

Using Contracts to Promote Problem-Solving and Teamwork Skills

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Introduction

Using project-based learning in the classroom can help students develop key intellectual, emotional, social, and ethical skills essential for the workplace. One of the most common teaching strategies for fostering teamwork is group-based project learning, which allows students to learn from one another (Vygotsky, 1978). However, group projects are often dreaded by both students and instructors due to challenges such as scheduling conflicts, personality differences, fair evaluations, and unequal workload distribution. Students in some project-based courses at Texas A&M University are required to create team contracts to enhance student accountability, communication, and problem-solving.

How it Works

In these public relations and advertising courses, students engage in a semester-long group project that mirrors real-world industry challenges. To mitigate common group work challenges, the instructor requires teams to complete a contract outlining expectations, responsibilities, and conflict resolution strategies. Students first complete a survey individually where they self-report their skills in several areas (e.g., Graphic Design, Editing, Research, and Analysis); availability to meet (e.g., Sunday mornings, afternoons, evenings); and whether they would be interested in a leadership position (e.g., Project Manager, Team Leader). Next, students share their top three skills as well as their meeting availability with the class. Students then form teams of three to four students based on this information. They are encouraged to form groups based on meeting time availability as well as a mix of skills.

Once teams are created, they work through a Team Contract worksheet as a group. They are asked to create a team name and exchange contact information. They then appoint a Team Leader and Project Manager. Team Leaders coordinate meetings, ensure fair distributions of responsibilities, boost team morale, and act as a liaison between team members and the instructor as well as between team members and the client. The Project Manager is responsible for keeping the team organized, tracking progress, and communicating with the team. Both leaders are evaluated by teammates in their final projects.

The next section asks teams to answer several questions related to due dates, such as:

1. When does your team want to have a first draft of assignments completed (e.g., a week before they are due, the night before they are due, the day before they are due)?
2. Team members should contact the Team Leader and/or Project Manager within ___ hour(s) if they are unable to make a scheduled meeting.
3. Team members should contact the Team Leader and/or Project Manager within ___ hour(s) if they are unable to complete a task on time.
4. What should a team member do if they feel they are being treated unfairly by their team?

The final contract session is titled Conflict Resolution and encourages students to think through the following scenarios and agree upon a resolution for each.

1. What is the consequence for a team member not completing a task on time? What if the team member made the Team Leader and/or Project Manager aware that they would not complete the task within the agreed upon hours listed above?
2. What is the consequence for a team member not fairly contributing to an assignment?
3. What is the consequence for a team member not effectively communicating with the team?
4. What is the consequence for a team member not contributing to a positive and healthy team environment?

Results to Date

The instructor credits this assignment with reducing team-related challenges and enhancing students' abilities to resolve conflicts independently. In fall 2024, two teams in an upper-level public relations course that used the contract encountered significant group conflicts and sought guidance from the instructor. However, by referring to their contract and pre-negotiated terms, they were able to resolve their issues collaboratively. In a final class reflection, one student wrote:

I have always not enjoyed working in group projects... This semester, in my project group, I saw this happen quite a bit. Those who cared about the project or the assignment or the grade worked the hardest while others sometimes did not... Because we had a contract that laid out exactly how to handle group project conflicts, we were able to handle a large amount of issues within our group in a mature, and efficient manner.

Advice to Others

Others who plan to use this assignment should be ready to point students to their team contract rather than tempting to act as a mediator unless absolutely necessary. The instructor also recommends keeping a copy of the contract that is available for the instructor and all team members to view, such as on a group channel on a Learning Management System.

Cost/Resources Needed

Instructors will need to provide a digital or printed form of the survey and contract worksheet for students.

References

Vgotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind in Society*. Harvard University Press.