

“We the Students”: Employing a Code of Conduct in Student Group Projects

The benefits of group work have long been established. Most instructors agree that student learning is improved by sharing their experiences with their colleagues, and that there is truth to the old adage, “Two (or more) heads are better than one.” Many workplaces embrace teamwork, and completing group projects in a classroom setting helps prepare our students for these workplace situations.

However, group work is not without its drawbacks. Most students have had at least one experience with a group member who has not carried his or her fair share of the load, or who argued with the other group members. Many of us have memories of similar experiences during our own time as students. Some instructors are even reluctant to introduce group work into their courses for fear of dealing with the inevitable student conflict issues.

I have incorporated semester-long group projects into three different courses that I teach: External Auditing, Internal Audit and Controls, and Accounting Theory. Each semester-long project is quite different, given the varying course content. The External Auditing project has thirteen assignments that simulate a real-life audit, which are submitted in batches of two or three at a time over the course of the semester. The Accounting Theory project has a series of five tasks that relate the course material to a real company chosen by the students. The projects in Internal Audit and Accounting Theory include a group presentation to the rest of the class. One thing, however, is common among the different courses: the first assignment each group is required to complete is a code of conduct or a group contract.

The code of conduct is based on the belief that many of the problems encountered by students working in groups can be eliminated, or at least reduced, if the students set the rules for group work in advance. The difficulties I have witnessed in group work often stem from a miscommunication or misunderstanding of the expectations among students. If the rules and expectations are set in writing and agreed upon by the group at the start of the project, there is less potential for disagreement later.

When assigning students to write a group code of conduct, I ask for four main sections:

1. A brief summary of how the work will be divided among the group members.

In the past, I have found that a common point of disagreement among students in a group is the way the workload is distributed. Groups have complained that one member wasn’t pulling his or her fair share of the load,

or problems arose due to confusion about which group member was supposed to complete a particular task.

Writing about how the work will be divided among the group members requires the students to review the entire project and think about the workload it represents. It encourages students to plan their approach to the project and consider how the workload will be distributed. Some student groups have recognized the opportunity to “play to their strengths” and have allocated work based on personal likes and abilities, making the project more enjoyable for each group member. The planning also reduces the opportunity for students to “ride on the group’s coattails” through the project, as group members are committing to a share of the work right up front. Finally, putting it in writing reduces the opportunities for students to later say, “I didn’t know I was supposed to do that.”

Some examples of techniques that students have developed to allocate the work include: conducting a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis of team members; allowing each member to pick their preferred task; randomly selecting assignments for each member; or agreeing that all group members will work equally on all assignments.

2. A brief summary of how the group will communicate with each other.

Another common issue I have dealt with is a group that is not communicating well. The issue arising around communication may be a group member who misses team meetings, or students who did not submit their tasks when the rest of the group was counting on them. Often a simple communication breakdown has led to significant problems in the way the group worked together. Sometimes disputes have arisen simply because one student had a different work schedule than his or her teammates, or a single mother was not able to arrange a babysitter so she could attend a group meeting.

Similar to the logic behind the division of work, a discussion about communication methods will encourage students to lay out the ground rules of how they will share information over the course of the project. Again, different groups have come up with different communication strategies. Some have agreed to have a face-to-face meeting once a week, sometimes right after class, or sometimes at a different time and location. Many groups have exchanged cell phone numbers and have decided to coordinate their work through text messaging. Other groups have used Google Docs to work on their projects remotely, while still others have created their own Facebook group in order to complete their projects. The exact methodology

does not matter; getting the students to think about the process in advance is the important part.

3. A brief summary of how the group will resolve disputes.

This section is the heart of the group code of conduct. Many students are reluctant to engage in group work because of the potential for disputes and disagreements. Writing this section encourages students to think about the possibility of conflict and to prepare themselves for it. Some students have had previous negative experiences with group work, either when one individual “coat tailed” on the work of others or dominated the group activities. Creating a process for resolving disputes helps students feel better about group work. Students feel that they have control over the situation, knowing they can do something about a non-performing member or one who tries to bully the other members.

Student groups often get very creative when defining a process to resolve disputes. Most groups indicate a desire to resolve disputes professionally, allowing each group member to voice his or her opinion. In the event that a common consensus cannot be achieved, most groups decide to hold a vote, with the majority deciding the course of action. Some groups have chosen to use a coin toss to break a tie decision; others have settled on “rock-paper-scissors.” On one occasion, two groups even went so far as to strike an agreement that, in the event a consensus in either group could not be achieved, a mediator would be selected from the other group (thus being impartial) to hear both sides and arbitrate the dispute.

The students often contemplate issues I never would have considered. For example, one group included a section in their code of conduct describing what process they would follow in the event of the death of one of their group members. I applauded their thoroughness and I am pleased they never needed to follow the process they developed. They included it in the “Resolving Disputes” section, however, which made me wonder a little bit about their dispute resolution method.

As the instructor, I remain the final escalation point for any group disputes. However, I have found a significant reduction in the number of issues brought to my attention since I began asking the students for a written code of conduct. In the rare event a group does need to escalate an issue to my attention, my first question to the group is, “Have you followed your code of conduct?”

4. An indication of agreement that all group members will follow the code of conduct.

Group members will sign the code of conduct, either physically (some groups have, in the past, scanned in their signatures and imbedded them into the document as an image) or electronically (typing their names and indicating their intention of following the code).

This indication of agreement makes the document feel more official to students; less like a class assignment and more like a binding contract between group members. Students seem to take the process more seriously, and it

reduces the likelihood of a group member claiming that he or she was unaware of or did not agree to the rules.

As with all student work, the length of the final submission varies from one group to another. Some groups produce a five- or six-page document, while others produce a page or two. Length is not always an indicator of quality; some of the shortest have covered the required contents in a most efficient manner.

In my role as the instructor, marking each code of conduct takes only a few minutes, since there is no right or wrong group contract. I am not looking for specific procedures or methods. It is up to each group to determine how they will split the work, communicate, and resolve disputes. Rather, what I am looking for is evidence that the group has considered these issues, and that they have given some thought towards how they will address each of them. Points are lost due to vague statements or half-answers, unworkable or overly complicated procedures, or a lack of effort in completing the assignment, as opposed to a correct process or procedure.

It is worth noting that the courses in which I have employed the student code of conduct are third- and fourth-year courses in a baccalaureate degree program. Students entering these classes bring with them a level of maturity and previous experiences with group projects that first- and second-year students may not yet possess. I do believe that this approach could still be employed with freshman and sophomores; in order to compensate for the lack of student experience, instructors may consider giving more explicit guidance to students, perhaps including specific suggestions or examples for each section of the contract.

Having students develop a code of conduct at the start of a semester-long project has reduced the number of difficulties requiring my intervention. The vast majority of group issues are now dealt with at the group level. Students have commented that the code of conduct has helped “head off” potential disagreements before they even happened, because all of the group members referred back to the code of conduct to which they had agreed.

Realistically, any time that a group of individuals comes together to form a team, there will always be the potential for interpersonal conflict. Having students develop a code of conduct for their groups certainly does not completely eliminate problems within a group, but it certainly reduces the opportunities for problems to emerge, and makes for a smoother and more enjoyable experience for instructors and students.

Stephen L. Bergstrom, *Accounting Instructor*

For further information, contact the author at SAIT Polytechnic, 1301 16th Avenue NW, Calgary, Alberta, Canada T2M 0L4. Email: stephen.bergstrom@sait.ca