

Conflicting Motives

How might we help students understand how differing individual priorities impact group collaboration?

Overview: Student groups often face conflict over competing – and sometimes *hidden* – motives. While one student may want to use the project as a polished portfolio piece, another may want to take risks and “think outside the box.” Moreover, students may have a tough time recognizing (let alone *articulating*) their own motives, leading to conflict. This activity helps show the impact of teammates’ individual motives on group productivity and outcomes.

Time Required: 30 minutes

Materials: Post-It pads for each student (one yellow pad per table, the rest non-yellow), pens

Details: Have students work with their teams on this project. Tell students that they are going to work on a brainstorming activity for their projects that will also teach them about working in groups. Explain that the purpose of this game is to score as many points as possible, and that each team gets one point for every idea they write down on a Post-It (one idea per Post-It). There will be additional opportunities for points after 5 minutes, but you will share these later.

Share the project-specific prompt (Ex: “Brainstorm different ways to demonstrate parabolas to the class” or “Brainstorm different people to interview for your oral history project”). Let students brainstorm for 5 minutes.

Groups should come to a stop at 5 minutes. Ask each group to total their scores and write these on the board. Now explain that each group member is going to get a secret card that has an additional way to earn points. Students cannot share what is written on their card with teammates, but they are free to *influence* others’ behavior in any other way. For example, if your card says +1 point for every idea that has a related drawing, you can’t *tell* your teammates your card says they should draw a picture, but you can draw a picture on each Post-It. Answer any questions, then pass a slip of paper to each team member (it’s important that each team member gets a different slip of paper):

- +5 points for every 5 ideas your team generates
- +100 points if your team only adds 10 more ideas
- -2 points for every idea written on a yellow Post-It
- +100 points if your team has an even number of ideas
- +2 points for every idea written in CAPITAL LETTERS

Students will have 5 minutes to continue brainstorming, but they cannot take back what they’ve already done (no throwing away or re-writing Post-Its). At the end of the timer (and before you tally scores or reveal what was on the cards) ask the students to share what they think their partners’ hidden motives were. How did this impact the team’s performance? How might the team have maximized their total points in Round 2? Which motives were productive to the group’s goal of brainstorming? Which, if any, were counterproductive? How did this change the group dynamic?



Ask students to reveal their motive card and tally their points. Add this to the previous score and celebrate all the teams. Debrief how this is similar to what happens in groups – where different people have competing motivations in how they work. Ask teams to discuss their motivations in working on their longer term project.

Suggested reading:

Oakley, B. (2002). It Takes Two to Tango: How 'Good' Students Enable Problematic Behavior in Teams. *Journal of Student Centered Learning*, 1(1), 19-27.

Strong, J. T., & Anderson, R. E. (1990). Free-riding in group projects: Control mechanisms and preliminary data. *Journal of Marketing Education*, 12(2), 61-67.