

# Your Peers

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## WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial prepares you to collaborate effectively with your peers by emphasizing the value of diverse perspectives and exploring strategies for practicing cultural sensitivity and respectful class discussion. The second half examines the benefits and challenges of group projects. Here is what will be covered:

1. The Value of Diversity
2. Personal Perspectives: Culture, Values and Beliefs
3. Practicing Cultural Sensitivity
4. Contributing to Class Discussion Respectfully
5. The Value of Group Projects
6. Effective Collaboration in Group Projects
7. Responsibilities in Group Projects
8. Resolving Conflicts in Group Projects

## 1. The Value of Diversity

Higher learning requires a mind open to new ideas and new people. A closed mind refuses to change—and without change, there can be no growth. Thus a diverse student body and a diversity of ideas are cornerstones of the kind of intellectual and social growth that occurs in the best educational experiences. Being open to and respectful of new people and new ideas makes you a good “citizen of the classroom”—that is, a student who is considerate of their classmates and helps to promote a spirit of inclusivity and welcoming. It also connects you to perspectives outside the scope of your experience and thereby enriches your own perspective. In other words, it makes you a better student and a better person.



### THINK ABOUT IT

The Latin verb “vertere,” meaning “to turn” is part of the derivation of both the words “diversity” and “university.” Interestingly, whereas diversity denotes that things “turn away” or differ from each other, university—with the prefix “uni-,” meaning “one”—indicates a place where different things come together or “turn into one.” The function of the university in a society—to be a meeting place or even a marketplace of diverse people and ideas—is embedded in the history of the word “university.”



### THINK ABOUT IT

In some online courses, you may have little or no interaction with other students. At the same time, it's important for you to understand what the norms are for other types of higher education courses in the likely event that you will continue your education in a traditional classroom or online course with discussion forums or virtual classrooms. This tutorial will help you prepare for those types of experiences.

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## 2. Personal Perspectives: Culture, Values, and Beliefs

Your perspective is the position from which you see the world around you. Your perspective is shaped and informed by things like where you come from, how you were raised, the privileges you've had, or the adversity you've faced. You are inevitably going to be in class with students who come from a different culture or have different values than you—that is, people who see the world from a different position than you do. Once again, this is a good thing! The classroom is an ideal place to learn with, and learn from, people from all kinds of backgrounds and perspectives. This includes students from different countries, different economic classes, different religious beliefs, different gender identities, different abilities and disabilities, etc.

## 3. Practicing Cultural Sensitivity

It's important for students in diverse classrooms to practice cultural sensitivity. Practicing cultural sensitivity means:

1. being aware that your perspective is just one in the diverse set of perspectives that contribute to your class and
2. conducting yourself in a manner that is considerate of and respectful toward other perspectives you might encounter in your classroom.

Being culturally sensitive is not the same as being afraid you're going to offend someone; a culturally sensitive student is actively empathetic toward fellow classmates and attuned to the whole of the classroom community. If you work to develop your cultural sensitivity it will not only deepen your perspective by inviting you to think critically about your own prejudices, but it will help to foster more productive interactions with your peers.

### EXAMPLE

You are reading a novel in your literature class and there is a character in the book who behaves in a way that is at odds with your values. A number of vocal students in the class don't seem to share your beliefs and opinions about the character. You are considering speaking up because you want your values to be represented and respected in the discussion. Should you say something? It depends. For instance, does your opinion include a value judgment about the behaviors you oppose? Might those students that don't oppose those behaviors have a different set of values? Might they, in fact, participate in or support the participation in the behaviors you are opposed to? Basically, you want to be sure before expressing your opinion that you are being respectful of your classmates and any perspectives that you don't share. Cultural sensitivity involves taking thoughtful measure of a situation.

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## 4. Contributing to Class Discussion Respectfully

Contributing to class discussion respectfully is a great way to participate in your class and help build a sense of community. But how do you know you are being respectful? First, before expressing your personal opinion about an issue raised in class, make sure it is an appropriate time and venue in which to express it. Your opinion is often welcome, but be mindful of the moment—what the purpose of the assignment or lesson is and how your opinion might impact the focus of the course. Next, take care to express your thoughts in a manner that doesn't include assumptions or value judgments regarding other cultures and perspectives. Your opinion is valued, but not at the expense of anyone else's. Even if you don't intend any disrespect, thoughtless or careless comments can negatively impact your classroom community.

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## 5. The Value of Group Projects

Your coursework will occasionally require collaboration—that is, working together with other students. In a group project, two or more students collaborate to produce one unified piece of work. Group projects can help you develop skills that will be vital to your professional life after school. These skills include communicating effectively, dividing and delegating responsibilities, building consensus, and giving and taking constructive criticism. The majority of situations in the “real” or working world are going to involve collaborating with co-workers. Therefore, group projects in school are not merely an academic exercise, but rather they are some of the more useful elements of your education in preparing you for your future career.

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## 6. Effective Collaboration in Group Projects

Effective collaboration in group projects begins with establishing active and open communication. Active and open communication entails making sure each member of the group's voice is heard and their opinion is taken into account. If you communicate well within your group, each member will understand their individual role and responsibility and the group can therefore proceed confidently and efficiently toward its goal. Also, if healthy communication is established within the group, this will help facilitate timely and satisfactory resolution to any conflict that might arise.

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## 7. Responsibilities in Group Projects

Effective collaboration in group projects requires that you fully understand your responsibility within the group and do your best to execute the work you are responsible for. The process of determining individual students' responsibilities within the project should approximate consensus—that is, the agreement of everyone involved—as much as possible. Some students may naturally gravitate toward leadership roles and others toward secondary roles; this is perfectly acceptable and can result in more effective collaboration, as long as no one's voice is ignored or overshadowed. Once roles and responsibilities are established, it's crucial that they are honored and that every member of the group contributes according to plan. Problems arise when students do either more or less than their share of the work.

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## 8. Resolving Conflicts in Group Projects

Any time you are working on a group project, there is the potential for conflict to arise among group members. After all, you are often being evaluated as a group, so each individual member of the team's performance can affect everyone's grade. Once again, the best way to avoid conflict is to establish clear and open communication from the start. However, this does not ensure that each individual within the group will follow through on their responsibilities or that any number of unforeseen circumstances will interfere with the success of the collaboration. If a conflict does arise, it's best to address the problem directly and candidly. If you feel one individual is responsible for the problem, express your concerns to that individual respectfully. Conversely, if a student or students within your group express a concern they have with your work, consider their point of view carefully and try to avoid defensiveness. In any event, do your best to resolve conflict within the group and move forward. Only when resolution of the issue fails despite your best efforts should you contact your instructor or seek help outside of the group.

### IN CONTEXT

It is the nature of group projects that not every member of the team will contribute an equal amount of effort and work. So one of the most common issues students have with working in groups is when one or more members of the group are not doing their share. It's understandable to be frustrated in this situation, as it is indeed not fair that students will share credit equally when their individual contributions are far from equal. So what should you do if you find yourself in a group project doing most of the work yourself? Again, it is important that you communicate your concerns to your group mates. Be polite, but clear and direct. If this doesn't work, you can inform your instructor of the situation. In some cases, it can be clear to the instructor who is and isn't doing their work, and they may take that into consideration when evaluating the project. You might also choose not to tell the instructor; to some extent, an imbalance of effort in group projects is inevitable, and this will be true in your life beyond school as well. You can settle for taking pride in your own work.



### SUMMARY

This tutorial focused on **the value of diversity** and diverse **personal perspectives**, as well as the **practice of cultural sensitivity** and **respectful contribution to class discussion**. Then it emphasized **the value of group projects** and explored strategies for **effective collaboration**, including understanding your **responsibility within the project** and **resolving conflicts** that arise.