

Limed: Teaching with a Twist

Episode 5 – Opportunities to Make Group Work Authentic

Matt Wittstein (00:00:10):

You are listening to Limed: Teaching with a Twist, a podcast that plays with pedagogy.

(00:00:23):

This week we consider some of the logistics of group work. Derek O'Leary from Virginia Commonwealth University teaches advertising, a field known to require collaboration and cooperation with diverse teams often remotely. David Buck, Gianna Smurro, and our producer Dhvani Toprani consider how to create an authentic group work experience in a remote setting. The panel provides some advice on creating groups, providing support and assessing group work. I think this episode provides some useful suggestions and things to consider as you build your next group project. Thanks for listening and as always, please rate and review our show.

(00:01:07):

Welcome to the show Derek. I'm so excited to have you on Limed podcast. Tell us a little bit about yourself.

Derek O'Leary (00:01:13):

Sure. I'm Derek O'Leary. I'm a full-time instructor entering my third year at Virginia Commonwealth University, or VCU for short. I teach at the Robertson School of Media and Culture. I'm primarily teaching advertising. In fact, we have two degrees in advertising, a strategic advertising, and in case you don't know what strategic is referring to, it's kind of the who we talk to and then what type of messages we'll connect with them.

(00:01:39):

And then the creative advertising, which you're probably really familiar with. And that's where we're actually creating those advertisements that make that connection, social media, TV, just about everything that... that your eyeballs make you bleed when you see it. And we're trying to make something really kind of creative, and actually stand out and make that connection. I also have a little design business where we kind of do some work on the side and up here in Richmond, kind of working at a bunch of advertising agencies since graduation for the last 10 years or so.

Matt Wittstein (00:02:09):

That's awesome. So you're like a practitioner of advertising, and you've found your way into an academic role. How have you found that experience and that transition?

Derek O'Leary (00:02:20):

A little challenging, for sure. I did, like I said, 10 years in the profession, and then I had a colleague who made that transition as well, and recommended that I come into the program to teach more new media. Augmented reality, virtual events, stuff that aren't the traditional advertisements. And it's been really a fun process of being able to connect with students, get across some good ways to connect them, and have them really kind of grow in the industry.

Matt Wittstein (00:02:49):

So I understand one of the things you're curious about is how to create those authentic work group projects feel like the real workforce, but you're teaching in a unique setting, where you're teaching remote only students. You want to tell me a little bit more about the course you're teaching and what that remote setting looks like?

Derek O'Leary (00:03:09):

The class itself is called Completeness, and it's that idea of seniors, and both, actually, tracks, the strategic and the creative kind of coming together for one last time to use all of their separate skills together on a project. We really want to give students an authentic experience to where they can show something when they graduate. So we actually have them work on real world clients. They're typically nonprofits from the Richmond area.

(00:03:38):

And it kind of does two things. One is that we're kind of helping the community grow, and actually having them get real advertising work, maybe they couldn't afford. And now students have that great work of having something in their portfolio they can show to employers. In that class, we kind of pair up the students, it's about a 20-person class, into about four to six people in the size. And they're working a little mini advertising agency, working on the problems of whatever this client is.

(00:04:08):

They are pitching. And so all these little groups are pitching against each other, and then that client says, "This is the winner." And then sometimes they use that work. I'm sure, just about everyone, as far as a professor knows that once you have those small groups, there's just sometimes people that aren't pulling their weight in the class. And so it's this question of how to create that authentic group work where you're having these groups really kind of work together to make something that can actually be used. And especially since this is a real world client, a nonprofit that can't really afford it, there's a real big importance to making sure that this works.

Matt Wittstein (00:04:49):

So you kind of raised a couple different things there with that group work, working with a real world client in almost a service capacity, you want to make sure that they do high quality work. So how do we ensure the overall product is meeting a standard? But, also, some of that we all see in our classrooms of how group dynamics are weird for our students, that one person maybe takes on a larger burden than another student. So what have you done to mitigate that? What's been successful for you versus what has been unsuccessful for you in that capacity?

Derek O'Leary (00:05:27):

That's a great point. I feel that, especially with it being an online class, I've had to put up specific checkpoints for these groups to work on. To where if you have a group of about four to six people, there's a little bit of something for each person, so you don't have that dreaded hanger-on. And that's, I think, something that I kind of tried to get out. And so I think that's working pretty well, but I think in the front and in the back of this group work is maybe the thing that I feel like I still could improve on.

(00:05:59):

So in the front, how do you actually assign these groups? I've talked to colleagues and there doesn't necessarily seem to be a agreed upon way to put these students together. It seems like it's a lot of gut, in some ways. And especially when you're in that first week, is there a system to pair these up? Is it by

the grades that they have? Is it by their work ethic? Is it by some sort of personality quiz? Since this is an online class, is it based on availability? So you make sure that everyone meet. It really doesn't seem like there's a good way. And I kind of wonder if is there something that can help stop that?

(00:06:39):

And then the last part I talked about that I think could be addressed is the peer reviews. So maybe it's that fact of coming out with how everyone's doing their fair share. And in the case of my class, the entire group shares the grade. Sometimes group members will say, "Hey, this person didn't pull their fair share. They shouldn't get the grade that we have." And I've talked to a couple of colleagues and they talk about, "Maybe it is giving them a lesser grade."

(00:07:08):

I've heard of some instances where group members are kicked out, and then they have to do the whole project themselves. But this is a case of a real world client, so then are they then pitching a piece all by themselves? Is that fair? Is that even worth doing? And so those are all kind of questions of that peer review as far as coming out with people's experience and they're pulling their weight in some ways. But then people aren't really too honest on those either. So that's kind of a great question of is there something in the questions that can help find about people pulling their weight?

Matt Wittstein (00:07:44):

In your classroom, what do you think are the most pressing challenges that you're experiencing? Is it developing the connections of people in the groups? Is it getting them to buy into the group work concept? Is it simply the logistics of having all of these people remote only, trying to manage their life schedules?

Derek O'Leary (00:08:04):

I'd probably say it is that online aspect, since this is an asynchronous course, is that the students have something else. And I think anyone that has taught asynchronous classes, when there's other classes that are in person, students tend to put that at the end. And so how do you put the sense of importance on this work to where they are prioritizing it in the same way? I think that's what is happening.

(00:08:31):

And then the other fact is student's availability, especially in these big group works. Some really can only work on it right before the deadline, while others want to work on it right away. And so there doesn't seem to be a great way to help the students kind of work together. So I think it's those logistic aspects, because especially since these are seniors, they know the skills, they kind of know what they need to do, but it's this working together, which it seems like is maybe the point of the class in some ways.

Matt Wittstein (00:08:59):

If I have this right, one of the aspects is just thinking about how our students might perceive remote asynchronous courses as lower priorities to their in-class courses. The second thing that you have there are developing those dynamics and helping them develop some collaborative skills for work in a remote environment.

(00:09:22):

One of the things that I find super cool and interesting with this is I imagine in advertising, and please correct me if I'm wrong, that you often have to work collaboratively, maybe not in person with perhaps a client that's across the country, a creative partner that's not in the same office building as you.

Derek O'Leary (00:09:41):

That's a great point. And that's essentially why we want to offer these online classes is so many jobs and advertising industry have some sort of remote work aspect. So we want students to get these skills that they can be collaborative online, and that they can take that. Because it definitely is a learning process as far as how to communicate with someone who might not be in the same time zone.

Matt Wittstein (00:10:05):

What sort of technology tools are you currently using in your classroom or in your workplace to help with developing strong, collaborative relationships?

Derek O'Leary (00:10:15):

It seems like a lot of the cloud sharing documents, so Google, I use Figma too, where you know can see everyone working at the same time. Those are always really helpful. It helps me also go into their work and give good critique. It seems like there's a lot of communication tools, so Discord or Slack. It doesn't seem like there's a singular way to do it. But I think just emails, text can also help a long way to getting there, too. But I am open to just about any tool and I think that's about the same for the advertising industry is they're pretty open to whatever is going to be personal preference.

Matt Wittstein (00:10:56):

You've taught this course a few times, I believe. I'm curious what types of feedback you've gotten from some of the graduates or students that you've had previously in that course of things that worked well, that didn't work well, areas that maybe you want to improve, or I really like the phrase of making a strength a superpower, like something that went well that you want to make it just super awesome every time. What's some of that feedback that you've gotten from students about your course?

Derek O'Leary (00:11:25):

The students like the project, they like the aspect of working with nonprofits, for the most part. They feel a sense of importance in that. They enjoy the bigger campaign. I think on the flip side of that is that they really like working on this project, but then they don't put it in their portfolio to show to potential employers. So then did they really like the work? I think, an aspect that I sometimes hear is that, "I really like the projects, but I didn't necessarily have something I can take away with that." It's kind of interesting.

(00:11:57):

As far as maybe negatives, I think it is addressing those people who are those hanger-ons. As much as they liked working on the projects, they feel like that person didn't deserve a grade, and they maybe wished that I had made sure that that person was, I don't know, punished or something. And that's just because they just felt really stressed out because of how much extra work they had to pick up. And so I think that's maybe the biggest critique students had is just my role stepping in to kind of take care of people who weren't doing their fair share.

Matt Wittstein (00:12:30):

I want to offer you the opportunity, are there specific things that you would like our panels to address as they're having that conversation?

Derek O'Leary (00:12:39):

Just about anything with group work can kind of relate to just about any professor at any level, whether it's in person. So I think a lot of the stuff of maybe it's pairing students in groups and then addressing the dynamics once they're in the group. Whether that's in the peer review process at the end, or ways to help them along the way in the middle to say, "Here's better ways for communication." So anything that just helps a smoother road for students and working in these group environments of four to six.

Matt Wittstein (00:13:14):

Thank you so much. Well I think we have a lot of really good content.

Derek O'Leary (00:13:17):

Awesome. Thank you so much Matt. This has been fun.

Matt Wittstein (00:13:23):

So we're here with our panel and I'm really excited to talk about Derek's issue of group work in the classroom. And to introduce yourselves, I would love for each of you to just kind of pop around real quick and share what do you think is one key characteristic of successful group work. Gianna, why don't you start.

Gianna Smurro (00:13:42):

Hi, I'm Gianna Smurro. I'm a sophomore communications fellow at Elon University, majoring in journalism and cinema and television arts with a minor in political science. I'm also a CEL student scholar for the Center for Engaged Learning for our research seminar on work integrated learning. So collaborative group work really works when you pull from the strengths of many of the different people in the group, while also allowing opportunities for those less knowledgeable about other aspects to build upon their own strengths to learn new skillsets.

Dhvani Toprani (00:14:09):

Hi, everyone. My name is Dhvani Toprani and I'm an instructional technologist at the TLT department at Elon University. I have a background in teaching, learning, and design. And I have worked a lot with groups and building collaborative groups among younger students, older learners, and adult learners.

(00:14:28):

My idea of a successful group or creating and working in successful group is having a good shared understanding of why this group has come together about the group goals, about the group strategies, communication processes. I think the shared understanding piece really is fundamental to everything else that the group does.

David Buck (00:14:48):

I'm David Buck, I'm an associate professor of psychology at Elon University. And I was a Center for Engaged Learning faculty scholar, where I was researching collaborative projects and designments as a high impact learning practice.

(00:15:05):

When thinking about the answer to this question, my impulse is to turn it back and say, that depends on how you define success. Because this is something that is a challenging thing when trying to think about

collaborative projects as a pedagogical tool and a business setting. Success is very clearly defined by the success of the product that comes out of the group work.

(00:15:31):

But if I'm using collaborative assignment as a learning tool, then the resulting product isn't necessarily what I think of as a indicator of success. What a success is how much have the individuals that make up the group learned? Have they met the learning objectives that I've had for them? That can sometimes be reflected in the project, but it can also sometimes be masked by individuals taking on the lion's share of the work.

Matt Wittstein (00:16:05):

So to share with you a little bit about our guest for this episode, Derek O'Leary is a instructor of advertising at Virginia Commonwealth University. He teaches remote only, asynchronous courses in their advertising program. And he's specifically thinking about his course, which is called Completeness, which brings together their senior students from both the strategic advertising and the creative advertising tracks to sort of do a final group project together.

(00:16:34):

And what he does in that class is he works with some nonprofits in the Richmond area to have them work as sort of a miniature firm to support some of the nonprofit's goals. And what he's really curious about is understanding how to create what I'm framing as authentic group work. Group work that sort of mimics what they will experience in the workforce, developing some of the skills that he would want of his employees in the workforce. He also owns a advertising company, so he has some practical experience there as well.

(00:17:06):

But I want to just lead off with how do you make groups work well? And I want to know both the student and the faculty and the staff perspective. What are characteristics of groups that have worked really well, like the actual group that you worked that was successful by whatever definition you had? How do you make them work well?

Dhvani Toprani (00:17:27):

I think the first thing that comes to my mind when I'm thinking of creating a group and making students or learners be in a group is that you as a designer of the learning experience need to begin the process with a complex enough task. So if the task does not lend itself to the complexity of having three or four people come together, the motivation to work together is going to be missing at the onset of the task. If your task is simple enough, that is easy to accomplish by one person, that's when you're going to see group members very easily wavering off to the side, when a single person is able to accomplish the task. So from the perspective of an instructor, I think it's very important that you put enough thought, literature, and research into designing the task that you are expecting your groups to do.

(00:18:18):

And when I say complexity, I want to speak a little bit more to what that complexity can look like. Complexity can be in terms of the expectation of the diversity of knowledge that needs to come into accomplishing the tasks. So that's going to help your students and learners coming from different backgrounds of knowledge. You spoke about having students from the creative side and the strategic side in Derek's case.

(00:18:44):

So making sure that the task is complex enough that caters to the needs of different types of learners. So when the task is complex enough, there is going to be an inherent need in the task for different students to come together, and that's going to act as a motivator for each of them to work together.

Gianna Smurro (00:19:02):

Yes, I've definitely had a lot of experience working in groups with people coming from different skillsets. So I find that to be the most productive way to work is when you're in a group of people who come from many different backgrounds. So being a communication student, there's a core curriculum that we have to follow, but there's people all across the different majors in the comm school can work on.

(00:19:21):

So what I found what to be really great is when their students from the journalism department, from the cinema department, who can all bring the different things that they've learned in their more specialized classes. Because it really allows you to use your skills and build upon them in your own specific fields, but also learn from people in other fields and take their skillsets to kind of build yours as well.

David Buck (00:19:42):

The point that you're making of complex tasks that capitalizes on the variety of skills that group members have is great. I think from the instructor side of things, one of the things that has become more and more apparent to me as I started researching this, and as I use group assignments in my classes is building in time to, essentially, help students learn how to do those things, how to capitalize on skills, how to work together effectively as a group.

(00:20:19):

Students probably in their first year in college and in high school and in all that have had experience with group projects, and universally everyone can pull up at least one time where it's just been a nightmare. And part of the problem I think is that when we assign a collaborative assignment, we often assume that the students who are taking part in the assignment already know how to work as a team, already know how to work as a group effectively, but it's very likely that they actually haven't been taught that.

(00:20:52):

Thinking of you wouldn't assign paper if you weren't sure that the students didn't know you know how to write about the topic or something. So you would take the time to teach the writing that's involved or make sure that it's a prerequisite or something. But we don't do that with group work. And I think that group work is itself a skill, and it's not something that everyone comes to as easily. Some people I think work rather naturally with others. Some people it's a heavier lift.

Dhvani Toprani (00:21:25):

David, one thing that comes to my mind when you say that is a time when I was in a classroom working with fifth/sixth graders, we used to begin with this assumption that collaboration is not learned. And to prep them up for the semester long design project, we used to start with a design challenge, which would last for just two weeks, and we would let all those problems come out that would be difficult for groups to work with.

(00:21:51):

And we used to take some time to reflect upon those problems that came out in those smaller, I won't say smaller, but group work or group projects that lasted just two weeks, before they actually went into this semester long group project. So I found that as a very useful strategy as an instructor to kind of test

the water that do I need to change any group? Do these kids need to be shuffled around? And if not, then they, also, the group members, got a chance to kind of understand the pulse of every student and the difficulties that they may face while they're working on a bigger projects.

Gianna Smurro (00:22:24):

I definitely think it's important, especially in lower level classes, to kind of establish those collaborative environments. Because when you're first coming to university, to a college, you're first meeting people for the very first time and you're all put into a very new environment. And so I feel that having a collaborative and group work in your earlier education will almost set you up for those projects further down the line. So that it sets like a baseline at the beginning, and then as you get into higher level courses, you don't have to set that established boundary.

David Buck (00:22:54):

Gianna, I think your point is good of you need these initial essentially skills, and some of them relate to say emotional intelligence, even. Say if someone in your group submits their share of the project or draft of it and it's really not up to the standards that you would like it to be, how do you communicate that criticism in a way that is constructive, that won't create social conflict within the group, that will allow everyone to work together to make it a better project? That requires some communication skills that not everyone really has on tap, naturally. So doing some of that teaching I think is important.

(00:23:37):

I think within a class, beyond that, just establishing norms. Just as whenever you go into any new work environment, there are different sets of norms for how people work effectively in that environment. Making that a part of the introduction to an assignment I think is really important. And these can be either norms maybe that the instructor has prepared, or potentially, even better, norms that are developed out of a larger discussion with the group members or the students in the class as a whole.

Gianna Smurro (00:24:09):

And I think that really comes into play when you're discussing whether you're taking part in an in-person class, a synchronous, or an asynchronous class, because each of those different environments will involve different things. Say, if you're in an asynchronous class, you're not meeting in-person ever, but will it be in expected from the class to do separate Zoom calls to kind of get together in that way? So just kind of establishing that, depending on the different ways in which a class is meeting, is very important.

Dhvani Toprani (00:24:36):

Talking about the synchronous and asynchronous aspects of teaching and learning, I want to go back to David's idea, where he was talking about the product and the process. I also feel when we are talking about collaboration, we tend to give a lot more focus on the product. And when we as instructors and designers of a learning environment give a lot of importance to the product, we are kind of teaching the groups to do the same. So they tend to overlook the processes, they tend to overlook the difficulties that they're facing in the process of delivering the final product, because we have taught them to pay more attention to the product.

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But in reality, if the process is strong and the process has been supported by the instructor, if the process has been discussed enough by the learners, then the product will come out to be good. And

that's where we are teaching them both the content and collaboration. So I think really builds into the longevity of the group, the sustainability of the groups, and the kind of interactions they'll engage in.

Matt Wittstein (00:25:34):

I think if I'm hearing you all right, some of the keys to success in group work might come down to having a good group to work with. But some of that can be by building the skills in the individual students, so that they're all able to work collaboratively. But there is still that sort of notion of making the right group. There's probably not a right group or a wrong group, but how do you assign groups?

(00:25:59):

Or how do you like groups to be assigned, Gianna, when you're working with students that maybe you know really well and others that you don't know really well? How's that experience from the student side? And then David and Dhvani, do you have any suggestions on best practices in helping students pick or make or assigning groups for them?

Gianna Smurro (00:26:20):

Since I'm a cinema major, a lot of times we're doing videos, where we're on sets, and so we have people managing cameras and lighting and all different things. So at least when I'm in a group, I like to rely on people who I know I can rely on. I think students always like to kind of be with people that they know, and that they can trust, because they already have that established connection.

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But then kind of stepping back from that, I feel it's also kind of important to work with people who are outside of your circle, so that you can learn their skills as well and possibly broaden your network. So there's kind of that multifaceted way to look at it of which would be beneficial in a certain environment, really specifically tailored to any given class.

Dhvani Toprani (00:26:59):

And I'm going to become an evil instructor over here, because I think one of the goals for my learning environments is to push students out of their comfort zone. And when I say that I'm not going to pair the two people who obviously dislike each other together, but I do tend to focus on bringing diverse students together for two reasons. One, because you want those diverse experiences to be voiced in the work that they're doing. And two, because when you go into a professional world, you don't get to pick your groups that you're going to work with.

(00:27:36):

So one of the most important things about collaboration is how do you build trust with people who are not like you? How do you build a working relationship? How do you find ways to efficiently communicate with people who do not think like you? So when I'm creating groups, I do focus on bringing that diversity into a group, so that it kind of gives them a more authentic experience of what collaboration can look like in the real world.

David Buck (00:28:03):

What both of you have mentioned is trust. And I think that is one of the most important things that groups need to be effective. And when students are able to, or when anyone is able to self-select their group, you have that kind of safety net of built-in trust.

(00:28:22):

I agree with Dhvani, in that I think there's also a lot of good reasons to not allow that to be the case. To say that, "Well, you won't necessarily be able to pick all your coworkers when you're in the real world. Let's create an environment where you're in a group, where you now have to learn how to build trust, learn how to become a cohesive group."

(00:28:49):

Beyond that, just having used these kinds of assignments in my classes for many years, initially, I allowed students to self-select groups. And there was always then unfortunate scenario where there were a few students who maybe they were new to the university or for whatever reason, and it ended up having a very last kid selected for dodgeball kind of feel to it. And you might then have them be added on to a trio of self-selected people to make a four-person group. And really it feels like they're sort of the odd person out. And I really didn't like that.

(00:29:26):

For my classes, I tend to do sort of a mixture of the two. I survey students, and, well, I ask a few different things, but the first two questions I ask them are, is there anyone in the class that for whatever reason you think you would really like to work with? Maybe you've worked with them in the past on things maybe you know that your schedules click really well, whatever reason, I don't need to know it. But is there anyone that you would like to be grouped with? And then conversely, is there anyone that, you do not need to tell me why, you know you shouldn't probably be grouped with. Those get maybe two or three names most for most people. So it's a fairly easy thing.

(00:30:07):

Then I just ask about schedules, because I think logistics end up being one of the biggest points of challenge for group members. Because I think whether it's in person or online, face-to-face communication through something like Zoom or just meeting together when there's time, I think is really, really important as part of that trust building, as part of building cohesion and a sense of groupness. So asking about schedules and trying to sort people based on where they have a lot of overlap.

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And then I ask last about goals, what are your goals for this class? For this project? Things like that. And that's essentially the order that I tend to prioritize, personal preferences, logistics, and you could think of it as goal orientation or even work style. I don't think there's one perfect way to do this, because I think human beings are so complex. Don't do it random. Random is by its nature random, so it doesn't necessarily make sense. In a way it's not respecting either your students to make these decisions or it's not showing that you have any kind of intentionality or idea of how to form groups. So I think doing something intentional is really the key thing.

Dhvani Toprani (00:31:27):

I 100% agree with you that intentionality is very important in creating these groups. And just to tell you how complex this process is of grouping and how much research has thought about this, I would want to point our listeners to Brigid Barron's work. Through different articles, she's spoken about when smart groups fail, and she's looking at different characteristics of what makes a good group and what are the different processes that go into making a good group. And after trying so many permutations and combinations, we still do not have a set answer for this question. So yes, there is a lot of complexity involved in this process.

(00:32:06):

And then the second thing, just to back David up on some of the things that he was saying, that if you have a rationale as an instructor or a designer for creating groups one way or another, communicate that rationale with your learners. Tell them, "Here is the rubric I used for creating these groups, and this is my intention. This is my rationale. And if this rationale makes sense to you, go ahead..." They're going to have that kind of a confidence that you have in a group when you have created a group.

(00:32:32):

And then if they want to switch a group, one thing that I ask my learners to do is, "You need to come up with a rationale stronger than the rationale that I have presented to you for putting you in a group." That brings in that intentionality, not just on your end but on your students end as well, where they start thinking about personalities and communications and their schedules. I never thought about schedules, David, so that was a great idea.

Matt Wittstein (00:32:54):

So I want to keep moving us forward a little bit. We've talked a little bit about assigning groups and creating some trust between group members. Now I want to ask, what do you do when group dynamics just go wrong? What do you need from the teacher, if you're the student? What systems do you maybe put in place for students to self remediate within a group? Or how do you check in just to make sure that things are going well along the way?

Gianna Smurro (00:33:18):

A big thing that my teachers have always put out there is availability. If something isn't going right to being available to have a conversation with you, whether that be at office hours or through email. Just because group work can become very complicated, especially if members aren't putting in their share.

(00:33:36):

Also, at the end of assignments, a lot of teachers have sent out surveys, where the grades is dependent on what other people say about you. So from one of my statistics classes, we had a project that lasted the entire semester, and at the end we got a survey. And each and every person, you had to rate them on skills of participation, work ethic, and that was factored into their final grade. So almost holding each other accountable for their work, so that they can put out the best product possible.

David Buck (00:34:05):

I think the point that Dhvani mentioned earlier of if a group member wants to switch out of their group, coming up with a rationale relates very much to this idea. I mean it's sort of an early stage preemptive, "I know I can't work well with this group," but we've talked about how in the real world you don't always get to pick your coworkers, but you do get to choose if you want to quit a job. And if it seems so terrible that it would motivate that, well having some kind of plan for that I think is not a bad idea.

(00:34:44):

I think Gianna's point about peer assessment is important and it's often brought up as an important feature of collaborative learning is having some way of showing individual accountability. I would say waiting till the end is not great. If it's a group that is around the whole semester, there should be check-ins. Because if you wait till the very end, well, by that point things have gone wrong. And wouldn't it be better if we can catch things before they go wrong, so that we can try and engage in some kind of mediation, constructive feedback, something like that to help the group work successfully.

(00:35:25):

To that end, I think having some kind of proactive, reaching out to groups to say, "Check-in, how are things going? Give me a progress report. How's the group functioning?" That kind of stuff I think is important. And beyond that, just scaffolding things. So if you have a semester long project, I would not make it that you form the groups in the first week and that you just collect something in the last week.

(00:35:53):

It should be something where there are stages of this project that have due dates, and even if they're graded for completion or you're just asking them to turn something in, so that you as the instructor can get an idea of how far along they are, so that you can identify, "Ooh, this group has a lot of work they need to do, so maybe I should meet with them." I think those are all sort of proactive things that if we're talking about a real world environment, the instructor's like the manager, and the manager might check in periodically to make sure that the group is progressing appropriately.

Dhvani Toprani (00:36:32):

I might totally sound crazy here, but every time I see a group dysfunctioning, it makes me really excited. Because as a researcher, what it tells me is that there are opportunities for learning. There are opportunities for instructors to do something different, and that just naturally excites me. What I'm thinking about helping them build empathy. Because many a times there is not something actually wrong and dysfunctional in the group, it's just that group members have a hard time understanding each other. Just telling them that, "Hey, you know what? This is a difficult process, it's going to be messy. But how can we empathize with each other in the process?"

David Buck (00:37:10):

I think the empathy piece is really important. Empathy doesn't mean just trying to understand and forgive when a group member doesn't live up to the expectations that existed for them. If someone doesn't show up for a group meeting, I think empathy here might mean saying, "Well, I'm going to assume they didn't do this for a malicious reason, that maybe there's something going on that prevented them. They wanted to be here. Let's wait, let's talk it out."

(00:37:38):

But I think empathy also means understanding how your own failure to be accountable for your responsibilities affected your group members, and genuinely wanting to then live up to those responsibilities. So to do what needs to be done to make sure that you aren't letting down the group. At the beginning of the group projects that I do, I have students, essentially, work within their group to come up with a sort of group contract or charter that talks about things like how will we communicate, what do we do if someone misses a meeting or misses a day of class?

(00:38:19):

And I always take a moment to talk with them about a few things with that. One, groups that just put, "We'll try and be as flexible as possible and understanding," groups where that's what they put on that contract and I collect these and keep them, and they keep a copy as well, at the end of the semester, those are the groups that have sort of exploded. That's generally what they've put there, "We're going to be as flexible as possible."

(00:38:45):

Because at a certain point that flexibility is going to reach a tipping point where people are like, "We need to get this done or we're going to fail this assignment. And so we've been flexible this whole time." So it will easily spill into resentment and frustration. So when talking about those kinds of questions,

don't just say, "We'll be flexible and understanding," but also don't take this as a question of how are we going to punish this person?

(00:39:09):

Take this as, if someone doesn't meet this deadline, what are we going to do? Because the project still needs to be done. So are there alternative ways to communicate with the person? Do we maybe plan to have deadlines a little bit earlier, so that we have some buffer there? How will we get information about what we discussed at our group meeting to someone who may have missed the meeting? How will we make sure that they know what they're assigned to do before the next week or by the next deadline?

(00:39:38):

So it's not just about saying, "We're going to roll over for everyone," and it's not about how can we really punish someone for messing up? It's about understanding sometimes things happen. How do we adapt? How do we create a group that is flexible and agile enough to respond to those situations?

Dhvani Toprani (00:40:00):

And I think this goes back to the idea that I was trying to refer to in the beginning of our conversation. Having that shared understanding, having a shared goal, understanding what is the goal of our collaboration here is going to help you be more efficient at having these conversations that David was just talking about.

Gianna Smurro (00:40:19):

I think it also comes down a lot to personal character and past experiences. Because if a person isn't looking to be that proactive person to participate, they may never be that person even with measures to hold them accountable. So I feel that's also a very important thing to kind of consider is that some of these people who are put into groups, no matter what the group setting is, may not put that effort forward.

(00:40:42):

What should the instructor's role be in those specific situations? Should they intervene? Or is that something that is almost a boundary between teacher and students? So it's kind of like that difference of is it personal character or is it something that you can develop as a new skill?

David Buck (00:40:57):

And I think that we can help try and nurture that kind of character. I tell students in my classes that, "If there's a conflict in your group, first thing you need to do is really try and have an open and candid discussion with each other. If things don't go well, contact me, and then I'll help mediate an open and candid discussion." And then the nuclear option is we decide if this group needs to change its form for the rest of the project.

(00:41:26):

I am comfortable with saying, "If all else fails, I'm not going to hold a group together that clearly is not functioning." And again, thinking about authentic assignments and how the real world is, no, if someone is just completely missing all deadlines and failing in their duties and not communicating, they'd lose their job. Now, as an instructor you have to figure out how am I then going to maintain some kind of assignment with that person, because they're still part of the class? And that can be tricky depending on what the assignment is.

(00:42:06):

But it is usually a point where I say, "Okay, everything you've done up until this point, everyone gets a copy. Anything coming forward from that, if some peoples decide to stay as a group, they can. If others don't, they can do their own thing." But by that point, they'll be turning in separate assignments, essentially.

Matt Wittstein (00:42:24):

I really love how each of you have taken the idea of challenges within groups and thinking of it as ways that we can reframe it as learning opportunities, ways to teach some of those communication and collaboration skills that we're going to need when we have less control over our group or our project or things like that. But also having a lot of different ways to move forward, regardless of what that challenge is, whether that's a system you put in place or just knowing what the three options are at this stage.

(00:42:55):

So the last question I want to talk about is how do we assess group work? We know at the end of a semester we typically have grades at most institutions. And for me, I know in my classroom, I'm always wondering how do I account for that group work piece? I know, Gianna, you talked a little bit about students holding each other accountable and rating each other. That at times can feel scary and unfair, but it can also maybe be motivating for other students. So what are some of your tips for how to assess group work?

Gianna Smurro (00:43:29):

I think having rubrics that kind of distinguish between personal perspectives on as well as academic perspectives. So almost having a rubric that outlines, this is what the entire group is accountable for that you're putting forward. And then having a personal section as well, that says, did this one specific groupmate contribute these things? So just kind of having that distinction, just so it isn't like everybody in the group gets, let's say, a 90 on this assignment, rather having it be a little more complicated than that of this person clearly put in a lot more work and it really showcased a lot more, so they deserve the 95 rather than the 90 that their other teammate might have gotten. But just kind of having that difference to facilitate the group work and have it be more equitable when receiving your grades.

David Buck (00:44:17):

I actually, I wrote a couple of blog posts about this when I was working as a CEL scholar, because this is a really thorny issue, assessing group work. If what you're assessing is a final product that's delivered by the group, where individual efforts are hard to distinguish, that's tricky. Where I sort of came down on this personally, based on kind of reading and thinking about this at [inaudible 00:44:47] is, I don't make the final product worth a whole lot.

(00:44:51):

So in the class that I have where students do spend, essentially, the semester working on a group project, it is very scaffolded. There are lots of smaller parts that are submitted for feedback throughout the semester. There are assignments that they do that are intended to encourage the actual collaboration. The process is worth about three times as much as the actual final product is.

(00:45:22):

If you're trying to assess learning, individual student learning, I do not think you can do that well with a group project. I think if you want to assess individual student learning, you need to find an individual

assessment. Peer assessments are frequently used as a way of trying to weight the grade that individual group members get. But when you're assessing something, you're assessing, typically, the learning goals that you have. And peer assessments are typically more focused on teamwork skills. And if teamwork skills are a learning goal that you have, absolutely, it's important and it should be part of that assessment.

(00:45:58):

But if your learning skill that you're really hoping to assess is can someone create interesting graphic design for an advertisement? And you had six people turn in this product, how well they worked as a team doesn't necessarily tell you did they create an interesting graphic design? It could still just be that one person was in charge of the graphic design element and they did a great job, but that's all they did. And you've got five other people that were good team players, but in the end you don't know that they know anything about graphic design.

(00:46:32):

I've debated about this a lot and in the end, I'm not really convinced that I would put a whole lot of weight onto the final product of group work as a major point of assessment. I would try and have ways that you can get individual assessments built into it.

Dhvani Toprani (00:46:50):

I love what David said, because I was going to say the same thing. The assessment has to focus both on product and the process. And you quantifying that the process needs to be three times the product. I guess it's amazing, because that process is important. One thing that I do think differently than Gianna over here is that, if I am creating something that's for collaboration, that's for encouraging students to work together, then doing the assessment individually kind of contradicts the thing that I'm trying to establish here.

(00:47:23):

So I would look at the group as a single unit, and I would want the learners to look at the group as a single unit when they are assessing or helping me assess their process or product. So if I'm asking them to tell me how the process went, what they did, I'm going to want all three of them to sit together and have this conversation, and evaluate themselves on how did we do in collaboration? How did we do in communication? How do we do in listening to each other? And things like that. And I could help them identify these criteria, but I would want them to think of the group as a single unit and not individuals in the group. I think that takes us back to the idea of am I doing cooperative work together or collaborator work together?

(00:48:08):

And then the second thing is to make sure that everyone has still contributed to the work and the collaborative process, there are different technologies that can help you do a quick quantitative assessment of how active they were. If you're using Teams, if you're using shared documents, you can go look at versions and who has contributed how much to the version. But, again, I wouldn't give too much of weightage to that because that's just to make sure that everyone was involved in the conversation. But beyond that, I think those reflections and those assessment of the group as a unit is more valuable in the process of assessment than looking at individual efforts and who contributed how much.

Gianna Smurro (00:48:47):

I think it really comes down to the fact that, at least coming from the student's perspective, when you ask students what their main priority is, a lot of people will just answer, "It's the end product grade." So I think it really just needs to kind of be communicated that the learning process is what's really most important, because that's what you will get out of it.

(00:49:05):

So I mean very much value my grades. I always want to do the best and put out the best that I possibly can, like most people do. But I think that a lot of times it's kind of lost the meaning of the group work and why you're working together. So I think that especially needs to be communicated when you're heading into these different experiences

Dhvani Toprani (00:49:21):

And I think for all of you, Gianna, to think like that, the blame is on us. We taught you to think like that, I guess, as instructors, by giving you, "These are your assignments and we are going to assess you on the product you submit." So I think that shift from product to process is so important right now.

David Buck (00:49:39):

So peer assessments are a great way of trying to get some degree of process feedback from the students. As Gianna mentioned, there are some concerns that students have with peer assessment of are you getting a positive assessment because you were likable or because you contributed a lot? And say you work in a group where you end up being kind of a task master, because no one else maybe has the same goals as you do for the project. You might run the risk of getting negative peer assessments, even if you contributed quite a bit to the project. So that can be a tricky thing.

(00:50:15):

I tend to like to use peer assessments as more forms of formative feedback, so that they can initiate discussions within the group of how are we doing for each other? What do we need to improve on? Or to help initiate discussions between me and the group. With asynchronous classes in particular, it's going to be a lot more challenging when we talk about these collaborative assignments. There tends to be this impulse to divide and conquer, which isn't what would be considered true collaboration in a lot of the literature on collaboration, which makes this distinction between cooperation and collaboration.

Matt Wittstein (00:50:50):

At this point, David misspoke and said cooperation instead of collaboration. So collaboration is...

David Buck (00:50:57):

More of this, everyone does a part to create the whole. And so Gianna, you do cinema and film kinds of assignments, you absolutely need a director, you need someone who's doing the lighting, you need someone who's doing the sound. And that is a collaborative project, where everyone has cooperated utilizing their specific skills to create this whole thing. A cooperative assignment is where really everyone has some sort of meaning making as the director and has some kind of role in it. Everyone has some sort of role in the lighting. It's not efficient, by any means.

(00:51:30):

But if I, as the instructor, want to make sure that all the students in the group, if I'm trying to assess, well, do they understand lighting? When all I look at is the final film, I don't know that all the students understand lighting. So we run into this problem where a lot of times cooperation is what we are hoping

for when we're assessing a final product. But in reality it's more likely that it is more of a collaborative part where everyone sort of utilized their specific skillset to do some component of the project, and ideally, then it was brought together to become some kind of cohesive whole.

Gianna Smurro (00:52:06):

I think it's really important to recognize that across different fields and different careers and different majors, that group work could be defined in many different ways depending on the different assignments that are in each of these classes. So when looking to assign these projects as well as to really grade them, I think it's really important to distinguish that it's very different across different fields.

Dhvani Toprani (00:52:29):

While we are talking about learning objectives, I wanted to look back to the idea of we have spoken so much about giving importance to process. So when we are coming into this whole thought process of assessment, it's important to recognize that once you start giving more importance to process your learning goals or learning objectives for collaborative work have to be defined very broadly. Because now if you're focusing on process, what is happening in one group versus another can look very different.

(00:52:57):

So to capture that heterogeneity, to capture those differences and experiences, I think it's important that we, as instructors, defined learning very broadly. Such that anything that's happening in each of these different groups and worlds, and these groups are going to become a world of its own, is being able to measure it in the learning outcomes, in the learning goals that you are defining for your collaborative work.

Matt Wittstein (00:53:24):

I think overall, to sum things up, is that it really revolves around the purpose of the assignment, what the instructor values as the learning outcomes for their students. And that actually kind of segues into each of these parts. How do you assign groups? Well, it depends, what's your goal of the group? How do you deal with difficult dynamics in a group? Well, it depends on what your goals are. Do you want to get through it and get a good product? Or do you want to work on those skills on how to get through difficult conversations in a workplace? And same thing with assessment. It depends on what that instructor's purpose is. So I think at this point I have tons to share with Derek. So I just want to thank you all one more time for being a part of the show.

David Buck (00:54:10):

No problem. Thank you for asking.

Dhvani Toprani (00:54:12):

Thank you, Matt. It was my pleasure.

Gianna Smurro (00:54:14):

Thank you so much.

Matt Wittstein (00:54:17):

Derek, welcome back. I have lots to share with you.

Derek O'Leary (00:54:21):

Matt, I'm excited to be back. Always looking forward to finding out some things to improve the classroom experience.

Matt Wittstein (00:54:27):

So our panel, everyone was from Elon University. It included David Buck, who's a psychology professor, Dhvani Toprani, who's our producer, and also an instructional technologist at the university, and Gianna Smurro, who is a sophomore communications major. David and Gianna have both worked with the Center for Engaged Learning at Elon. David kind of diving into the topic of collaborative work as a high impact practice. And Gianna as a student scholar with a research group that's exploring work integrated learning. So they kind of have nice varying expertise and experiences at their stages of their lives to share some perspective.

(00:55:05):

So our discussion talked about some logistics of making groups, what to do when groups experience difficulty, and then finally thinking a little bit about that assessment piece that I know you were curious about. The big picture here is that there's no one right way to do group work. And as instructors, we really need to think through our purpose and our intention for a group assignment.

(00:55:27):

So one of the major themes that connected each of those pieces is that to develop good group dynamics, you really want to create opportunities to get groups on the same page. That might be just having schedules that allow them to work together, but it could also be things like having common goals for a project or a mix of skillsets so that each individual kind of has a purpose within their team. And it might require some teaching time to allow students to practice collaboration, because they may not have practiced those skills yet. And how you make those decisions will be unique to your classroom and your particular assignment.

(00:56:03):

So starting with creating groups, there was sort of a balance between having trust and comfort with group members, so working with people that you know and you like. Or pushing your students to maybe get out of their comfort zones a little bit and developing some of those real world authentic workplace skills, when they're working with a new team or a new team member.

(00:56:23):

David, over time, has developed a system that's kind of similar to what I use in my own classes that works well for him in creating groups of essentially asking students who do they want to work with? Who do they not want to work with? Asking them about logistics, so what are some common times that you can meet? And then finally asking them about those goals for the assignment or for the class, or maybe what the project topic is, something related to the actual thing that they're going to be doing.

(00:56:51):

The panel did want to emphasize for your class specifically, because it's remote and asynchronous, that logistics piece is probably super duper important. And they pretty much were across the board saying, "You need to require some synchronous meeting times for your groups, if you're not already doing that."

(00:57:10):

We also talked about how to check in and what to do if things go wrong. Dhvani actually expressed some excitement, because when there's conflict in groups, it creates a learning opportunity to develop empathy, improve communication, build trust. Those real world skills that we want our students to have when they hit that professional workforce. So it's also super useful to have some systems in place to help when there is conflict. So actually creating some structures.

(00:57:36):

Some specific ideas there that were thrown around is, one, just making yourself available to students. Gianna was like, "When the professor is super available, it's easier to navigate anything in the class." Having students as a class or in their groups, whatever works better for you, develop some sort of conflict resolution plan using group contracts and maybe most importantly, checking in early and often. So we kind of shared that experience of, "Oh yeah, when you check in mid-semester and things have already gone wrong, it's hard to reconcile." So check in early, check in again, check in again, check in again, and give them lots of opportunity to share feedback with you and practice giving feedback to each other.

(00:58:21):

I really loved the idea of framing conflicts as learning opportunities, and having structures you give students to help resolve group issues. Reminds me a little bit of the idea of failing forward, that it's okay to fail, but we need a way to move forward from our failure. And that is probably going to help the group's work as well.

(00:58:40):

The assessment piece was a complete-mixed bag, and ultimately it really needs to link back to the purpose of why are they actually working in groups. Peer assessment is probably going to be a good tool to get students to hold each other accountable, but it also needs to be coupled with creating a culture of fair and constructive feedback and criticism, and that might require them practicing giving constructive feedback and criticism. But knowing where you stand as the instructor in terms of collaboration versus cooperation and product versus process is really important.

(00:59:14):

So the takeaway here is really to just align your assessment and how you weigh aspects of that assessment with your desired learning outcomes. So that could be product related for your nonprofit partners. So did they make a really good thing for their partner? It could be process related to developing good work group skills, or and probably more likely a combination of those two. But that's kind of for you to decide with your particular class and assignment.

(00:59:41):

When using peer assessment, you should also consider some of the other things that students might unknowingly have some bias and berating their classmates on. For as simple as was somebody pleasant to work with? Has nothing to do with the quality of their work. It was just were they easy to work with? Do I like this person? It might change the way that they assess each other. So I know that was a lot, but I want to ask from those ideas, what feels the most supportive of preparing your students for their futures in advertising or other professional fields?

Derek O'Leary (01:00:15):

Yeah, you're right, Matt, there was quite a number of things I think the group really kind of touched on, and it's good to hear some of the things that were brought up. There are a couple of things that I am

actively trying to work on. So I think that's awesome, especially when you start thinking about putting the groups together, in that I pretty much am trying to put them together based on their availability for it being an online class, so that was good.

(01:00:40):

I think the check-in, I feel like I keep hearing, what's the best way to stimulate group discussions and even just get a lot of collaboration and just good participation in online classes? Always kind of comes down to I feel like professors just being involved as early and often as possible. And so I feel like having some more kind of structured check-ins, I mean right now I have kind of four peer reviews,. Where the students kind of come in and I think the first one maybe happens the fifth week and maybe that's way too late.

(01:01:15):

And so I like the idea of trying to come in earlier and often. And even just having a plan of just trying to figure out conflict, because for the most part, all the conflicts tend to be the same. So to actually maybe have some things in place. And I feel like that's also something where I could even talk to some of my colleagues about what are some real concrete steps to help come in and have that learning opportunity of really understanding and working together? Which the group and I think you mentioned this, really a reflection of the real world. So all of those sounded great to me.

Matt Wittstein (01:01:52):

So you talked a little bit about being involved early and often and maybe moving that peer review a little bit sooner. Are you right now thinking of anything that you can do to be more accessible to your students? I know in this generation, in this time, I respond to my emails quickly, I have lots of open hours to visit. What's going to work for you in this setting to just make sure your students know that you're there to support them? Maybe not literally 24/7, but figuratively, you're always there to support them.

Derek O'Leary (01:02:26):

It came down to, I think, maybe one of the points that was kind of made where requiring students to have a in-person time, and that is something I actually have, is that the students have to have a 30-minute huddle every week. And so I have it right now to where I plan to drop in at least once or twice each semester, but maybe it is dropping in more often than that, especially since with these meetings they're scheduled, they're 30-minute meetings, I can see when they're going to be for the entire semester.

(01:02:58):

So maybe it's me reframing them saying, "Just like a class or office hours, this is just as important for me to drop in, and even just for 15 minutes, just to see if there are any questions." And then that might just make more of a rapport where students are reaching out, if they have conflicts. I can't imagine that there is going to say the conflicts in front of each other, but I think it is something about them kind of reframing and seeing that I'm there for them.

Matt Wittstein (01:03:22):

I do want to ask real quick about what you're thinking on how to assess this group project. Is this really more project-based, where they're going to be assessed as a group on what that final product looks like? Or are you really making the learning outcomes align with those developing collaborative skills? And

what are you thinking for your approach to, ultimately, turn that into grades at the end of the semester? But the formative feedback's really valuable too.

Derek O'Leary (01:03:49):

For the most part, it's the product itself, especially since this class, they're working on work for real world clients, so I'm trying to push them to do work that's going to be valuable to a lot of times nonprofits. But I think it's something to be said about having an extra piece in there where you can talk about the collaboration and the cooperation together. And maybe kind of splitting the group work down that so they get a chunk for the collaboration of the shared project, but then also one that reflects just on their specific work too.

Matt Wittstein (01:04:27):

And even just having that conversation with them of the difference between collaboration and cooperation, and what that looks like from your professional perspective would probably be incredibly valuable to them. So I want to thank you one last time for sharing your class and what you're trying to accomplish, your learning goals for this advertising assignment with us. I just want to thank you one more time for being on the show.

Derek O'Leary (01:04:54):

Awesome. I think this has been really helpful, Matt. And I hope to implement just some of these right at the beginning of this semester, really. See if I can try to get some stuff in there to just kind of improve all those. But thank you for having me, and thank you for the group for really [inaudible 01:05:09] on this problem.

Matt Wittstein (01:05:08):

Limed: Teaching with a Twist was created and developed by Matt Wittstein, Associate Professor of Exercise Science. Dhvani Toprani is an instructional technologist, and serves as a producer for the show. Music for the show was composed and recorded by Kai Mitchell, a class of 2024 music production and recording arts student at Elon University.

(01:05:37):

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