steps, etc.

“They [the students] report themselves, and I see the fruition of the project,” he said. “The service coordinator
Garrott noted that students receive a grade proportionate to their performance.

“The SLC checks in with students often so that free-riding doesn’t drag down the entire project,” he said. “There are almost always students who are into the project and are willing to pick up the slack.”

Snowball said her SLC was helpful.

“We had trouble coordinating with United Way,” she said. “She [the SLC] was just there 100 percent, trying to contact them as well and making sure everyone stayed on task.”

Finally, Garrott believes that individual reflection essays comprise the “pillar of service learning.” Snowball said she found this part of the process personally valuable.

“You actually sit down and figure out what you discovered and accomplished,” she added. “I think it’s necessary for me to grasp what the experience did for me.”

ASK STUDENTS TO EVALUATE THEMSELVES, OTHERS

According to “McKeachie’s Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Teachers,” author W.J. McKeachie supported this component—individual reflection essays—of group assessment because it can “measure how much content each student has learned.”

Indeed, evaluation of individual performance is imperative in a group setting, as noted in McKeachie’s book and evidenced by research conducted at the collegiate level in 2005 by Karin Sandell and Lonnie Welch. The latter discovered that students in a political communication course and a software-engineering course became well versed in the

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material after individual and group assessment.

“In both courses, the instructor uses an individual exam to stimulate student thinking and reduce social loafing, followed immediately by the same exam completed by the group,” said Sandell and Welch.

According to the study, students received grades for both “stages” of the exam cycle. This process—in particular the group exam—illuminates Garrott’s idea of knowledge as a social product.

“One can often observe a member of a group teaching concepts to other members of the group,” noted Sandell and Welch.

Similar to Garrott, Anderson seeks student input at the very outset of his course.

“We develop the syllabus together in the first week,” he said.

Anderson then has his students sign an agreement that outlines their comprehension of their responsibility to their individual and group grades. From there, Anderson said the determined groups commence their respective projects.

Catherine Ethington, a senior in speech communication, completed Anderson’s course last spring and appreciated the agreement because “it gave students a clear outline of what was expected on their end.”

However, Anderson, unlike Garrott, remains more of a consultant rather than an active monitor of group progress.

“I don’t intervene unless they ask me,” he said. “You [the instructor] need to get the hell out of the way.”

In spite of this difference, Anderson still values student evaluations of each other. Early in the group project, he has his students complete a nine-point form that includes a measure of each person’s attendance, participation, interaction style, appreciation for diversity, and timeliness and quality of work.

“After the first evaluation, there’s not a problem,” said Anderson in reference to potential personality and contribution disputes within each group. He attributed intra-group harmony to the plethora of student input that occurs at the start of the course.

Of course, even with these preventative measures in place, challenges within a group can still surface from time to time. Ethington recalled a participation issue with one of her group members, but she nevertheless praised Anderson’s disposition with his students because it gave them the opportunity—the choice—to communicate as necessary.

“He [Anderson] made it very clear that he was open to discussion and questions and concerns,” she added.

As it pertains to the students’ overall course grades,
Students don’t like that they don’t control their own destiny.”

» JIM ANDERSON, communication department professor

Researchers Sandell and Welch said that these should result from more weight on the individual performance rather than that of the group. Otherwise, “some students would opt to come unprepared and depend on the group score to raise their grade.”

In his class, Anderson said each group receives a single grade for the portfolio submitted at the conclusion of the course, and individual grades are adjusted based on the peer evaluations conducted throughout the duration of the project.

Ethington said she appreciated the chance to evaluate her performance as well as that of her peers and the knowledge that those assessments would count in the end.

Although group work may not be applicable to every classroom setting, it may be worth a try if only to break the “traditional, hierarchical structure” of sequential lectures once in a while. Anderson seemed pleased with the results.

“Take a major concept out of the readings, make it fun, and they [the students] do a wonderful job,” he said.

Communication professor Jim Anderson asks his students to complete this evaluation form early in the process, which helps students stay accountable to each other and the group work.

WORKS CITED


‘Why are we doing this?’

Explaining purpose goes long way in gaining student confidence

By ALICIA GENE WILLIAMS

The first day of class as an undergraduate is usually the same. After passing out a syllabus, the instructor spends the entire period reviewing information and class requirements: how to contact the instructor, course description, how the grading will be conducted, and stuck between the course schedule and the location of the tutoring center is the dreaded “group project.”

Lisa Teran, like many students, wasn’t fond of group work. The 2007 University of Utah graduate in mass communications said her immediate reaction to seeing a group project on a syllabus was a groan followed by mental flashes of past experiences.

“There were times when I thought a professor included a group project just to torture the students,” she said.

Obviously, there is an education purpose to group projects. Why would so many instructors assign them otherwise?

Several studies cite the same reasons for the use of group assignments in college classes. Two main goals are enhanced learning and development of group skills often required by future employers, according to a study conducted in 2002 by James, McInnis & Devlin at Australian Universities Teaching Committee, Assessing Group Work.

In theory, students increase their learning in groups through collaboration. Group work offers an opportunity for students to discuss their knowledge of the topic. At the same time, they are exposed to other students’ opinions and ideas. They have to work together to negotiate a combined resolution to the situation. It sounds easy enough, but to many students, the reality is somewhat different.

Educational benefits are minimized when students do not clearly understand the objective of the group work. Instructors tend to assume that students understand the purpose, so teachers may bypass the explanation at the beginning of the course.

“Teachers have an obligation to explain why a group project is necessary and what should be gained by doing them,” said Kathy Taggart, a senior in public relations. “If not, then it will just become another item on the list to be checked off but not truly experienced.”

Each student entering the U’s MBA program is required to take a one-week team class before beginning the program. Students are put into a group that works together throughout the two-year program to complete a marketing simulation for a core MBA marketing class.

Jake Budd, a senior in the MBA program, said he understands the purpose of group work is to practice collaboration and negotiation.

“As an example of collaboration, one of my information systems groups met at one of our teammate’s places of work. We were working on a data-mining project using a program called Weka,” Budd said. “Although all of us had attempted to learn about the program, one of our teammates had discovered a technique that allowed us to more rapidly go through the data. Within minutes, the entire team understood the technique.”

This example shows how Budd’s ability to learn was greatly improved because of his group’s willingness to collaborate. He said he strongly advocates the instructor taking a few minutes in class to highlight group dynamics and the characteristics of a successful group.

“This exercise provides expectations that serious students can use to hold their cohorts accountable as the student works to develop assertiveness, leadership and project management skills,” Budd said.

MBA COURSES HELP TEACH STUDENTS HOW TO COLLABORATE

Kristina Diekman teaches the Teams MBA course and, said she focuses on students’ understanding of how to work effectively as a group in the class, and she stresses the significance of having experience with the challenges and resolutions that groups encounter.

“It’s important for students to learn how to work effectively together,” Diekman said. “I focus on the process and structure of a group and the interpersonal skills of communication,
leadership, also time and conflict management. Without this, most people just 'wing it' and are likely to fall victim to the common mistakes teams make and not know why problems are occurring and what they can do about them.”

Perhaps unlike many undergraduates, MBA students are taught how to work effectively in a group, how to recognize and resolve challenges and/or mistakes of the group, and ways to avoid or minimize those mistakes. They are exposed to the skills needed to successfully achieve the group's goal.

Today's businesses use group efforts to manage the increased complexity of corporate problems or to accomplish overall company goals. Susan Hytry, a local recruiter with more than 20 years experience in hiring and managing employees, said new employees must possess group-work skills. She believes the work environment is collaborative in nature and says focus groups are routinely created to solve problems, develop programs and initiate changes.

“It is critical for prospective employees to have strong verbal and written communication capabilities, proficiency in prioritization, the ability to delegate diplomatically, time management adeptness, and the ability to build consensus and influence decision making,” she said.

Hytry identifies a “night and day difference” between undergrads and MBA students.

“Partially due to their (undergrads) lack of general life experiences, diminished exposure to a professional work environment and business acumen, coupled with limited exposure to bonafide work groups, fresh undergrads do not have the same level of bandwidth as MBA graduates,” she explained.

**KEYS TO GROUP WORK SUCCESS**

So, why, after four years and numerous group projects, do many undergraduates still not understand or appreciate the purpose or possess the skills that group work is supposed to provide us?

Let's go back to our first day of class scenario and the dreaded group project. Usually, the students are given a packet that outlines all the group project requirements: number of members, pages and the due date. Several different problem options are offered as well.

Then… nothing. Often times, students are expected to figure it out. They are supposed to be grown-ups, not high school kids, and other than the occasional reminder from the instructor that the due date is quickly approaching, they are left to their own demise.

It’s assumed students’ group skills are inherently known. Through trial and error and the overcoming of obstacles, we will gain everything else. In a perfect world, this may be true, but the problem starts at the beginning. Students don’t understand the purpose: “Why are we doing this?”

When instructors take the time to establish the group and explain the project’s purpose, they are legitimizing the students’ efforts.

“If a teacher ‘sells’ the group project, then students will become energized about it and will put forth their best effort,” senior Kathy Taggart said.

Of course, a college degree has different meanings for different students. The level of motivation and sense of responsibility varies from student to student. Some have the philosophy that “C’s and D’s get degrees,” while others believe that every grade is a direct reflection upon who they are. Then there are the ones in between.

“Like most things in life, learning depends on how much effort the student and teacher decide to put into the class,” said Jake Budd.

There may be no way to guarantee a student’s level of commitment to a group. But, if an instructor defines the purpose of the group assignment and offers tools to help students learn group skills, then it might go a long way in helping group projects be more successful—and less “dreaded”. In return, students need to understand that it isn’t about the “project”; it’s about learning to work in a group.
Real world, real collaboration

Is group work utilized in the workplace?

By HEIDI CHAMORRO

Michael Freeman wades into a stream in the Wasatch Mountains as his fellow co-worker waits along the bank to fill plastic bottles with water samples that Freeman collects. The two work as a pair during this routine procedure to avoid contaminating the samples that will then be analyzed back at the lab.

“You need to be able to collaborate and cooperate with different people — especially when you’re on site,” said Freeman, a hydraulic technician with the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) in West Valley City.

This is just one example of how people collaborate in the working world to accomplish a goal. But, as students, we’re often skeptical when asked to perform together for a grade in a college class. Why? University learning is personal. We want to be held accountable for our own actions and abilities. And if we have to do group work in class, then we want to know its benefit, its point.

It can be problematic for professors to persuade students that working in groups will prepare them for future careers. When brainstorming story topics about group work for this publication, we wanted to know if Utah companies and professionals were actually utilizing collaboration in the working world, and if so, how it was taking place.

Of the five people we spoke with — from a teacher to a business manager — all said the ability to collaborate with co-workers was not only an asset, but a necessity in today’s global workplace.

GETTING ALONG WITH EACH OTHER

The dynamics of the workplace have changed over the years. Increased technology and a more diverse employee base means the circulation of new ideas is imperative.

Mike Phillips, the creative director for Ingenix, a health information, technology and consulting organization in Salt...
Lake, said within his company, writers and designers work mostly on their own, except when it comes time to present an idea and final concept to a client.

“We have to accommodate the needs of our clients, and we need to be able to communicate to the person to whom the marketing is directed,” he said. “People who understand that best are in a different division than you, so it takes effort for them to help you understand who you’re marketing to and for you to help create the thing that will reach those people.”

Phillips also said employees “have to be on the same page because the product needs to look, feel and sound like it’s coming from the same company.”

Freeman, a recent University of Utah graduate, agreed that while he may do daily tasks on his own, he also is required to work with multiple people to perform a study or do field work important to the overall goal of the USGS.

“You have to be able to work with them,” he said.

For example, when installing gauges that record water depth, Freeman must team up with another person to get the job done for both health and study reasons. If another employee isn’t there to remain “clean,” then the sample would get contaminated, and the work would not be correct.

SHARING OF IDEAS, MENTORING AND Why It WORKS

Another important aspect of group work in the workplace is the sharing of diverse ideas with people from different disciplines within a company. That is often a concept lost on undergraduates when performing group work in class. This might be due to the fact that students don’t get much experience working with those in other majors and backgrounds until they get into the actual workplace.

Silvia Norman, vice president of Latino Banking for Wells Fargo in Utah, says group work is a good way to lead while also gaining ideas from other team members.

“What a better way to mentor than to use other employees’ ideas to work better as a team? It motivates them to be creative,” she said.

So how does this concept translate into a better product or better efficiency within the workplace?

Phillips, of Ingenix, said when a group works on a large project, such as creating a Web site, they must get different ideas from the other departments and communicate those ideas in order to make the web site accurate while at the same time ensuring it is interesting.

“People in marketing will talk to those in charge of specific products, so they know the benefits and the way the product works,” Phillips said. “Then, they have to communicate that back to us, so we can figure out how to portray that with imagery and graphics.”

We also found through writing this story that collaboration has its place in professions that tend to be more independent in nature, such as teaching.

At primary and secondary schools, teachers are working to improve the classroom and their own teaching style by learning and working with each other to share ideas and concepts. Joni Akbarian, a teacher at Hunter High School in West Valley City, said she worked with other teachers, and as she became more experienced, she looked at methods that were successful for others that she could then utilize.

“In the first six to 10 years that I taught, I worked alone solely,” she said. “As I became more seasoned and realized that other teachers had techniques that would really work well in the classroom, I began to collaborate with others in my department. We even sit in on other teachers’ classrooms to see how those teachers approach teaching the same subject or unit that we do.”

These workplace examples show how university students may benefit from sharing ideas and brainstorming in group situations. Professors could help students learn this by making brainstorming part of group work, where the students actively share their ideas as part of their grade. If a student knows that giving an idea is part of the assignment, they might be more willing to participate than if it was just voluntary.

COLLEGE GROUP WORK VS. ON-THE-JOB TRAINING

University students often argue that group work in a class takes up valuable time because it is not relevant to the particular profession they are pursuing. Students assume that once they get a job, they’ll be put in group situations and will be trained to deal with the problems that might arise from working with others.

This may true for some, but if a person has never been
exposed to working with others on projects, then can they really be prepared to deal with the problems that can arise once on the job?

One reason group projects are important for students — and a reason professors need to help foster collaboration — is that during the time students work together, they also develop skills needed to solve problems with other people through brainstorming.

Freeman said he took many classes in geology that involved going out to sites and working with other students to solve a problem. "Field trips and group activities definitely prepared me coming into this job because it helped me to get together (with other students) and to try and solve assignments. "When things aren't working, I have to constantly go to senior employees to try and solve the problem; they have to work with you; you have to work with them. It’s the same scenario as (I experienced) in college.”

> MICHAEL FREEMAN, USGS geologist

However, others, like Lyn Ellis, an accountant at the Judge Building LLC in Salt Lake, said that group work in college may help a student become accustomed, but in her experience, most of the learning is on the job.

"It (college) doesn’t prepare you for the real world, but it’s better than nothing. You still have to adapt, but it can give you principles to adapt to the real world.”

Ways in which group work can improve

Most would agree that working with others helps students both in college and in the real world. People skills have been and always will be a characteristic needed to succeed in any job.

Perhaps part of the reason students dislike group work is because they can’t see how it will be relevant to their careers. When they are studying with other students in the same classes with the same majors, they forget about what happens in the real working world: Future co-workers may have a differing skill set or expertise, and they will have to learn to communicate their ideas in that setting.

How can university instructors help prepare students for working in a diverse workplace through group work?

Phillips said professors could assign projects in which students work with others in different majors.

"It’s important to have that cross-discipline experience,” said Phillips. For example, someone studying political science could benefit from having to do a project with a student from the psychology department. It would force them to think outside of the box and teach them that working with others can help them better understand their own career.

As the working world becomes even more global, it’s important for students to have the skills to work with people with different backgrounds. The sharing of information and ideas can be vital to whether a company will succeed or fail.

This is why group work in college can help students acquire the mindset needed to cooperate within a team in order to solve the many problems that may arise in their respective profession. (continued on page 17)