



Laptops in the Classroom: Virtual Working Teams

What is it?

Virtual Teams are groups of individuals who work across time and space with links strengthened by communication technology. Geographically dispersed teams allow students to meet regardless of their location, achieving synchronous collaboration. Members of virtual teams communicate electronically, and can consist of members working from home or in small groups outside their immediate community. They work on a common task together, rather than working in isolation or in competition. The result is sometimes a product of their learning that lives on the web after completion, acting as a resource for other students, departments or groups. They serve the larger community in some way, often as an information resource.

Why is it Important?

The nature of teams has changed significantly because of changes in technology and how students work. Students are distributed across geographies and have the ability to share and comment on each others content. Relationships among students on and off campus as well as professionals off campus (COOP, customers, suppliers, managers, and business professionals) are becoming more prevalent. Students have discovered the value of collaborative work. There is a new emphasis on knowledge management - harvesting the learning experience of students so that it is available to the whole team.

Pros...

- Students tend to be more productive
- Time constraints become a non-issue
- Bring the best resources together regardless of space and time
- Knowledge sharing and collaboration grows

Cons...

- It takes time to build a highly-functional team
- Faculty need to emphasize tolerance of cultural differences
- Students sometimes struggle with time/work management

How to Use them...

Virtual teams don't just happen....

Shared understanding in teams leads to improved performance by helping students anticipate the behavior of others, better coordinate their work by improving implementation, and increase team members' motivation. It is important to provide a framework for the activity and clear expectations of student behavior. Start with small projects or activities and build the scope as students become more comfortable with the tools and roles within the team. Think about online discussion boards. Rather than simply being a place for students to post comments, they could become a means for collaborative academic exercises, facilitating conversation that could not take place in the classroom (Kellison, 2008).

Tips on how to develop virtual teams:

- Develop a project-based idea conducive to collaboration
- Build a framework to include the teams' purpose, goals, and outcomes
- Identify students who are critical players (team leaders) to support the project
- Hold an initial meeting with students to lay down the groundwork, set guidelines, and processes
- "Check-in" frequently to monitor activities and progress of the team

Who used it...

Cindy Stevens: Office Hours with students

Ted Greene: Student Collaborative Teams

Robert Cowherd: Student Groups in BlackBoard

For further reading...

"Virtual Teamwork," Karen Kellison: For a group of schools, web-based collaborative projects are opening up new vistas of learning opportunities.
<http://www.thejournal.com/articles/22724>

"Taking the A out of Asynchronous," Matt Villano: As mainstream collaboration modes evolve, the way schools are tackling online information sharing is changing, and it's changing fast.
<http://www.campustechnology.com/articles/64817/>