

In the Classroom 70

What LMS Tools Can Students Use for Group Projects?

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Speaker: Welcome back. Hey, thanks for taking time to listen to this podcast, it certainly means a lot. You can be doing other things and you're hanging out with me, so I really do appreciate it. Love them or hate them, group projects are essential to learning. The research is out there that group projects have a lasting impression on students' learning and we need to do them. A lot of faculty avoid them. There's a lot of good and bad points dealing with group work. Students don't necessarily like it. A lot of issues around it. They don't think they're graded well. They don't think that-- They think they're doing more work than everyone else. A lot of things going on with that.

Well, that's not what we're talking about today. The fact that, especially looking at this current COVID-19 pandemic, we are working in online environment and we have to work with others. Being in an online environment doesn't mean you have to give up group work assignments. As a matter of fact, there's ways to do that in an online world that I think is easier than face to face, but that's just my opinion there.

The fact that a lot of us are teaching in an online environment, how do we make group work work within our learning management system? There is certainly a lot that goes into building a group project or doing group work. In this episode, I just want to narrow down specifically to the tools that are at your disposal in common learning management systems or LMS. Your learning management system has a number of tools that will make it easier to facilitate group projects as well as encourage communication and participation. I just want to hone in on those things.

Before we get there, why do group work? Well, I'm going to reference the quality review rubric that I use and it's called Oscar. In Oscar, when you look at the standard that says, "Course offers opportunities for learner to learner interaction and constructive collaboration," when you look at that particular standard, they have a number of things to say. Those comments are open source, so I'm just going to share them right here.

That collaboration in an online course, fosters constructive learning by enabling learners to be active participants, take initiative, think critically and engage others in dialogue. This was from Palloff and Pratt back in 2007. By requiring learners to engage with each other, the design of such activities requires them to assume more responsibility for their learning. Learning is messy and I've realized group work is messy. I talked about that just a few seconds ago that not all students warm up to the idea of group work, but I know from the experiences that I've had in group work that they find it rewarding at the end if done right.

I believe that a lot of getting things right is to help them learn how to use tools at their disposal to keep things on track so not everyone is overwhelmed. Those are some of the tools that I want to talk about.

Learning management systems have tools for this. I have worked in Moodle, I have worked in Blackboard, I have worked in Canvas and each one of those has tools for group work and these tools are designed to help the group, the team be successful. If you were to look at an LMS because you wanted tools to help with group work, some of the tools you definitely want to use our discussion boards so students can chat between themselves, a file sharing area so they can upload things, review it and just basically be able to share things and ideally, a space for live real time sessions or chat at a minimum but there's so many other tools that you can add. I'm going to talk about some of those tools.

Before you open up the tools, one of the things that you should do is make sure that students know how to use the tool; simply use the tool but also how to employ the tool. That's where I think faculty in facilitating the course can really help students be more successful in group work is guide them. Guide them, be part of definitely part of their group. Not an active member where you're making decisions for them at every step of the way, but really guide them in the direction on how to use these tools; provide suggestions, model, different ways of using tools.

That's where they can benefit from this because each platform has a different set of tools. Some are common, but different set of tools and how you would engage those tools as part of group work may vary. We're also seeing how those tools are being used in the workplace that I've seen a lot more collaboration, especially in this online environment that faculty are going out and using tools in order to help move projects forward, to move committees forward. It's been enjoyable to watch.

The first one that I want to talk about is Blackboard. Blackboard is a tool that I use at work. The community college I work at, I support that and try to help faculty use Blackboard for their particular courses. With Blackboard, you can assign groups in a number of different ways.

Groups can be assigned manually. This is where the instructor individually identifies as student places that student into a group. You manually enroll them into the groups and to the group set.

Random enrollment. This is nice. Basically, you set the parameters, maybe that you want three groups, six people each and Blackboard will just tell you what the groups are. There can be some issues with randomly assigning groups, in that, you may not get the skill sets you need at each one. If you are trying to bring up a weaker student and place them with stronger student, the randomness of Blackboard wouldn't know that. There are some limitations to that. The random distribution only applies to students who are in your course. That is part of it.

Then you can also self-enroll. So, you would set up groups and it's like a signup sheet that students self-enroll. If you don't want them to jump from group to group after all the dust has settled, you can go in and edit the group and turn off self-

enrollment and so then the groups would stick. Three different ways: manual, random, self-enrollment for groups. So, there's a lot of flexibility in how you do that.

Now, with Blackboard, when you set up the groups, one of the things that you would do is identify the tool set that the students would have available to them and decide what tools that you want. A large part depends on what type of- what you hope to achieve as far as the group project. So, you can control what tools, maybe you decide that they don't need blog as part of the tool.

I'm of the opinion that you give them all the tools and let them figure out what best works for their particular group. They may think of ways of using a tool that you had not considered before. Therefore, you get to learn something but you definitely want to, I would say, don't hamstring them upfront, give them the tools, let them do it. There's not a lot of damage that they can do far as the learning management system goes.

When you get these groups created in Blackboard, there will be for the student a new entry on their course menu that will say My Groups and it'll indicate what groups that they are part of. That's how they get to the rest of this tool set. Some of the tools that you can put in, there are a blog, where students could add entries and comments to a group blog.

This is a place where maybe they want to share ideas. Another tool is a discussion board. Students would be able to manage their own forums. They can go in there and just pursue ideas and flesh those out; so they can have discussions back and forth dealing with different ideas.

Email, this is something else in Blackboard that students would have the ability to email their group with all at one time. Now, with Blackboard, email is a one way delivery that it send it out to the email address that they have as a student. That's one way so students couldn't respond that way. There's other ways to do it but it's not native to the Blackboard group.

File exchange is another tool where students can upload files so individuals can look at them. Part of the team, maybe, as a final product, they have to put together a presentation, well this is a place that they could do it. Journals, this is a place that each student can share their thoughts and communicate back to the instructor. This may be an additional requirement that students have to maintain a journal as part of the group project. Normally, journals are reserved as a communication tool between the instructor and the student.

Tasks is another tool. Members of the group can define and separate the workload and go out assign tasks. Each task has a status and a due date. This lets everybody in the group know where things are in that particular project. I see, that is a real powerful tool depending on what the group project is. In Blackboard, you also have a tool called collaborate. This is like Zoom. It's a virtual meeting tool where students can get together and meet face to face. I've used collaborate, I'm more of a fan of Zoom but it's definitely a useful tool. It does what it's supposed to do, virtual meeting. Wikis. Wikis are another tool and this is more about designing pages and creating

connections between pages but developing a topic or a thought that everybody in the group could work on those different pages. A Wiki is another one of those powerful tools to build knowledge. I like it.

One of the nice things about Blackboard is students can personalize their group space, that if you allow them to personalize it, they can select a color theme. They can add a banner, some imagery, things like that to brighten up their space. Just personalizing it help with that bonding. I think that's a powerful aspect to them. Another thing about assignments, group assignments that at the end of the day students may have to turn in something, a document or presentation, some type of group work. They may have to turn it in. Within Blackboard, all of this gets graded, all the group members get the same grade but that you can adjust that manually.

Those are some of the tools that are at your disposal for blackboards. Once again, blogs, discussion boards, email, file exchange, journals, tasks, Blackboard collaborate, wikis, those are tools that students would be able to use. I think it's a pretty good collection, very powerful place to start. I would say that you should not restrict students just to these tools, but allow them to add on other tools that they think are necessary to help to get their group work done. This gives them a lot of opportunity to explore ways of collaborating.

Canvas. Canvas is definitely another learning management system. It's one that I use when I teach classes for a university out in the west. It has its own collection of tools. With Canvas, you can also allow students to join a group, self-enroll, or just like Blackboard, it has three different ways. Students can be manually or automatically added to a group set or they can self-enroll.

One of the features of Canvas that I think is interesting is it will identify a group leader and you can identify this group leader or it can be randomly assigned for that particular group. The idea of group is just a way that students can collaborate and this is just some of the technology that helps them do that. Here are some of the tools that you would typically find in a Canvas group.

Their homepage, this is where anything new that's happening into the course, this is where this would be listed. If there's new announcements, somebody made a change to a page, something in the discussion, all this would get listed on this group homepage.

Some of the tools that are available in Canvas. First one is Announcements. Group members can post announcements that would show up here. Basically, when you would have a meeting or what intentions are happening, that something can get posted in the Announcements or some kind of alert, "Go look at a specific page," "Go participate in a discussion," what have you. So, Announcements are there.

Pages. Pages are like the Wikis that were in Blackboard. These are pages that you can flesh out on a specific topic to provide more information. It could be a place that you gather research and you pull it all together or just presenting information, rules of engagement, what have you, but that's what you would do with Pages.

For People, there's with People that you could go look at who is involved in the group, get to know them a little more. I would certainly encourage students to fill out their profiles and flesh that out as much as possible to help others in their group get to know them just a little better.

Discussions, very much like Blackboard, it will allow students to create discussion threads and be able to respond back and forth as part of those discussions.

Files also like Blackboard, you're able to post files that others can see, but with a group file storage it's set at 50 megabytes, which is not that big. Now, I know historically, someone declared that a computer only needed 640 megabytes, but that was totally discarded very rapidly. 50 megabytes doesn't go very far. I see that is a limitation.

In Blackboard, they have Conferences. Conferences is a virtual classroom solution using a tool called Big Blue button. That's available if they want to meet virtually in a face to face format. That's a tool that's available to them.

They also have another tool called Collaboration. Collaboration allows a participant to put together a- basically create a link to an external site like Google Docs or Microsoft Office 365 Document where students can write collaboratively a group paper or take notes together, something like that. The instructor can make these collaborations. Students can make these collaborations. That way, as I said, they you don't have to swap emails sharing a document back and forth, is that you can work on a common document. Normally, when I set up classes I just share the document from my Google Drive, for example, and share it in there. I've never used the Collaboration but I know students who have used the Collaboration before. It's proven to be quite useful.

Those are the tools that you can expect to see in Canvas. Once again, those tools are Announcements, the Group Homepage, Pages, People, Discussion, Files, Conferences and Collaboration. It doesn't look like, at least from my experience so far, of the capability of turning any of these tools off, but I'm more of the inclination that I will just make all these tools available. I was looking for ways to enhance this, to add more tools. I didn't find it but that could be just a limitation of what I know really about Canvas because I don't work with it all the time.

That was Blackboard and Canvas. Before we finish this up, one of the things I want to talk about are some strategies for success.

One of the first strategies in order to help you out with group work group projects is really explain why. I am a big proponent of why. Why are we doing this? Why are we doing group work? What's the purpose behind it? If you can explain how it fits into the course and how the course fits into the program and all that, the more that you can explain why, the more buy in that you will have.

The next thing is clear instruction. Make your instructions as crystal clear as possible, understanding that they're in an online environment. If you're in a face to face environment, you can get away with a little sloppiness. The fact that students

could ask you questions immediately, you can provide a response to them. Online, you have to do the extra work, you have to make the instructions as crystal clear as possible and once again tie it to that why. Why are you doing that? Part of those instructions is set clear expectations of how or where you want their final product to be produced. How is it going to be turned in? Is it going to be done as a presentation or a word document? Where are they going to put it? How are you going to be able to find it? How is it going to be named? All those pieces come into play. Make it as clear as possible.

A lot of recommendation on intentionally creating teams compared to allowing them self select. For me, I don't have enough experience to really go one way or another, but I can understand why you would want to be intentional and this is to basically try to make it as rewarding of a learning experience for as many people as possible. I do agree with limiting group size, that your group shouldn't be any larger than three or four group members at a time. That way you don't have people sitting out on the sidelines doing nothing but simply getting the grades. Three or four members is pretty good. If you keep it to three, there will always be a majority when it comes time to vote. That may give you a reason why you want to keep your groups even just a little smaller.

Because a lot of students are not adept at group work, sometimes you just have to go define some roles and responsibilities for them. I did it for an undergraduate class. I defined who the group leader was, who the talent was, who was going to be the videographer and all those things. that you may need to identify those roles and responsibilities and have students identify what roles that they are going to take on. You can also have the flexibility that, after two weeks you're going to shift the roles if it's going to be a very long project. Things to experiment with.

What I think is absolutely critical is that the instructor stays involved with the group activities that you don't set up the groups and walk away, that you continue to closely monitor what's happening in all aspects of the group. Just poke your nose in and see what's going on, making sure that there's no issues that are cropping up. Use the data from the learning management system to make sure that students are moving forward. You can see what student progress is occurring based on the data. You want to try to be proactive in this and not reactive. You don't want to wait for a student to send you an email that their group is totally off the wall. Try to be very proactive that.

So, just kind of monitor the space and be involved. Pop in, offer suggestions on how they can make the group work a little more efficiently. Use the experiences that you're using as an instructor in the committees you're in and as you're part of a department and the things that you have to do. Use those experiences to help students become better at this idea of learning. Certainly, be available to your students when they need you. Provide supports that these group tools may not necessarily be intuitive. Provide links to instructions on how to use the tools and develop any instructions to really talk about how to employ these tools.

Don't restrict just to the LMS tools if they find out that VoiceThread is a great tool, but it's not part of your LMS, I would say, just let them go out and explore VoiceThread. Let them go figure out what really works for their particular group.

Those are some strategies on how to be successful. This is all you know about doing group work. It's about really just a tool set that can support you and make it easier for students. They have at least a set of tools to help them get started in what they need to do. Hopefully, this helps, but before I go, here's a quick plug for my book.