Concept Paper: Working in an Online Task Group

While relatively new, online group work will be a common part of your future practice. This course will require you to develop skills in working online. The following suggestions are based on previous class experiences.

Backups are important
In our complex world, systems fail. Keep good backup of computer files, have backups persons for key tasks, etc. Also, be respectful of others and keep your virus detection software up to date.

Networks are flexible and durable structures
When making assignments, try to use a network design, e.g., each node operating independently so that the failure of one node will not cause the whole system to fail. For example, do not have someone agree to edit all documents into a final document. That creates a bottleneck and makes the whole system dependent on a lot of work by one person. It is better to assign one person (also appoint a backup) to pull together all submitted materials using a group approved outline. This draft can then be emailed to all for corrections and changes. Consider using the track changes feature of Word.

Immediate feedback is important
If it is important for the person who emailed you something to know that you received it, give a short reply. Since technology often fails, especially in crunch situations, feedback helps all to know that communication channels are working.

Make decisions in F2F meetings and assign homework
Complex decisions and tasks that need discussion are best completed in groups. However, many other tasks can best be completed as homework. Out of respect for other member’s time, all should agree to come to a meeting having read and prepared to discuss the information provided. Conversely, if you send information to the group, be clear why you are sending it and if any action is required on the part of the receiver.

Task groups are not good at composing or editing
It is easy for a task group to become involved in composing text. However, rarely are documents produced by group process well written. Occasional composing and rewording by a task group is acceptable. However, if the group spends several minutes struggling with wording, then the chair or any group member should move to assign the writing to one group member. This writing or editing can be done on the spot or as homework and brought back to the group for minor changes and approval. The person assigned the writing task should insure they have enough direction or information to produce the desired draft document.

Discuss potential problems or “what if” scenarios before they happen
Most students begin class thinking all will give 110% throughout the semester. However, experience suggests that things do not go as planned. For example, what happens if a task member misses one or more classes due to car problems or an illness of a family member? What happens if group members have fundamental differences on CAP issues or if someone thinks the task group is not operating effectively. Decisions on when and how potential process problems are to be handled should be in the minutes of your first or second meeting.

Ask for help if the task group is struggling
We live in a complex world with specialized expertise. If your task group is struggling, ask someone from the outside, e.g., the instructor, for help. Task groups are sometimes like a family, e.g., an outside observer can quickly see and resolve a problem that is hard for the family to identify.