

Structure for Success

Implementing Group Projects in Online Counselor Education Courses

The inclusion of opportunities for active learning is a crucial component in online course design in counselor education. Group project work is an effective pedagogical strategy that encourages student engagement and provides many benefits for student learning. However, students and instructors alike often have hesitations about group projects, especially in an online learning environment. This article (a) provides strategies for instructors to set up group projects in a manner that addresses common student concerns and maximizes student success and (b) discusses ethical, assessment, and technology considerations for the inclusion of group work in online counselor education courses.

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Group work is a widely used pedagogical strategy in higher education that is both well-supported by contemporary research and anecdotally reviled by students (Opdecam & Everaert, 2018; Shimazoe & Aldrich, 2010; Thom 2020). Instructors who incorporate group work into their course design must reconcile this tension by devising proactive strategies to enhance student collaboration and mitigate potentially negative outcomes (Brannen et al., 2021; Cartwright et al., 2021; Davies, 2009; Kleinsasser & Hong, 2016; Thom, 2020; Williams et al., 2019). Careful, thoughtful structuring of collaborative learning experiences is particularly important in online courses due to the ease with which students can simply “disappear online” (Swan et al., 2006, p. 7). Additionally, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a significant shift in terms of counselor preparation, where programs moved to delivering online courses and increasing the integration of technology into course delivery (Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP], 2022). The trend for online counselor education programs continues to grow, with more than 100 online programs accredited by CACREP. Given the proliferation of students in online counselor education courses, coupled with the skepticism many faculty have regarding quality student outcomes in online courses (Snow et al., 2018), counselor educators may benefit from suggestions and resources for effectively structuring online group projects and implementing group projects in online counselor education courses.

Group Work in Counselor Education Courses

Utilized in both traditional and online classrooms, collaborative group learning has been linked to positive outcomes for students in several domains, including cognitive learning, academic success, career-related preparation, and social-emotional functioning. Unfortunately, student attitudes toward group work do not always align with the positive research findings (Chang & Brickman, 2018). Students’ concerns include (a) the time demands of group work (Hammar Chiriac, 2014; Healy et al., 2018); (b) “free riding,” which involves peers who fail to contribute equally to the task (Davies, 2009; Hall & Buzwell, 2013); (c) grading implications for individual group members when grades are based on group performance (Chang & Brickman, 2018); (d) difficulty coordinating schedules (Brown & Thomas, 2020; Gottschall & Garcia-Rayonas, 2008; McKinney & Sen, 2016); (e) reduced opportunities to learn directly from the instructor (Herrmann, 2013); and (f) fear of conflict (Hammar Chiriac, 2014). Challenges with group work are exacerbated for online students, which can lead to more negative perceptions and lower

satisfaction with collaborative learning than peers in traditional classrooms (Chang & Kang, 2016; Smith et al., 2011).

Despite student concerns related to group work, standard-bearers in online education and counselor education and supervision consider it an important pedagogical tool and a matter of best practice. The Quality Matters higher education rubric requires that online course instructors “provide opportunities for interaction that support active learning” (Quality Matters, 2020, standard 5.2). Similarly, the ACES Guidelines for Online Learning in Counselor Education and Supervision assert that online courses must “provide opportunities for student interaction and social construction of knowledge” (Association for Counselor Education and Supervision [ACES] Technology Interest Network, 2017, p. 6) that replicate face-to-face modalities. Counselor educators in online programs must not only rely on discussions boards to increase student interactions and collaboration but, instead, utilize additional strategies for peer-to-peer interaction in their course development (Wasik et al., 2019). Given that asynchronous collaboration is becoming increasingly common in the modern professional counseling workplace, group projects, especially in mostly asynchronous and online courses, constitute an authentic and relevant learning experience that includes building important technical and social skills (Robertson & Riggs, 2018). Fortunately, researchers have identified proactive strategies that instructors can employ in maximizing positive collaborative learning outcomes, while mitigating the issues of most concern to students.

Structure for Success

Project groups in counselor education courses can be described as task groups in that they “promote efficient and effective accomplishment of tasks by a group of people typically assembled to achieve a specific and time-limited goal” (Association for Specialists in Group Work [ASGW], 2021, p. 3). Thus, counselor educators should carefully attend to the structuring of project groups as they would in any group counseling situation. While the steps for setting up group projects are similar for online and face-to-face courses, online groups may require the instructor to provide more initial direction and structure (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016). Supporting students in the initial stages of the group project will help equip them for success as they progress and should include (a) explaining the purpose of group projects to students; (b) forming groups; and (c) creating group contracts.

EXPLAIN THE PURPOSE OF GROUP PROJECTS TO STUDENTS

Although there are multiple benefits associated with group projects, students may have reservations about group work, particularly in an online environment (Koh & Hill, 2009). Thus, it is helpful for instructors to inform students of the rationale behind the inclusion of a group project in the course and how the group work supports outcomes desirable for emerging counseling professionals, as knowing the pedagogical rationale for group work can increase student buy-in and motivation and address students' hesitancy or skepticism (Shimazoe & Aldrich, 2010). Instructors should also be explicit about how the group activity relates to the course learning objectives. For example, in an online school-based crisis course, project groups can mimic a school-based crisis response team, which supports specific CACREP (2024) standards (e.g., Standard 5.H.9). It may be especially beneficial to share the purpose of the group project in a synchronous online class meeting or a short video early in the course, as students often struggle to follow and comprehend lengthy written explanations (Darby & Lang, 2019).

FORMING GROUPS

Methods for Selecting Group Members

Group structure is considered a “crucial factor in performance” in group projects; thus, it is important for instructors to utilize a group formation method that aligns with the type and purpose of the project (Thom, 2020, p. 263). The ACES Guidelines for Online Learning in Counselor Education and Supervision (2017) assert that a group of three students is generally a good size for an online project. Larger groups tend to experience more conflict, free-riding, and member dissatisfaction (Aggarwal & O'Brien, 2008). In addition to the group size, it is also important to consider methods of group formation. Random group membership, such as is achieved by dividing the class into equal-sized groups based on an alphabetized class roster, is most appropriate for informal or short-term assignments (Barkley et al., 2014). Student-selected groups, which offer students greater agency, may be best suited for online classes in which students have had some prior experience with one another (e.g., through discussion forums) (Association of College and University Educators [ACUE], 2020). Student-selected groups can be created using sign up tools such as a Google Doc that has been labelled with a designated number of spots for certain topics. A third option for group formation involves instructors determining group membership based on student characteristics. Instructor-determined groups are often the most effective group membership selection method, as students are not always aware of all the factors that make a good team (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016). At the beginning of the course, instructors can distribute an electronic survey—using a tool such as Qualtrics or Google Forms—to assess student information that is relevant for forming either homogenous or heterogenous groups. For example, instructors can include an item that solicits students' views, experiences, or opinions on a specific topic to create groups with diverse perspectives. Instructors can ask students about their learning and work styles, their knowledge and interest in certain topics, and their familiarity and comfort level

with technology. For asynchronous courses, it is also important to ask about students' time zones, work and family schedules, and when they are available for collaboration to form compatible groups.

Group Membership Diversity Considerations

Diversity Considerations in Group Formation. Project groups can be homogenous or heterogeneous in terms of group membership. It is important to emphasize that diversity among members of project groups includes not only culture and demographic diversity but also diversity in terms of members' values and background (e.g., education, work experience, and expertise) (Myers & Anderson, 2008). Research suggests that diverse groups may produce ideas of higher quality and solve problems more effectively by bringing various options and perspectives to the group (Kirchmeyer, 1993; Mannix & Neale, 2005; McLeod et al., 1996). These benefits are widely seen as "major educational values of collaborative learning" (Barkley et al., 2014, p. 78). However, distributing students from underrepresented groups to create heterogeneous project groups may isolate them and put them in the position of feeling solely responsible for representing their group, potentially resulting in them becoming further marginalized and stereotyped (Barkley et al., 2014; Offidani-Bertrand, 2020). While homogenous project groups may not provide students with a rich diversity of viewpoints, there are potential benefits associated with homogenous groups. These benefits may include a higher comfort level among group members in terms of discussing sensitive or personal topics, as well as possible higher levels of satisfaction that group members may feel when working with students similar to themselves (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005; McLeod et al., 1996). Ultimately, instructors who choose to determine groups based on student characteristics should be aware of the implications associated with both types of group membership and form groups that align with the goals of the course and the objectives of the project (Barkley et al., 2014).

Impact on Group Dynamics. Group members' unexamined cultural beliefs and attitudes can negatively impact project group dynamics; ethnocentrism, assumptions, and expectations about other cultural groups are among the factors that can lead to misunderstandings and inhibit effective communication among group members (Okech et al., 2015). The Association for Specialists in Group Work (Singh et al., 2012) asserted that facilitators should be "aware of and sensitive to the multiple dimensions of the multicultural and multi-layered identities of group members" and "consider the impact of multicultural elements on the group dynamics such as cultural conceptions of time and differences in communication styles due to high context (primarily non-verbal) and low context (primarily verbal) communication" (pp. 315, 317). The framework of high- and low-context culture described by Hall (1989) may be especially applicable to understanding potential conflict and miscommunication in project groups in counselor education courses. Members of high context cultural groups may place more value on relationships over tasks and rely more heavily on non-verbal communication and the inward expression of emotions. Members of low-context cultural groups, on the other hand, tend to rely on explicit verbal or written communication and prioritize tasks over relationships (Hall, 1989). While no one cultural group can be described as high- or low-context in general, and

variations exist in all groups, counselor educators can help students to identify both high- and low-context cultures and groups to which they belong and pinpoint how these groups affect their own communication practices and approaches to work in task groups (Okech et al., 2015). An example of a specific approach to asking students to assess and share their communication styles may be through the use of a cultural mapping activity (e.g., [Mapping Your Cultural Orientation](#)). The cultural mapping activity asks students to assess themselves on a number of different cultural factors that directly impact task group dynamics. Counselor educators can ask students, as part of their initial group meeting, to complete the assessment and share their orientations with other project group members in order to heighten individual awareness and encourage growth-enhancing effects of valuing and respect for other group members (Anderson, 2007).

CREATING GROUP CONTRACTS

Students in online courses cite difficulties with communication and a lack of accountability as significant challenges in group projects (Koh & Hill, 2009). Requiring group members to complete and submit a group contract can prevent communication and group dynamic problems, reduce student anxiety, help members remain accountable to each other, and support them in producing the required project deliverables (Brannen et al., 2021; Cartwright et al., 2021). After groups have been formed, an instructor can require each group to hold a videoconference during which the members discuss and create a group contract for the project (Darby & Lang, 2019). Instructors may wish to provide a template or sample form that the group fills out together and that each individual member signs and submits as part of the overall project grade (Barkley et al., 2014). The contract template can include the names, roles, and responsibilities of each group member; how and when the group will meet; specific communication expectations; a timeline for project tasks; and a plan for how conflict or disagreement will be handled. Instructors who wish to provide additional structure in the group contract can include a list of incremental deadlines or checkpoints and required evidence of progress for the group to submit at various points in the project (Darby & Lang, 2019). Boettcher & Conrad (2016) recommended establishing a minimum of three checkpoints, such as a project proposal, a project blueprint or outline with resources, and a final deliverable. The clarity and structure provided by the contract will help make group expectations explicit and support students in holding themselves and each other accountable.

Ethical Considerations in Group Work

Regardless of whether instruction occurs in person or online, issues of diversity must be considered to “support an inclusive and equitable learning community” (CACREP, 2024, Standard 1.1.). The American Counseling Association (ACA) echoes the importance of supporting a diverse

student body, instructing counselor educators to “provide appropriate accommodations that enhance and support diverse student well-being and academic performance” (ACA, 2014, F.11.b.). Similarly, the ACES Teaching Initiative Taskforce advised counselor educators of the importance of considering the needs of diverse learners in course development (ACES Teaching Initiative Taskforce, 2016).

Culturally-responsive teaching can be enhanced through group work and by providing various avenues of interacting with content (Wasik et al., 2019). However, special attention should be paid to “collaborative and individualistic strategies, role of stereotype threat in student performance, and cultural appropriateness of expectations for self-disclosure” (ACES Teaching Initiative Taskforce, 2016, p. 46). While online group work has been shown to encourage collaboration and mutual support, lack of a sense of community and communication difficulties in online learning can serve as a barrier for successful group work (Chang & Kang, 2016; Koh & Hill, 2009). To ease these challenges and foster inclusion, counselor educators can provide explicit instruction and support of student socialization prior to and during the group work (Wade et al., 2016). Darby and Lang (2019) recommended that instructors have students participate in a team building or icebreaker activity after groups are formed. A quick internet search can yield several websites (e.g., [Virtual Icebreakers](#)) that provide examples of quick, interactive activities that will help students get to know each other. Providing a clear definition of roles needing to be assigned within the group can also assist students in understanding expectations and ensure groups success (Wade et al., 2016).

Potential Impacts on the Class

Unbalanced skill sets and expectations of the course may impact how much students contribute and gain from the group experience (Chang & Kang, 2016). To meet the educational challenges faced by students, including those with disabilities, it is imperative that guidelines are clear, and students have multiple ways of accessing information (ACES, 2016). Having individualized grades based on mechanisms such as peer reviewing, and cooperative group work can mitigate negative effects. Lastly, the incorporation of video conferencing tools, especially to create the group contract, may serve to counter non-verbal communication limitations present in online group work (Chang & Kang, 2016).

SELECTING COMMUNICATION, COLLABORATION, AND PRESENTATION TOOLS

Instructors should carefully consider the implications of technology choices for online group projects, given that technology is not one-size-fits-all (Orlando & Attard, 2015). Considerations should be made to address students’ readiness, learning preferences, and technical skill, as well as the availability of technical and multimedia support (Kebritchi et al., 2017). It is

important to keep in mind that, while many students are comfortable using a wide array of technology, it causes others significant anxiety (Gillett-Swan, 2017; McKinney & Sen, 2016). Allowing students to choose the mode of communication they prefer can alleviate pressure and is often appreciated by students and faculty alike (Brown & Thomas, 2020; Gillett-Swan, 2017).

Synchronous tools are especially useful early in the project for initial team communication. Low-tech tools such as the telephone or online conferencing platforms, such as Zoom, allow group members to establish rapport and collaborate on the group contract. Instructors can also create group video meeting rooms for each project group within many commonly used learning management systems, such as Blackboard or Canvas. These meeting spaces may remain open and available for group members to meet at any time. Once the team has met and established its plan, asynchronous tools such as discussion board forums and Google Docs are useful for collaborative writing and sharing of resources (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016). Students can share final projects and receive comments from peers using tools such as Voice Thread or Padlet (Beltrán-Martín, 2019; Bickle & Rucker, 2018). Finally, it is important for instructors to consider the possible impacts of using technology outside of the course learning management system. Groups should be cautioned to choose technology that does not require an additional subscription fee and/or require group members to navigate in a public space (e.g., using social media) in a way that may make them uncomfortable (Darby & Lang, 2019).

Evaluation of Effectiveness of Utilizing Group Work

Specific cognitive learning benefits derived from student engagement in group work include the stimulation of creative thinking, greater retention of information, enhanced development of critical thinking skills, and learning that is considered both deeper and more active (Chiriac, 2014; Erdogan, 2019; Huff, 2014; Morgan et al., 2000; Swanson et al., 2017). Academic benefits of collaborative learning are reflected in academic achievement, including higher test scores and higher course grades (Sisk, 2011), as well as better performance on course outcomes (Allen et al., 2013; Gillies & Boyle, 2011; Sisk, 2011; Tsay & Brady, 2010). Additionally, group work is attributed to helping students develop job readiness and career-related skills such as teamwork, communication, leadership, and time management (Cartwright et al., 2021; Davies, 2009). Thom (2020) suggests that, in fields like counseling that “demand high levels of communication” (p.257), group work may be particularly valuable to students’ professional success. Finally, documented social-emotional benefits include the development of intercultural skills, reduced anxiety, and increased sense of affiliation and belonging (Brannen et al., 2021; Cartwright et al., 2021; Hammar Chiriac, 2014; Daly et al., 2015). In asynchronous online courses in particular, the use of online discussion has been linked to enhanced social presence

and sense of community, which has, in turn, been linked to greater student satisfaction and success (Richardson & Swan, 2003; Swan, 2002).

ASSESSING ONLINE GROUP PROJECTS

Assessment of student learning outcomes in group work can be particularly challenging. Performance, participation, and engagement are often assessed rather than knowledge. Additionally, the instructor's role in group work assessment is often missing or is combined with the peer assessment (Forsell et al., 2020). Effective assessment of online group projects should include both an evaluation of the final product in the form of a group grade as well as the process of how the team worked in the form of an individual grade (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016). Assigning a group grade, based on a project grading rubric, for the final product can enhance the quality of student work (Howell, 2011). Most learning management systems have built-in rubric tools that ease the burden of grading and allow students to review the rubric in advance. Placing responsibility of the final deliverable equally on all group members by assigning a group grade requires students to work interdependently and will help ensure that group members engage in a collaborative process throughout the project.

Requiring self- and peer-evaluations is an effective way to assess the group process and to assign an individual grade for each student's contributions to the group project. Basing part of the grade on self-evaluation may also alleviate student anxiety that may arise when grades are based on group performance (Chang and Brickman, 2018). When students know they will be evaluated by their peers, they may also be more motivated to contribute effectively to the project (Bowen & Watson, 2017). Nilson and Goodson (2018) recommend that the individual grade based on a peer evaluation be worth 5 to 20% of the group project grade, but no more than 30%. As part of the self-evaluation, students can provide narrative support of how they completed their role outlined in the project contract.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES FOR ASSESSMENT

Crutchfield and Klamon (2014) developed an assessment instrument for peer assessment of team performance. These scholars suggested that peer evaluations should include an assessment of five major criteria, including contributing to the team's work; effective communication with teammates; attention to high quality work; "pulling his or her own weight" (p. 290); and engaging in effective problem solving or conflict resolution. Students can evaluate themselves as well as their project group members on each of these dimensions, using a Likert-type scale that can then be converted into a percentage for an individual grade. Additionally, McKinney and Sen (2016) utilized a reflective evaluation measure of where both group members' own behaviors and overall group process could be improved. The reflections also identified how communication issues were resolved. Finally, if students utilize Google Docs for collaboration on the final project, instructors may choose to evaluate student progress and individual

contributions in real time and use this method to assign individual grades (Brown & Thomas, 2020).

Implications for Counselor Education

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS AND LIMITATIONS

There are several unanswered questions that need to be addressed in group work in the online environment, which merit additional research. One challenge is how best to be intentional in deciding to create homogenous or heterogeneous groups in the case of instructor-determined online project groups, especially with small group sizes. An additional limitation is addressing challenging group members, including those who want to complete a project early, who are not participating regularly, who are resistant to using technology, or whose personality conflicts with the group. This brief has tried to address some of these concerns through group contracts and the formation of groups, but more research is needed to determine their effectiveness.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

More research is needed in online group work, with a specific focus on its application in asynchronous courses. Issues that instructors confront in the formation and implementation of face-to-face group assignments, such as monitoring group composition, encouraging student engagement, navigating potential conflicts, and individual versus collective assessment practices, should be studied in the specific context of asynchronous learning to determine where similarities and differences exist. Additional areas for further research include exploring the instructor's role in the assessment process, the establishment of guidelines for individual student learning objectives), and development and implementation of surveys related to group formation (Forsell et al., 2020). While questions and hesitation on the part of students and faculty may still exist, instructors should feel confident in the potential benefits of group work for students in online counselor education courses. Counselor educators who structure group projects carefully and intentionally will maximize the chances for student success.

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