

# Successful student group projects: Perspectives and strategies<sup>1,2</sup>



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## Abstract

Nurses are a critical element in an increasingly interprofessional and complex health care system. In every practice arena and role, nurses need skills in negotiation, managing conflict, and working in cooperation with diverse groups. Group work assignments help build these expected role competencies in nursing students. This article explores advantages and challenges implicit in this teaching–learning strategy and offers practical insights gleaned from the real-world experience of faculty and students. © 2015 National Organization for Associate Degree Nursing. Published by Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

A student-centered learning environment has long been endorsed as best practice. It makes intuitive sense that our courses be designed to encourage student involvement in the discovery and sharing of knowledge. Thoughtfully developed group assignments are one approach to promote student involvement in active learning and achievement of course outcomes. The impetus for this article is the real-world experience of the faculty authors who have encountered the “ups and downs,” so to speak, of using group work assignments in nursing courses. The authors were further inspired to consider the topic through the lens of nursing students participating as co-authors.

## 2. Purpose

This article considers the benefits and challenges associated with group work as noted in the literature and experienced by the authors. Faculty and student perspectives with guidance for best practices are shared. For the purposes of this article, group work is defined as two or more students working collaboratively on a course assignment toward a common objective.

## 3. Background

The incorporation of group projects in nursing education programs is aligned with stated professional nursing education and practice standards. The American Nurses Association (ANA) professional code of ethics mandates that nurses, irrespective of role, engage with others within ethical, supportive, and civil relationships (ANA, 2015). Because many nurses progress on an educational pathway from associate to graduate degrees, it is important that each level of education includes curricular content and meaningful ways in which students can build these skills in collaboration and communication.

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The latest standards of the Accreditation Commission for Education in Nursing (ACEN) mandate that interprofessional collaboration be included in curricular content and instructional strategies in nursing education (ACEN, 2013). Interprofessional education (IPE) is identified in curricular and accreditation standards across health care disciplines. At its core, IPE serves to optimize client and population health outcomes and to strengthen the quality of health care delivery (Interprofessional Education Collaborative, 2011). The recent joint position statement between the National Council of State Boards of Nursing (NCSBN) and professional organizations in medicine and pharmacy endorses the importance of a team-based approach to quality health care delivery (NCSBN, 2014). Similarly, the guiding essentials for baccalaureate and master's education for professional nursing practice as outlined by the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) emphasize the importance of communication and collaboration in the health care environment (AACN, 2008, 2011).

The importance of a strong nursing workforce cannot be argued, and it is critical that employed nurses be encouraged and supported to further advance their education (Organization for Associate Degree Nursing, 2012). The associate degree nursing program student who participates in quality group work projects has an advantage in adapting to the expectations of today's workplace upon graduation. Further, previously developed competencies in collaboration and group processes will continue to be of value as associate degree nurses continue on to earn baccalaureate and graduate degrees during their career.

From novice to expert, from generalist to advanced practice specialist, all nurses are expected to have skills in negotiating with others, resolving conflict, and working with others to achieve expected care outcomes and institutional metrics. The expectation that health care professionals, including nurses, have sound preparation in group processes and collaborative communication skills is clear. These standards and expectations serve as an endorsement for implementing small group and cooperative learning in nursing education courses. These opportunities are a solid foundation to transition students toward interprofessional activities with other health care professional students and care providers.

#### 4. Benefits

Three realms of benefits—academic, social, and practical—are noted in the literature with respect to the teaching–learning strategy of group projects. Academic benefits include the expansion of critical thinking skills, deeper consideration of new perspectives, preparation for professional practice, and refinement of problem-solving skills (Gagnon & Roberge, 2012; Noonan, 2013). Social benefits include relationship building, self-discovery, being accountable to others, and broadening one's perspective (Noonan, 2013). Group project

participation in an increasingly diverse student population prepares the learner for the similar variety of workers and patients in the workplace.

Practical advantages of group project assignments include allowing students to disperse the workload and cover large areas of content efficiently while building on previous experiences to advance their skill set before graduation (Jackson et al., 2014). Faculty may value the promotion of active learning and the transition from the proverbial “sage on the stage” to a supportive “guide on the side” serving as an access point to resources (Ward-Smith, Peterson, & Schmer, 2010). The educator may also believe that students may engage more richly with course content through peer engagement and find group work a useful element in a flipped classroom course design (Critz & Knight, 2013).

#### 5. Challenges

Authors across multiple disciplines (Huang, 2014; Sevenhuysen et al., 2014; Taylor, 2011; Tomocho & Foels, 2012; Wooley, Malone, & Chabris, 2015) share in the perspective that group projects are not without unique challenges. Issues common to the general student dislike of group work, in the class or clinical setting, include difficulties with group dynamics, variances in individual preparation/participation, and reports of limited learning outcomes for the effort. Irrespective of the discipline, the assignment of group work to meet course outcomes necessitates that students receive guidance and development in the skills and strategies for collaborative work (Beccaria, Kek, Huijser, Rose, & Kimmins, 2014).

It cannot be assumed that faculty members, although expert in their clinical and academic roles, are skilled in the complexities of group dynamics. The advantage of working with diverse groups, mentioned previously as a benefit, can pose a challenge if faculty do not consider and prepare students for differences among group members—cultural, experiential, and educational—that can potentially create gaps across group expectations and relationship building. Differences among students from various cultural groups in work ethic, communication styles, language proficiency, and expectations have been identified as impactful on the outcome of academic group work (Kimmel & Volet, 2012).

Even when collaborative work is a recognized professional requirement, faculty strategies for group work may well be based on personal experience or observation (Jackson, Hickman, & Power, 2014). If the educator has experienced conflict and discord in the past, they may opt for other teaching strategies despite the known benefits of group work. If a faculty member's student experience with previous student groups has been positive, the educator may not take the necessary steps to educate students on strategies for success and lay down clear expectations. The assignment of group work without a supportive foundation is argued to be

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