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## **DESIGNING A SUCCESSFUL GROUP-REPORT EXPERIENCE**

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REPORT ASSIGNMENTS AND collaborative assignments can both be fraught with risk. Report projects, if not well planned, can be too simple (which causes lack of motivation) or too complex (which causes frustration) and/or can leave students wondering what they are supposed to have learned—all while creating a major grading burden for the instructor. Poorly planned group projects can cause similar difficulties, with the added danger of creating interpersonal stress in the student groups.

Yet for many reasons, the report assignment is the perfect choice for the collaborative project. Because of its extra length and complexity, the report enables several students to contribute meaningful research, writing, and document design decisions to one product or a related set of products. If the project goes well, each student will learn important lessons both about report writing and about teamwork.

To maximize the likelihood that the project will go well, the instructor must think through a wide range of variables and decide, based upon his or her learning objectives, what the features of the project will be. To assist with this process, we have generated a

decision-making table (see Figure 1). By considering the options for the assignment's design, the formation of groups, the collaborative process, and the evaluation of the product, we create a more manageable and focused project, better student learning, and a lower likelihood of unpleasant surprises and reactions.

The following examples of group-report assignments illustrate the range of projects that can result from selecting different features of this table.

### **Example #1 (Rentz): Killing Several Birds With Two Assignments**

Students are given two assignments, with the first leading to the second. For the first, I put students into groups of three, based on my assessment of their different strengths. I ask the groups to do secondary research to identify three real companies in Cincinnati with employee-volunteer programs, to learn as much as they can about those programs, and to recommend which one to use for the next assignment. The audience is the teacher; the goal is to recommend; and the process is to write together, in any way they determine.

For the second assignment, I assign each group one of their three companies to research further. Each group interviews the director of the company's volunteer programs (with all three students assisting if possible). Then, using the same findings, each student writes his or her own report. In this case, students write in response to the following scenario: They work for a fictitious company that has only ad hoc employee volunteerism, and their boss, interested in creating a more formal program, has asked them to research and report on a similar company's program.

Spreading the collaborative report assignment over two assignments enables students to conduct both secondary and empirical research, to write together and alone, to write for both the teacher and an imagined business audience, and to practice both the recommendation and the analytical report.

### **Example #2 (Arduser): Using a Real Client**

This assignment asks student groups to generate a recommendation report for changes to a local fine arts group's Web site. In addition to exposing students to the risk of working for a real client, this assignment

<b>Problem Design</b>	
Students design it	Instructor designs it
Each student has a discrete task	Students figure out how to divide the work
Students have to do the research	Instructor gives them the materials
Audience is a real client	Problem is a simulation
Report is a stand-alone assignment	Report is linked to other assignments
Product is a long, formal report	Product is a shorter, more informal report
Report requires little technology use	Report requires considerable use of technology
Report uses few or no graphics	Report requires use of graphics
Report will provide recommendations	Report will present/analyze only
Ass't requires different areas of expertise	All contributions will be roughly the same
Students act as themselves	Students play roles
Product is one group-written report	Each students writes his/her own report
<b>Group Design</b>	
Student choose their partners	Instructor assigns people to groups
Students with similar majors work together	Students have different majors
Students with equal abilities work together	Students have different abilities/strengths
Students from same culture work together	Students with different cultures work together
Groups are small (2-3)	Groups are large
Students choose their tasks/roles	Tasks/roles are assigned
<b>Process Design</b>	
Students make their own timeline	Instructor gives students a timeline
Students police themselves	Instructor polices the groups
Groups share knowledge with each other	Groups work alone
Students choose the meeting method	Instructor tells groups how/when/where to meet
Students choose the writing process	Instructor tells groups what process to use
<b>Evaluation Design</b>	
Report is big part of course grade	Report is small part of course grade
Students evaluate each other	Instructor evaluates the students
Students graded on report alone	Students graded on both product and process
All group members get same grade	Grades adjusted for individual contributions

**Figure 1.** Decision-Making Table for Designing the Group Report

allows them to analyze critically a technological artifact they are familiar with—Web sites—and encourages them to develop a more multifaceted sense of audience because they have to consider both the organization’s targeted readers and the client audience that reads their report.

I form the student groups with the intent of creating a microcosm of the workplace; each group has a variety of majors and skill sets, but I also ask students which of the five clients they are interested in working with and try to accommodate these preferences.

Because of the potentially complicated logistics of working with five clients in one term, I limit the exposure clients have to the classroom by asking them all to provide documents describing their Web site’s audience and purpose and any specific issues or problems they want to address when they update their Web site. I let the student groups decide how much or how little they will communicate with the client and whether or not they want to invite the client to the final class presentation for the report. The groups are also responsible for deciding on their division of labor and internal deadlines and for reporting on these in class.

The opportunity to work on a real-world problem that can be highly motivational for students. It also creates a complex and challenging situation that demands increased attention to such project management issues as “project creep” and client noncommunication.

### **Example #3 (Meloncon): Using a Harvard Business School Case Study**

Harvard Business School (HBS) case studies (available for a small fee at [www.hbsp.harvard.edu/products/cases.html](http://www.hbsp.harvard.edu/products/cases.html)) simulate real-world business cases, complete with such problems as conflicting goals, incomplete or partial information, multiple avenues for communication, and most importantly, no right answer. I select an HBS case for the group report and ask students to take the position(s) of a member of a particular company (e.g., Starbucks) based on their own particular strengths (e.g., marketing or finance). The audience is a person or entity found in the case. The HBS case allows students to work through a complex communication problem while also learning about issues of corporate social responsibility. The final report includes both quantitative and qualitative analysis derived from the case and additional research.

I have found that HBS cases are ideal for helping me direct and manage the complexities of the group project. These cases answer the question of problem design for the group report because they include generous contextual and supporting material and are structured to help students grapple with the problematic issues of purpose and audience. The cases are also flexible enough to accommodate diverse student interests and groups and broad enough to allow students to collaboratively research and then write their own recommendations. In addition, I use these cases to require a substantial amount of writing among group members, between groups, and as final deliverables (proposal, progress reports, drafts, final report, presentation with handouts, and evaluations).

Besides offering opportunities for extensive dialogue and writing, the case method encourages students to transfer and apply knowledge from their business curriculum to the communication and writing situation posed by the case. This emphasis on real-world business problem-solving furthers the students' learning experience.

### **Tips on Group Writing**

If an instructor uses the decision-making table and makes pedagogically sound decisions from it, then a lot of the work of managing the group process is done. However, the literature on collaborative writing and group dynamics offers tips that can also help the group-report project be a successful experience for students and teachers:

- Teach students how to “do” group writing. Groups mean social relationships, and relationships affect one’s identity, so writing in a group is doubly risky. Most students will have worked in teams before but may have had bad experiences. And most will not have been taught how to make a successful team, certainly not one that writes too. At minimum, have the class discuss what goes into collaborative writing and what their experiences (good and bad) have been. Help the teams anticipate what members will need to contribute (writing, research, knowledge, management, and technical skills) and have them develop a list of ground rules or a contract. Decide what to do with “wayward” students.
- Explain the demands of collaborative writing. In most successful writing groups, members listen to each other, try not to dominate, and are free to disagree but will also work toward consensus. In fact, working out disagreements when interpreting the rhetorical situation

is usually a good thing, but conflicts about interpersonal or procedural issues can hurt a team. Groups can become more inhibited when tasks are complex or ambiguous, so create frequent opportunities for groups to meet and exchange information.

- Be sure that groups structure their tasks to meet the project's goals. Ask teams to create a project plan that includes task analysis, task management, a timeline, and document management (be clear on your style and format expectations). The plan should divide the writing part of the project into equitable portions for all group members and make clear who will do what. For longer projects, teams can submit progress reports, which can be as simple as a single email, to keep in touch with you and each other.

While it would be wonderful to address every desirable learning objective with one assignment, we've found that trying to make one project do all things is likely to result in its doing none of them well. But with careful planning, combining the report and the group assignments can bring rewarding results.

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## **FACILITATING TEAMWORK WITH LEAN SIX SIGMA AND WEB-BASED TECHNOLOGY**

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ONE OF THE largest team-based projects that I worked on in industry involved a team of more than a dozen members, a multiyear timeline, and a budget well into six figures. Our task was to deliver a new corporate Web site. As the business owner of that project, I remember sitting down with our IT manager, who explained that she would

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