



## Yes, You Can Lead Student Teams, Even in a Virtual World

With the recent migration of many community college programs to distance learning, the difficulties instructors face when facilitating student teams has been magnified. Facilitating group work online may be especially difficult for instructors with little online teaching experience. Since teamwork is an essential employability skill, I developed the TEAM (Teach, Empower, Administrate, Motivate) model to lead student teams in my classes. During the winter 2020 semester, this model proved highly effective in online classes.

### Teach

Teaching online is no different than teaching in-person when conveying to students the importance of engagement. When facilitating student teams, this guidance is even more important.

### Leadership

Team leadership skills must be taught before online group work begins to provide students with shared knowledge of leadership principals. Instructors can use models to help students better understand the teamwork process. For example, on the first day of each class, instructors can introduce Tuckman's Model to reinforce the stages of team development unfamiliar to many students.<sup>1</sup>

### Learning Outcomes

Students who resist group work may "buy in" when they understand the reasoning behind assignments. Instructors can help these students see the big picture by communicating how team assignments are connected to course and program learning outcomes. Asking students to develop quality criteria for their teams and create team charters helps further illuminate the big picture.

### Empower

Group work should be an empowering experience. Students should leave class feeling confident in their abilities to work as a team member and network with new peers.

### Team Management Tools

Instructors empower student teams by providing templates such as team charters, team member contact sheets, meeting agendas, and meeting minutes sheets.

Third-party platforms such as Microsoft Teams can be leveraged to create these resources. Team lockers and discussion boards can also be set up in the LMS to provide students with a space where they can ask each other and the instructor questions.

### Team Conflict

Because students have no direct authority over their teammates, instructors may feel pressure from students to resolve team issues. However, instructors must not become managers, investigators, or detectives, and instead, stay focused on leading and mentoring teams to be self-directed. Students should be instructed to manage conflict internally, only calling on the instructor when all other options have been exhausted. In extreme cases that violate the college code of conduct, issues should be handled in the same manner as in a seated class.

### Team Communication Issues

Student absenteeism may create communication issues within teams between actively participating and non-active students. Creating team discussion boards and encouraging students to exchange phone numbers can help with this issue. Students may also benefit from scheduled weekly meetings to replicate the face-to-face time they would spend in a seated classroom.

In a diploma-based introduction to marketing course I taught this winter, I asked students to contact their assigned team members the first week of the term. I created a flowchart to assist student decision making based on how many team members had responded, and directed them to contact me if no teammate responded.

### Administrate

Good group work means good organization on the part of the instructor. How you set up groups sets the stage for how students interact for the rest of the term.

### Team Formation

Research shows that a criteria-based system is the best method for forming student teams, because when choosing teammates, students often misinterpret strong social relationships with working relationships.<sup>2</sup>

Students in my courses are matched primarily based on schedule and commitment level. Gender is clustered to avoid isolation and skill sets are distributed evenly. When I surveyed students in the latter half of the term,

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95 percent felt that instructor-led team formation was better for their learning experience, even after initially preferring self-enrolled teams. Online educational teamwork systems such as CATME and ITP Metrics offer team formation surveying tools that simplify the process for teacher and student.

## Motivate

As in any seated class, students must be motivated to care about and complete their work. There are two types of motivators—extrinsic and intrinsic.

### Extrinsic Motivators

#### Job Skills

It is essential that instructors explain the “soft skills” developed during teamwork and how they improve the candidacy of graduates looking for work after college. Instructors may cite sources like LinkedIn, which identifies sought-after employability skills highly correlated with teamwork such as adaptability, persuasion, collaboration, and emotional intelligence.<sup>3</sup>

#### Self/Peer Evaluations

Peer evaluation instruments such as CATME and ITP Metrics allow instructors to effectively manage the demands of facilitating behavioral evaluations, which are strongly recommended for student teamwork. When a portion of a team member’s final grade is based on his evaluation score, he will objectively link his own behaviors with the success of his team. This can be further emphasized by applying the evaluation score as a portion of his grade on the team assignment.

#### Final Grades

Instructors should clearly explain the grading scale for all team-based assignments. Some students may protest their final adjusted grades and reject peer comments after the team has adjourned. Instructors may need to investigate the validity of a student’s claims to determine if the grading was “fair.” In these cases, instructors may offer teams the chance to resubmit their evaluations before final grades are calculated.

### Intrinsic Motivators

#### Interim Behavioral Evaluations

Mid-semester, instructors can have teams complete non-graded evaluations. This enables students to identify “blind spots” between self-perception and how they are perceived by their teammates. Blending anonymous comments with a non-graded score also provides qualitative and quantitative goal setting for each student. These non-graded evaluations help students re-orient if necessary to successfully complete their final graded assessments.

#### Team Success Stories

To champion student voices, instructors may encourage teams to submit weekly success stories shared via course announcements or discussion boards, reinforcing best practices and lessons learned. Some students may even produce videos or presentations to showcase their team successes.

### Conclusion

Although the upfront time commitment may be demanding, by using the TEAM model educators can reduce difficulty later in the semester while significantly improving the student team experience. Regardless of subject, discipline, program, or delivery method, educational leadership and student teamwork provide an enriching, engaging, and fulfilling experience for students and the teacher.

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#### Additional Resources:

CATME Smarter Teamwork: <https://www.catme.org>

ITP Metrics – Team Assessments Backed by Research: <https://www.itpmetrics.com/>

The Learning Portal, College Libraries Ontario: <https://tlp-lpa.ca/study-skills/group-work>

#### Endnotes:

1. Tuckman, B. W., & Jensen, M. A. C. (1977). Stages of small-group development revisited. *Group & Organization Studies*, 2(4), 419-427
2. Bacon, D. R., Stewart, K. A., & Silver, W. S. (1999). Lessons from the best and worst student team experiences: How a teacher can make the difference. *Journal of Management Education*, 23(5), 467-488
3. 4th Annual 2020 Workplace Learning Report. (n.d.). Retrieved April 30, 2020, from <https://learning.linkedin.com/content/dam/me/learning/resources/pdfs/LinkedIn-Learning-2020-Workplace-Learning-Report.pdf>