

Virtual Team Assignment Using Google Docs
Daena J. Goldsmith, Department of Rhetoric & Media Studies, daena@lclark.edu

Objectives:

Peer learning can be an effective way to master course content and collaboration is an important skill in its own right, yet group assignments can fall short. Groups procrastinate, then divide the labor and slap together individual pieces, resulting in poor quality work and little learned about collaboration. In some groups, a few members may collaborate while others freeload, creating equity problems for grading and a frustrating group experience that discourages future collaboration.

Groups that meet in an electronic text-based environment leave a written record of their interaction so the group (and the instructor) can see who did what when and how they interacted. This accountability provides motivation to collaborate and a way to analyze interaction so that students can learn how to do it more effectively. Meeting behind a screen, having time to compose what you say, and knowing the instructor is present can also democratize participation and offset peer pressure.

Procedures:

My introductory level Interpersonal Media class meets MWF. After a couple of weeks to stabilize enrollment and make group assignments, the W class meetings take place virtually. Instead of coming to our classroom, students log into a Google Doc shared with their team. I give teams an assignment (e.g., discuss a reading, question, or example, or synthesize a class unit we've completed). Groups discuss the task in the Chat box (which appears when more than one person views the document simultaneously) and write a short essay or discussion summary in the Document. The tasks are challenging to complete in the allotted time and the process and final product are graded.

Because my class focuses on mediated interaction, the last 15 minutes of each meeting is reserved for writing individual process logs (a record of their observations of what occurred in the group, thoughts and reactions to the meeting, assessment of what went well or poorly and how to improve next time, applications of course concepts to group interaction). At the end of 10 weeks, teams complete a final essay in which they formulate advice for future teams. In addition, students write an individual essay in which they discuss what they learned from the virtual teams and how it relates to theories of mediated communication.

Theoretical Grounding:

Baym (2011) is the text for the class, providing a vocabulary for discussing the affordances of the medium as well as the processes of community building and relationship development. Walther and Bunz (2005) provide a readable discussion of the challenges and potential for virtual teams. They found that virtual teams can achieve levels of task effectiveness and relational trust and liking comparable to face-to-face teams IF they have sufficient time and follow rules designed to compensate for reduced social cues. Students read this study and reflect throughout the semester on their implementation of the rules.

Lessons learned:

--Assign the groups. I've developed a survey and I construct groups that have similar orientations to group work (i.e., love it/hate it) but diverse opinions on the content they will be

discussing. I also invite them to let me know if there is anyone in the class with whom it would be awkward to work (e.g., ex-romantic partners) and I avoid putting friends in the same group.

--After one or two virtual meetings, devote an in-class session to discussing the Walther & Bunz (2005) article. Let groups meet face-to-face during class to talk about the degree to which they are already following Walther & Bunz's rules for effective teams and how they could implement those they aren't following.

--On meeting days, I have all of the team documents open in tabs and I move between them, following the chat and answering questions. Resist the urge to intervene but do give them feedback after the meeting. It is also possible to review the team meeting at a later time if, at the end of the meeting, someone copies and pastes the chat into the document (chat disappears once the last person has logged out).

-- Be wary of good essays produced because one person is writing while others watch. Initially, a true group effort is often inferior to what the best person in the group could produce alone but over time, they will produce superior essays once they figure out how to collaborate.

--Grade their group work. It gives a sense of urgency to their efforts and they learn more, produce better work, and become more cohesive. Use grades and comments to continuously challenge them. Early on, some groups will struggle just to finish and they will need encouragement. Mid-semester, many groups will figure out a system that works reasonably well and will grow complacent. At that point, we spend a little time in class critically evaluating their own and other groups' essays and analyzing their own chat. Push them to produce better essays, discussions, and individual reflections; otherwise, the meetings lose energy.

--Strongly discourage meeting face-to-face outside of their virtual meetings (except for the few occasions you design in class). Early on, they struggle to adapt and complain about how much easier this would be face-to-face. Gently insist that they stick with it—they catch on and then they value having learned to do something that was hard at first.

--Give the groups time to develop procedures and relationships. This is likely not effective as a one-off activity unless the task requires little collaboration.

--You (and the students) may be surprised as students who are reticent in class emerge as strong group leaders or as students who might not otherwise interact with one another develop mutual respect and liking.

References

Baym, N. (2010). *Personal connections in the digital age*. Malden, MA: Polity Press.

Walther, J. B., & Bunz, U. (2005). The rules of virtual groups: Trust, liking, and performance in computer-mediated communication. *Journal of Communication*, 55, 828-846.