International Journal of Instruction *January 2026 ● Vol.19, No.1*
e-ISSN: 1308-1470 ● www.e-iji.net *p-ISSN: 1694-609X*
pp. 281-292

Article submission code: 20250506174126
Received: 06/05/2025 Revision: 03/08/2025
Accepted: 11/08/2025 OnlineFirst: 03/10/2025

Students' Perception of Group Work in Academic Writing

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This descriptive study examines the perceptions of Honduran and Mexican undergraduate students regarding group work in academic writing projects, acknowledging the growing emphasis on collaborative learning in higher education. Conducted over eight weeks, this quantitative research was part of an online international collaboration that connected students and teachers from diverse cultures to develop both academic and soft skills through group work. The study aimed to identify the benefits and challenges of group work while producing a collaborative writing product, "Writing Academic Essays: A Guide for Students." Data were collected using a validated two-section questionnaire in a Likert scale format. The first section assessed students' perceptions, while the second section examined factors that hinder group work. The instruments evaluated participation equity, communication effectiveness, and logistical coordination among culturally diverse students. Findings show that students value group work for enhancing collaboration and independent learning, with 71.4% agreeing that it develops independent learning and 57.1% affirming that it encourages idea sharing. However, challenges include free-riding, which is reported frequently by 71.4% of respondents and always by 21.4%. Additionally, 42.9% cite unequal work distribution as a frequent issue, while 50% find scheduling meetings outside of class difficult. Recommendations include establishing clear role assignments, incorporating peer evaluations, providing collaborative tools, offering flexible assessment methods, and delivering training for students and educators to address diverse learning preferences and improve cooperative experience.

Keywords: group work, university students, perception, international collaboration, education

INTRODUCTION

The increasing importance of social skills is starkly visible to undergraduate students in real scenarios in the labor market. UNESCO emphasizes that social skills are desirable and essential for academic and professional success (OECD, 2019b). The situation highlights the crucial role of social skills in employability, job permanence, and promotion, as they enable employees to work together efficiently (Hodge & Lear,

Citation: Corea, N. E., & Oviedo, H. Y. D. (2026). Students' perception of group work in academic writing. *International Journal of Instruction*, *19*(1), 281-292. https://doi.org/10.29333/iji.2026.19114a

2011). According to UNESCO's Education 2030 Framework for Action and its reports on the Future of Education and Skills, social skills such as collaboration, communication, adaptability, leadership, and problem-solving are crucial for navigating an increasingly interconnected and technology-driven world (Howells, 2018). However, recent studies indicate a persistent gap between the recognized importance of these skills and their effective development in higher education, particularly in cross-cultural online learning environments (Boix Mansilla & Jackson, 2023; Oyarzun & Martin, 2023). From this perspective, universities are not only responsible, but also urgently so, for equipping students with strong social and technological skills to create equal opportunities through education, where students become global citizens and succeed in both face-to-face and virtual environments.

In response to these global educational imperatives, numerous universities incorporate cutting-edge approaches, such as Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), which links instructors and students from various nations to work virtually, promoting cross-cultural communication and cooperative learning through technologically enhanced projects. While COIL methodologies show promise, recent research highlights significant challenges in implementing practical group work across different cultural and educational contexts (O'Dowd, 2021). Intercultural competency, global cooperation, the use of technology and digital resources, shared coursework, collaborative assignments in a second language when feasible, group work, and final reflection are all components of the COIL methodology. All of them work together to develop essential skills for the future and globalized workplaces (Rubin, 2017). This study arises from an eight-week international collaboration between two public institutions, the Universidad Veracruzana in Mexico and the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Honduras, which implemented such approaches to examine how students perceive group work when creating an academic writing product. This focus on academic writing collaboration addresses a specific gap in COIL research, as most studies have concentrated on general collaboration rather than discipline-specific outcomes (Woodman et al., 2023).

Several studies highlight the immense potential of group work, as students recognize the benefits of this approach in developing a range of essential skills. These skills include communication, teamwork, conflict resolution, leadership, research, and problem-solving. "Collaborative learning is an effective approach to enhancing academic Performance in higher education (B.Ed. Honors) and that social factors play an important role in promoting collaboration among students" (Nazeef et al., 2024). Group work promotes equitable and active learning, encouraging students to reflect on their contributions and develop self-judgment and self-evaluation skills (Mckay & Shridharan, 2024). Researchers demonstrate how group work fosters critical thinking skills and individual accountability, increases reasoning and positive interdependence levels, improves problem-solving strategies, internalizes content knowledge, and strengthens interpersonal relationships to achieve desirable results (Schofield, 2006; Daba et al., 2017).

The academic benefits of group work extend beyond skill development to impact fundamental learning outcomes. Group work can be considered an effective tool that helps the co-construction of knowledge, develops comprehension, academic

performance, interpersonal skills, student satisfaction with their learning, engagement, and leadership (Johnson & Johnson, 2009; Slavin, 1980; Springer et al., 1999; Bouton & Garth, 1983; Jorczak, 2011; Michaelsen, 1983; Gates et al., 1997, all cited in Vogel & Wood, 2023). Group work requires effort because it implies a new conception of teamwork. As Campbell & Li (2006) mention, teamwork implies coordination, collaboration, contribution, sharing, and dedication.

This dedicated approach to teamwork becomes particularly valuable in applied academic contexts. Group work might become a form of teaching, learning, and evaluation where students develop, explore, and learn through real-world activities. The benefits and skills mentioned above for group work are crucial when students' evaluations depend on an academic final product, such as a course or an international collaboration, as was the case for the Honduran and Mexican students. In this case, the product participants of this COIL, who worked in teams, served as guides for students to write academic essays. Campbell & Li (2006) state that the main characteristic of group work is that "individuals should cooperate with others," making it more complex than working alone.

While the benefits are significant, implementing practical group work requires careful planning. Some studies evidence recommendations collected from different researchers to foster better results when working in group work to develop teamwork skills: addressing the issue of workload distribution by defining roles and responsibilities, enhancing online collaboration strategies, developing a community of practice between students to share strategies for overcoming barriers to online collaboration, improving clarity and understanding of the assessment task and tools, enhancing preparatory work for group assignments, and educating students on the value and pedagogical underpinnings of group work and peer assessment (Mckay & Shridharan, 2024). Moreover, according to the Centre for Teaching Excellence at the University of Waterloo, effective team members must communicate clearly on both intellectual and emotional levels, demonstrating empathy and adaptability in interactions (University of Waterloo, 2018).

Despite the numerous academic and social benefits of group work, it is important to acknowledge that not all students' perceptions, attitudes, and experiences are positive, whether they occur in person or an online context. Educators should be aware of several factors that influence students' acceptance of group work. These factors include group formation, size, cohesiveness, workload, and past experiences (Vogel & Wood, 2023). Other studies have noted challenges such as uneven workload distribution, fairness in group grading, issues with connecting and communicating effectively in an online environment, and struggles with unclear instructions and assignments. One of the challenges in group work is fostering relationships, effective communication, participation, social knowledge creation, and the development of new skills and attitudes.

METHOD

This study employed a quantitative approach because it “involves studies that make use of statistical analyses to obtain their findings” (Marczyk et al., 2005, p. 17). It was a descriptive study because, according to Singh (2006), “descriptive research is concerned

with the present and attempts to determine the status of the phenomenon under investigation" (p. 104). The research's population, which "is all individuals of interest to the researcher" (Marczyk et al., 2005, p. 18), was formed by 14 university students: eight Honduran university students from the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Honduras enrolled in the Foreign Languages Undergraduate Program and six Mexican university students from the Universidad Veracruzana enrolled in the Teaching English as a Foreign Language Graduate Program. This small sample size reflects the pilot nature of this international collaboration, allowing for a focused analysis of this unique educational context. The quantitative analysis of this small sample provides valuable descriptive insights into this specific case, while acknowledging that larger samples would be needed for more robust conclusions regarding generalization. Data was collected employing a questionnaire containing 20 items. The questionnaire was designed by Daba et al. (2017). It has two sections; one is about students' perceptions of group work, in which the questions were Likert-like items based on a scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." The other part was about factors hindering group work, and its questions were Likert-like items based on a scale from "never" to "always." The data obtained were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25. To achieve this, students participating in a Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) project attended synchronous classes via Zoom, and collaborative group work was implemented over eight weeks. When the project was completed, the questionnaire was administered through a Google Form, and an Excel file was downloaded and imported into SPSS for descriptive analysis.

FINDINGS

Table 1 presents a comprehensive analysis of the prevalence of various difficulties encountered during group work, as reported by participants. Five categories—never, occasionally, sometimes, usually, and always—are used to group the responses. The percentages indicate the proportion of respondents who selected each frequency level, and each row represents a distinct component. A thorough paragraph-by-paragraph analysis of the table is provided below.

One of the most notable findings is the issue of non-participation among group members. While 21.4% of respondents indicated that this never happens, 64.3% reported that it occurs occasionally to usually, with 14.3% stating it always happens. This implies that non-participation is a common issue in group projects, reducing the general efficacy and fairness of collaborative efforts. Similarly, the issue of unequal work distribution is also prevalent, with 85.7% of respondents experiencing it occasionally to usually. This is further supported by the fact that 50% of respondents said members sometimes do not share work equally, indicating a lack of balance in workload distribution.

Free-riding is another major issue, in which certain members obtain high grades without making sufficient contributions. Of those surveyed, 71.4% stated this happens occasionally to always, 21.4% said it always happens, and 28.6% said it never happens. This highlights a significant fairness issue that has the potential to deter engaged participants and compromise the integrity of cooperative projects. Furthermore, 85.7% of respondents reported occasionally or frequently forgetting to give, indicating that this

is a common problem. Other group members may experience unnecessary stress as a result of this lack of accountability, which can also disrupt workflow.

Indeed, the table indicates that sharing duties and responsibilities is a common practice in cooperative initiatives. For example, according to 71.4% of respondents, members occasionally share responsibilities, including the presenter, secretary, and leader. Similarly, members occasionally share tasks like gathering, arranging, and assessing evidence, according to 78.6% of respondents. According to the findings, many organizations seek to distribute responsibilities and duties effectively, which can increase teamwork and productivity.

Still, there is room for improvement in a few areas. For instance, whereas 50% of respondents stated that this occurs 'sometimes' to 'frequently,' 35.7% reported that group members always respect everyone's opinions. This implies that, while respect for opposing ideas is typically present, it can sometimes be lacking; thus, it can harm group dynamics. Additionally, 71.5% of respondents reported dealing with the problem of one person doing the majority of the work, ranging from "occasionally" to "usually". The overworked members may become frustrated and burned out as a result of this unequal distribution of effort.

Table 1
Factors hindering group work

	Never	Occasionally	Sometimes	Usually	Always
Group members do not respect everyone's opinion.	35.7%	14.3%	28.6%	21.4%	0.0%
Some members do not participate.	21.4%	14.3%	28.6%	21.4%	14.3%
Members share roles such as leader, secretary, and presenter.	14.3%	14.3%	35.7%	28.6%	7.1%
Members share activities' responsibilities, such as collecting, organizing, and evaluating evidence from resources.	0.0%	21.4%	21.4%	42.9%	14.3%
One student does the group assignment.	28.6%	42.9%	21.4%	7.1%	0.0%
Some group members forget to do their share of work.	14.3%	14.3%	42.9%	28.6%	0.0%
Some members get excellent grades without doing work.	28.6%	7.1%	28.6%	14.3%	21.4%
Members do not share work equally.	14.3%	21.4%	50.0%	14.3%	0.0%

Using five levels of agreement—strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, and strongly agree—Table 2 displays how students feel about group work. The percentages show the proportion of respondents who chose each level of agreement with the statements regarding group work represented by each row. A paragraph-by-paragraph explanation of the table is provided below.

Most students agree that working in groups has many advantages. Group work "gives me a chance to share ideas with others," for example, with 57.1% of respondents agreeing and 14.3% strongly agreeing, suggesting that cooperation is perceived as a beneficial way to exchange viewpoints. Similarly, group work "motivates me to learn from work," according to 42.9% of respondents who agreed and 14.3% who strongly agreed, indicating that it can be an exciting and interesting evaluation method.

Additionally, 35.7% agreed and 21.4% strongly agreed that group work "develops my independent learning habit," indicating its function in promoting self-directed learning skills.

Another benefit is that working in groups enhances critical thinking and self-esteem. A total of 50% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "It helps me develop my thinking ability and self-esteem," even though 14.3% disagreed and 21.4% strongly disagreed. This suggests that many students perceive group work as beneficial for both academic and personal development. In addition, 35.7% of respondents agreed and 7.1% strongly agreed that they "learn better from group interaction than from lectures," indicating that some students believe collaborative learning to be more effective than conventional lecture-based techniques.

Notwithstanding the advantages, students noted several difficulties with group projects. The fairness of group grades is a significant concern; 35.7% of respondents agree, and 14.3% strongly agree that "group grades are not fair." This suggests that many students are unhappy or unsure about the fairness of collaborative grading, particularly given the 50% who remained neutral. Furthermore, 42.9% of respondents agreed and 7.1% strongly agreed that "it is difficult to share members' work equally," indicating persistent problems with workload distribution and equitable participation.

Another recurring element that surfaced was logistical difficulties. For instance, "It is difficult to get together outside of class," agreed upon by 50% of respondents and strongly agreed by 7.1%, demonstrates the practical challenges of organizing group gatherings. Similarly, 50% of respondents stated that "it is difficult to get relevant references," implying that the availability of resources may be a barrier to productive groupwork projects. Additionally, group assignments "add a burden to work for me," according to 21.4% of respondents, and 7.1% strongly agreed. Additionally, 7.1% agreed and 7.1% strongly agreed that they "make me unnecessarily busy," suggesting that some students find group work too demanding.

Students' differing viewpoints were reflected in the diverse responses to some statements. In contrast, a much greater percentage disagreed (42.9%) or strongly disagreed (14.3%) with the statement that they "prefer group work to other types of assessment," with 28.6% remaining neutral. This implies that group projects are not always favored and might not be appropriate for every student's learning preference. Comparably, whereas 35.7% of respondents agreed that group work "helps me develop my thinking ability and self-esteem," a noteworthy 35.7% disagreed or strongly disagreed, suggesting that opinions on the effect of group work on personal growth varied.

Table 2
Students' perceptions of group assignment

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I prefer group work to other types of assessment.	14.3%	42.9%	28.6%	14.3%	0.0%
It motivates me to learn from work.	7.1%	7.1%	28.6%	42.9%	14.3%
It develops my independent learning habits.	0.0%	0.0%	42.9%	35.7%	21.4%
It helps me develop my thinking ability and self-esteem.	21.4%	14.3%	14.3%	35.7%	14.3%
It gives me a chance to share ideas with others.	0.0%	7.1%	21.4%	57.1%	14.3%
I learn better from group interaction than from lectures.	7.1%	7.1%	42.9%	35.7%	7.1%
Group grades are not fair.	0.0%	0.0%	50.0%	35.7%	14.3%
Group assignments make me unnecessarily busy.	0.0%	35.7%	50.0%	7.1%	7.1%
It adds a burden to work for me.	7.1%	28.6%	35.7%	21.4%	7.1%
It is difficult to get together outside of class.	0.0%	7.1%	35.7%	50.0%	7.1%
It is difficult to get relevant references.	0.0%	14.3%	35.7%	50.0%	0.0%
It is difficult to share members' work equally.	0.0%	28.6%	21.4%	42.9%	7.1%

Table 3 presents the results of a one-sample t-test, a statistical method that evaluates whether the sample's mean deviates significantly from a specified test value, in this case, 0. The test assesses whether the observed differences between the sample means and the test value are statistically significant. A thorough table analysis, including the significance of each column and the overall findings, is provided below.

The table's broad interpretation states that all claims have a p-value of 0.000, and it is less than 0.05. This suggests that the discrepancies between the sample means and the test value (0) are statistically significant for every variable. Furthermore, the sample averages for each statement are much higher than 0, indicating that participants generally concur with the group work-related assertions. The results' statistical significance is further supported by the fact that none of the confidence ranges for the statements include 0.

When the findings are evaluated for each specific statement, the table highlights both positive and negative attitudes toward group work among students. Participants undoubtedly prefer group work over alternative forms of assessment, as evidenced by the statement "I prefer group work to other types of assessment," having a t-value of 9.691 and a mean difference of 2.429. Statements such as "It develops my independent learning habit" (t = 17.667, mean difference = 3.786) and "It motivates me to learn from work" (t = 11.993, mean difference = 3.500) also exhibit strong and significant agreement, indicating that group work is seen as helpful for skill development and motivation.

Nevertheless, the table also reveals negative perceptions and difficulties related to group work. For example, the statement "A group grade is not fair" has a t-value of 18.297 and a mean difference of 3.643, indicating that participants significantly agree that group grades are unfair. Other statements, like "It is difficult to get together outside of class" (t = 17.678, mean difference = 3.571) and "Group assignment makes me unnecessarily busy" (t = 12.367, mean difference = 2.857), reflect common logistical and workload-

related issues in group work. Finally, concerns about fairness and participation are evident in statements such as "Some members do not participate" (t = 7.913, mean difference = 2.929) and "Members do not share work equally" (t = 10.647, mean difference = 2.643), which highlight concerns about unequal contributions and free-riding.

Table 3
One-sample test

	Test Value = 0					
					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Lower	Upper
I prefer group work to other types of assessment.	9.691	13	.000	2.429	1.89	2.97
It motivates me to learn from work.	11.993	13	.000	3.500	2.87	4.13
It develops my independent learning habits.	17.667	13	.000	3.786	3.32	4.25
It helps me develop my thinking ability and self-esteem.	7.985	13	.000	3.071	2.24	3.90
It gives me a chance to share ideas with others.	17.667	13	.000	3.786	3.32	4.25
I learn better from group interaction than from lectures.	12.362	13	.000	3.286	2.71	3.86
Group grades are not fair.	18.297	13	.000	3.643	3.21	4.07
Group assignments make me unnecessarily busy.	12.367	13	.000	2.857	2.36	3.36
It adds a burden to work for me.	10.225	13	.000	2.929	2.31	3.55
It is difficult to get together outside of class.	17.678	13	.000	3.571	3.13	4.01
It is difficult to get relevant references.	16.862	13	.000	3.357	2.93	3.79
It is difficult to share members' work equally.	12.362	13	.000	3.286	2.71	3.86
Group members do not respect everyone's opinion.	7.255	13	.000	2.357	1.66	3.06
Some members do not participate.	7.913	13	.000	2.929	2.13	3.73
Members share roles such as leader, secretary, and presenter.	9.539	13	.000	3.000	2.32	3.68
Members share activities' responsibilities, such as collecting, organizing, and evaluating evidence from resources.	12.851	13	.000	3.500	2.91	4.09
One student does the group assignment.	8.453	13	.000	2.071	1.54	2.60
Some group members forget to do their share of work.	10.408	13	.000	2.857	2.26	3.45
Some members get excellent grades without doing work.	7.104	13	.000	2.929	2.04	3.82
Members do not share work equally.	10.647	13	.000	2.643	2.11	3.18

DISCUSSION

The study's findings on non-participation and free-riding align with those of Vogel & Wood (2023), demonstrating how unequal participation undermines the effectiveness of collaborative learning. The prevalence of free-riding behaviors supports McKay and

Shridharan's (2024) findings about fairness concerns in group assessments, illustrating the phenomenon of "social loafing" (Johnson & Johnson, 2009) where active participants become frustrated while passive members disengage. Reported patterns of unequal work distribution contradict Slavin's (1980) assumptions about natural positive interdependence, suggesting current grading systems may not adequately reflect individual contributions. These results highlight the need for structured frameworks with clear guidelines for role assignments, task distribution, and accountability mechanisms. Incorporating peer evaluations and individual assessments could help address fairness concerns by better aligning grades with actual contributions.

The observed advantages in critical thinking and problem-solving validate Springer et al.'s (1999) meta-analysis on academic performance gains. Students recognized the role of group work in developing independent learning habits, expanding Bouton & Garth's (1983) findings about motivational benefits. These results affirm Vygotsky's (1978) social development theory, while suggesting that its application requires more structure in digital environments than is traditionally assumed. The positive aspects of group work in fostering collaboration and critical thinking suggest it should remain a key component of educational programs, though with accommodations for diverse learning preferences.

The effectiveness of role distribution supports Michaelsen's (1983) team-based learning framework, but it also reveals online-specific challenges. Logistical difficulties in coordination contrast with assumptions about digital natives' adaptability (Daba et al., 2017), highlighting how technological mediation creates unique barriers to effective communication. Practical communication tools and institutional support, such as online scheduling platforms and shared workspaces, could help overcome these challenges. These findings validate structured approaches, such as COIL (Rubin, 2017), which show that they outperform organic collaboration methods (Campbell & Li, 2006) in contemporary education. Effective implementation requires training for both students (in collaboration and conflict resolution) and educators (in group work design and management).

The Honduran-Mexican collaboration provides new insights into cross-cultural group work, an understudied aspect in COIL research (Woodman et al., 2023). Variations in perceptions about respect for diverse viewpoints suggest that cultural norms have a significant impact on the dynamics of collaboration. This warrants further investigation into optimal group composition strategies and the need for flexibility in assessment methods to accommodate different cultural contexts and learning styles.

CONCLUSIONS

This study confirms the dual nature of group work, as both valuable for skill development and challenging to implement equitably. The findings demonstrate that successful collaboration requires moving beyond theoretical assumptions toward structured, culturally-sensitive frameworks. Particularly in online intercultural contexts, educators must balance demonstrated benefits with careful design to mitigate participation inequalities and logistical barriers. Future research should explore optimal group compositions, technology-mediated solutions, and longitudinal outcomes to

enhance equity and effectiveness. Additionally, investigating alternative assessment methods and institutional support systems could further enhance collaborative learning experiences. These efforts should build on this study's foundation while addressing its limitations in sample diversity and scope, ultimately creating more inclusive and productive group work environments across educational settings.

Additionally, while this study focused on student perceptions, future research could examine instructor perspectives on group work in greater depth. A qualitative exploration of educators' experiences could uncover nuanced challenges, such as time constraints in monitoring multiple groups, varying student engagement levels, or institutional barriers to implementing collaborative learning. Understanding educators' pedagogical strategies, such as scaffolding techniques, feedback methods, or tools for tracking individual contributions, could provide valuable insights into designing and managing collaborative activities more effectively. This could include exploring how instructors balance group work with other teaching methods (e.g., lectures or individual assignments) and addressing persistent issues such as free-riding, unequal participation, or intercultural conflicts in multicultural teams.

Another critical area for future investigation is the impact of group size and composition on collaboration dynamics and outcomes. Rigorous experimental or mixed-methods studies could examine how variables like group size (e.g., dyads vs. larger teams), diversity (cultural, linguistic, or disciplinary), and composition (e.g., homogeneous vs. heterogeneous skill levels, gender balance, or personality types) influence teamwork processes, communication efficiency, and final project quality. For instance, research could test whether smaller groups reduce social loafing or whether diverse teams produce more innovative outcomes despite initial coordination challenges. Such findings could help educators optimize group formation criteria to maximize learning gains while minimizing conflicts.

Future studies could also evaluate the effectiveness of specific interventions and best practices in addressing everyday challenges in group work. Longitudinal or comparative research designs could assess the impact of structured peer evaluation systems (e.g., rubric-based assessments), role-rotation strategies (e.g., rotating leadership or scribe roles), or pre-collaboration training modules (e.g., conflict resolution workshops or digital tool tutorials) on improving fairness, accountability, and overall group performance. Additionally, research could explore the role of technology, such as AI-driven analytics to monitor participation or platforms that facilitate asynchronous collaboration, mitigating logistical hurdles. Evidence from such studies could translate into actionable guidelines for educators.

Ultimately, examining the psychosocial aspects of group work can offer a more comprehensive understanding of its effects. Mixed-methods research could investigate how collaborative tasks influence students' mental health (e.g., anxiety stemming from peer dependence), stress levels (e.g., deadlines versus interpersonal tensions), and interpersonal relationships (e.g., bonding or resentment after the project). Surveys paired with interviews could reveal whether specific demographics (e.g., introverts or non-native speakers) face disproportionate challenges and how institutional support

systems (e.g., counselling or peer mentoring) might alleviate these issues. This focus is critical given that poorly managed group work can exacerbate stress, particularly when workloads are unevenly distributed or communication breaks down due to cultural or technological barriers. Future research may build on the findings of this study by addressing these multidimensional areas, including instructor methods, group composition, evidence-based interventions, and student well-being.

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