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

Collaboration Defined

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

- *jointly calculating homework problems*
- *having another help one rewrite a paper*
- *sharing sources for a take-home exam*
- *working in a group on a lab assignment*
- *checking homework answers with others*
- *"debugging" another's computer program*

What is unauthorized collaboration?

Students are expected to do all coursework that will be submitted for a grade independently (i.e. on their own) unless the instructor has given explicit permission for students to work with and/or get help from others. Even when an instructor allows some degree of collaboration, the instructor often limits how much or the type of help a student may give and/or receive. This policy applies to in-class or take-home tests, papers, labs, projects, or homework assignments. Examples of too much help include, but are not limited to:

- Receiving so much help on a paper, assignment or computer code that the instructor can tell who helped them or that the work is not their own.
- Having someone else "edit" a paper and that individual changes the paper or tells the student what to change.
- Using sites like Course Hero, Chegg and GitHub to obtain the solutions for homework.
- In many classes, using a translator to convert a paper from one language into another.

What are the ground rules?

Under the UC Davis Code of Academic Conduct, all work submitted for a grade must be the student's own original, independent work, unless the instructor explicitly 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 policies and may only work together or receive help to the extent permitted by the instructor.
- If unsure about the limits, students must seek the instructor's permission before working with one another.
- Even if collaboration is permitted, it is never ethical to copy someone's work or let them copy yours.

Examples

1. Students were assigned to do a lab experiment as partners because the apparatus needs two operators. Partners were 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) were to be completed by each student independently, in the student's own words. Two student partners discussed their analysis of the data and worked together to create a data table and graphs. Each then paraphrased the joint work and submitted 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 collaborated without authorization.

2. 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.

3. 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.

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. Students may study together for tests, and may discuss concepts, readings, and notes to help each other learn the material before the test.

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 restricted in another. Faculty have varying teaching strategies and goals. Different subjects 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 skills. Working alone builds a student's individual skills, knowledge, and self-confidence. This permits a more accurate evaluation of each student's mastery of the material. When permitted, collaboration gives students the opportunity to 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 information, and follow assignment instructions.
- Don't guess or assume. If you're not sure, you must ask the instructor. Or call OSSJA for assistance.
- 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, rewrite papers, or do homework for the student.

Why limit or prohibit collaboration?

- Unauthorized collaboration misrepresents joint work as the work of an individual.
- Students who collaborate without permission have an unfair advantage.
- 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.

A note of caution about group work

You should also be aware that if you are working in a team or group, you are responsible for the entire work that is submitted. If another member of the team engages in academic misconduct, you can be held responsible as well. If you divide the work rather than work together, you lose control over how the work is completed and take the risk of being held responsible for misconduct.

Conclusion

Although new technologies and communications media make unauthorized collaboration easier than ever, it can be detected. Work that is submitted with unauthorized collaboration is often identified. The responsible students can fail the course and will face University sanctions. Unauthorized collaboration is unfair and undermines the educational goals of the University. If you have questions about course policies, talk to your instructor. For assistance, please call OSSJA at (530) 752-1128 or see our website at http://ossja.ucdavis.edu.