

A Web-Based System for Improving Student Teamwork

 teachingprofessor.com/topics/online-learning/a-web-based-system-for-improving-student-teamwork

May 26,
2019



Many instructors incorporate teamwork into their courses to teach skills that are critical for academic and business success. Yet many students and faculty also dread the inevitable problems that doing groupwork—face-to-face or online—creates. It can be difficult to ensure equal participation by all team members, manage interpersonal conflicts, plan and coordinate activities, identify roles and responsibilities, and agree on group processes (e.g., leadership issues, or how decisions will be made). Consequently, instructors spend valuable time “intervening” in an attempt to solve team problems.

The problem is that faculty often do not scaffold teamwork properly to ensure success. They put students into teams with instructions as to what must be the final product, but provide little or no guidance on how to get there. Instead of teaching teamwork skills, students become frustrated with problems in coordinating their efforts.

A colleague and I developed and taught a course focusing specifically on teamwork skills. Other professors realized that students who had our class performed better on team

assignments, and asked us for techniques they could use in their classes to improve team performance. In response we codified our best practices into the *Team+ System* (<http://www.teamplus.education>), a web-based program that will facilitate student teamwork in any class, regardless of course content or format (online or face-to-face). The *Team+ System* is not a commercial product. It is free to any instructor in any higher educational setting. Instructors and students may be asked to provide feedback at the end of the semester, and any data collected may be used for further research and development.

How the *Team+ System* works

While there are many features of the *Team+ System*, the majority of the learning and developmental experiences comes from eight structured activities completed by each team. These activities are grouped into four stages. All information and resources necessary for students to complete these activities are provided on the *Team+* website. Additionally, students begin each activity by viewing a tutorial video that explains why the activity is important and how to complete it. The eight activities are completed in order, and most of the activities have a “window” of availability based on the schedule created at the beginning of the semester. We recommend successful completion of the activities be tied to your course grading scheme.

Stage 1: Who We Are: Individual and Team Identity

Activity # 1: Personal Profile

Teammates share photos and interesting biographical information; posted on a rotating carousel at the top of the team’s web page, this information helps teammates get to know one another

Activity # 2: Individual / Team Styles

Members complete self-assessments that reveal communication, listening, and conflict management styles; feedback includes tips on how to work with others who have varying styles, which prepares them for working with the specific members of their unique group.

Activity # 3: Team Identity

Teammates agree on a team name, motto, and mascot so each team has a unique identity, promoting team cohesion

Stage 2: How We Work: Operational Effectiveness

Activity # 4: Operational Rules

Teammates decide:

- How to communicate with one another outside of face-to-face team meetings (e.g., email, text messages, phone conferences, etc.)
- How often members agree to check for messages or contact team members
- The best type of team meeting (face-to-face or virtual) and how often the team will meet
- To adopt a set of basic ground rules that will guide their interactions during the semester

Activity # 5: Individual Roles

Members accept responsibility for specific tasks that will promote more efficient interactions and successful task completion; possible tasks include:

- Send reminders for upcoming meetings
- Develop and distribute meeting agendas
- Create a calendar of internal team deadlines for task deliverables
- Review/edit documents prior to final submission
- Remind teammates of their project responsibilities and assignment deadlines

Stage 3: What's Working, What's Not: Process Improvement

Activity # 6: The Keep, Start, Stop Exercise

Teammates work together to identify:

- Specific behaviors/processes that are helping the team (Keep)
- Specific behaviors/processes that could help the team (Start)
- Specific behaviors/processes that are hindering the team (Stop)

Stage 4: How We're Doing: Performance Evaluation and Accountability

At both mid- and end- semester, self and peer ratings are completed for five "teamwork" factors:

- Acting Responsibly to the Team
- Creating a Positive Team Climate
- Making a Collaborative Effort
- Managing Conflict Inclusively and Constructively
- Monitoring Individual and Team Performance

For each factor, the student is presented with sample behaviors that reflect "Ineffective Behaviors," "Acceptable Behaviors," and "Most Effective Behaviors." Students indicate what

type of behaviors were displayed most often during the semester. Each student receives an individualized feedback report that compares self-ratings to the average peer rating.

Activity # 7: Mid-Semester Self/Peer Evaluations and Developmental Feedback

We recommend the mid-semester result be used for developmental purposes, allowing the team members to make positive changes over the last half of the semester

Activity # 8: End-Semester Self/Peer Performance Evaluations and Feedback

Using the same rating process as before, these results should be tied to the student's course grade

Other features of the Team+ System

- **The Instructor's App:** An instructor can easily keep track of the participation of individual students and the performance of student teams (all data, including self and peer performance evaluations, can be downloaded for further analyses).
- **Teamwork Skills Video Library:** The *Team+ System* includes numerous "self-help" videos that address issues often found in student teams. These brief videos provide specific recommendations (what to say, what to do) that students / teams can apply immediately to improve relationships and overall team performance.
- **Team Collaboration Tools:** Team members can easily share documents, post comments, chat, schedule meetings, receive notifications (messages, upcoming deadlines, etc.), and keep a calendar.

Feedback and comments from users

We have received some very positive comments from users of the *Team+ System*, from both instructors and students. For example, one instructor writes:

"Team+ has been a lifesaver for managing my class teams. Through the team builder activities, I'm able to encourage my student teams to be proactive in establishing the groundwork for team success so that fewer team issues arise. When team issues do arise, I have valuable resources to draw from within the team+ platform as well as data to support any interventions that I must take. I am thankful for the platform because it helps me to efficiently manage teamwork (particularly in my large classes)."

Student responses include:

"Team+ was a great system and delegated tasks perfectly; it is incredibly organized and easy to use."

"It is a user-friendly system that encourages students, makes students interact with one another and accountable for their participation."

We offer an *Instructor's Guide* to help support the implementation of the *Team+ System* and create a more positive experience for students. We also offer a "demo" version to allow instructors to view the complete system from both the instructor and student perspective. Use the system in your classes to improve teamwork and learning outcomes.

Jay R. Tombaugh and Clifton O. Mayfield are associate professors of management in the College of Business at the University of Houston—Clear Lake.

Tags: