

Facilitating Group Work To Maximize Student Learning in Labs, Discussions, and Teams

Case studies: GSI observations of students working in groups

1) Duane talks disproportionately more than the other students. He is always the first to speak on any issue during group work, speaking for long periods each time. Duane frequently interrupts other students and raises his voice to argue when other students offer their opinions. He rarely asks what the other group members think. During each activity, he makes statements such as, “Here is how we are going to proceed, Beth, you draw out all the tables, William, you measure the concentration of the stock solution and make the appropriate dilutions, and I’ll do the experiment because I have the most lab experience, or “Dude, that’s crazy, I know what I am doing and we should definitely do it my way”. His teammates are increasingly silent during many lab experiments and they often sigh, roll their eyes, or exhibit frustrated facial expressions and avoid eye contact with Duane. Whenever the GSI approaches their bench, Duane stops paying attention to the other members, even if they were speaking, and immediately engages the GSI in conversation.

2) Helen frequently apologizes to her group members for not being prepared or completing the work she agreed to finish before class. When the group tries to schedule a meeting outside of class, Helen is very vocal about why she can’t come. She needs to sleep during the mornings after working all night at the League, she has class in the afternoons, and she has tickets to the football game on Saturday and Sunday is her only day to study for her other classes. She also likes to tell long stories that have nothing to do with class or the assignment. The GSI’s policy has been to assign the same grade to each member of the group for each assignment. However, during group presentations, Helen always has the easiest part. Furthermore, it is clear that she is not familiar with the material or what other group members have done, especially during the question and answer sessions that follow the presentations.

3) During every activity, Nate, John, and Margarita assume the same roles. John is the group manager, Nate is the spokesperson when groups report back to the entire class, and Margarita is always the recorder/scribe for the group. John and Nate were obviously friends before this class. During group work, they frequently talk and joke loudly. Margarita does not participate in these conversations. Instead she watches and listens to what other groups are doing. During group work, Nate rarely looks at Margarita and addresses all his statements and questions directly to John. Margarita is often silent and pensive and John frequently pauses to offer explanations of difficult concepts to Margarita. When Margarita offers suggestions, Nate and John often nod their heads and then move on to other subjects. On one occasion, Nate repeated Margarita’s comments, paraphrasing them and John acknowledged them as good ideas.

What are the issues in these examples?

What advice would you give to the GSI regarding the management of group work?

What strategies could he/she use to remedy any problems?