

Tips for Collaborative Projects

Well-designed group projects provide many benefits to students, but they also create some challenges.

Benefits of Collaborative Projects

- Heterogeneous groups provide special needs students with models of content understanding, project planning, and critical thinking.
- Students have opportunities to get help from their peers and to offer others support when needed.
- Students learn important 21st century skills such as teamwork and self-direction.
- Many students enjoy working in groups, and find such projects engaging and motivating. This is not true of all students; however, the benefits of collaborative work are critical for even those students who prefer to work alone.

Challenges of Collaborative Projects

Challenge	Solutions
Individual Accountability: Teachers often worry that group projects can mask individual students' strengths and weaknesses.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Conduct regular informal individual student-teacher and group conferences.• Ask students to create project plans with frequent checkpoints.• Provide opportunities for reflection and goal-setting activities.• Use individual and group performance as part of final project grades by combining project grades with individual assessments, such as tests, quizzes, and reflections.
Resistant Students: Many students, often those who are high achievers, prefer to work alone and resist working on group projects.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Refrain from presenting group projects as "fun" activities, even though many students will see them that way. Instead, emphasize the career and lifelong benefits to learning to collaborate.• Invite guest speakers to describe the role that collaboration plays in their jobs.• Assure students, and their parents, that they will be graded on their individual learning, as well as on their collaborative skills and activities.

Challenge	Solutions
Student Self-Direction: Projects require students to take a greater role in managing their own learning and time.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide students with a project timeline, and ask students to complete their own project plans. Gradually decrease the amount of direction provided for project plans until students can create them independently.• Make a plan to systematically assess students' progress through observation, checklists, and conferences.
Absent Students: Group projects can be problematic when students are absent.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Create a project wiki to keep track of documents.• Set up a plan ahead of time to address student absences.
Instruction in Project Management: Students benefit from explicit instruction in the skills they need to be successful.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Conduct mini-lessons on critical skills:<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Time management○ Dividing projects into smaller tasks○ Communication○ Problem solving○ Compromising○ Self-assessment○ Giving constructive feedback