

COLLABORATION:

When You Can and When You Can't Work with Others

Collaboration is working with another or receiving assistance from someone (a classmate, friend, or parent, whether in person or electronically) to complete course work for a grade. Sometimes collaboration may be permitted, other times it is not. Collaboration can include:

- Jointly calculating homework problems
- Working in a group on a lab assignment
- Having another help one rewrite a paper
- Checking homework answers with others
- Sharing sources for a take-home exam
- “Debugging” another’s computer program

What is unauthorized collaboration?

“Unauthorized collaboration” means working with others, without the specific permission of the instructor, on assignments that will be submitted for a grade. This rule applies to in-class or take-home tests, papers, labs, or homework assignments. Students may not collaborate without faculty authorization.

What are the ground rules?

Under the [Code of Academic Conduct](#), all work submitted for a grade must be the student’s own original, independent work, unless the instructor permits collaboration, use of sources, or outside assistance.

- If working with others or receiving assistance is allowed, any help or collaboration must be given credit and cited.
- Students must comply with the course rules, and may only work together, or receive help, to the extent allowed by the instructor.
- If unsure about the limits, students must seek the instructor’s permission before working with one another.
- Even if the instructor permits collaboration, it is *never* ethical to copy someone’s work or let them copy yours.
- If your instructor asks whether you worked with anyone on an assignment, always tell the truth.

What about studying together?

The rules about unauthorized collaboration do not mean that students can't study together or help each other learn. Students are encouraged to do this. Having study partners and explaining concepts and ideas to one another is valuable in the learning process. If in doubt, ask your instructor.

Examples

1. In a computer science class, students are allowed to discuss “general concepts,” but all computer code submitted must be “individual work.” Four students assume they can work in a group, since each of them writes part of the code. Is this unauthorized collaboration?

Yes. “Individual work” means that students must work alone. Even if they didn’t copy, portions of the code submitted by each student were written by the other students – none of these four wrote all their own code as assigned. “General concepts” do not include specific solutions, answers, or code.

2. An instructor prohibits all collaboration, and tells students not to discuss homework, solve problems together, or compare answers. During office hours, a student asks about a homework assignment and the TA explains the question. Seeing this, two students work on the homework together. Have they violated the professor's rule?

Yes. Assistance provided by those who teach the course (whether in class, at discussion sections, or during office hours) does not imply or give permission for students to work together on assignments. Students may not exceed the limits set by the instructor, and may only work together as specified.

3. Students are assigned to do a lab experiment as partners because the apparatus needs two operators. Partners are allowed to discuss the concepts involved in the experiment and the lab report format, but calculations and write-ups (procedures and equipment used, results, graphs, and conclusions) are to be completed by each student, working alone, in the student's own words. Two student partners discuss their analysis of the data and work together to create a joint data table and graphs. Each paraphrases the joint work and submits the same table and graphs, formatted with different fonts and spacing. Did they break the rules?

Yes. Analyzing data, preparing graphs, and writing the report are important parts of the learning process; each student was required to do them alone. Even if neither copied, and they worked together only on the graphs, they still broke the rule.

Can the rules change from one course to the next? From one assignment to the next?

Yes. Collaboration may be permitted in one class and forbidden in another, because faculty have varying teaching strategies and goals. Different subjects (English, computer science, microbiology, and drama) require different approaches. Some assignments may be designed for individual work, and others for groups. Important lessons are learned from working individually, while group work develops other abilities. Working alone builds a student's individual skills, knowledge, and self-confidence. This permits a more accurate and individually tailored evaluation of each student's strengths and weaknesses, achievements and needs for improvement. When allowed, collaboration gives students experience working on a team, and they can learn from solving problems together, discussing questions, sharing strategies, and giving mutual encouragement. Students need both experiences – working alone and collaborating – to prepare for their chosen fields.

How can you know which rules apply?

- Read the syllabus, review the course website, and follow assignment instructions.
- If you're not sure, ask the instructor. Or call OSSJA for help with understanding the rules.
- Don't guess or assume – if you're confused, others probably are too. You can help by raising the issue with the instructor.
- When in doubt, remember the Code of Academic Conduct requires students to work alone unless they have permission to work together.
- Students may consult tutors about pending work, as long as the tutor only identifies errors or demonstrates sample problems that are NOT part of the assignment. The tutor may not fix mistakes, re-write papers, or do homework for the student.
- Students may study together for tests, and may discuss concepts, readings, and notes to help each other learn the material before the test.

Why limit or prohibit collaboration?

- Unauthorized collaboration misrepresents joint work as the work of an individual.
- Unauthorized collaboration gives those who break the rules an unjust advantage and creates unfair competition.
- Those who always work with others are unaware of gaps in their own knowledge and skills, and do not learn all they can or should from their assignments.
- Students are held accountable for understanding and following class rules, and must ask questions if they are unsure.

Conclusion

Although new technologies and communications media make unauthorized collaboration easier than ever, it can be detected. Some students who break the rules might not get caught this time – but next time they will. Unauthorized collaboration is unfair and undermines the educational goals of the University. If you have questions about course rules, talk to your instructor. For assistance regarding these issues, please visit our website (<http://ossja.ucdavis.edu>) or call our office (530-752-1128).