

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. 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*

Sometimes collaboration may be permitted, other times it is not. The following information will help you be able to know when it is O.K. to work with others.

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 UC Davis *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.

Examples:

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. Have they broken the rule against 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.

In his syllabus, 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.

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 – for example, 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. Individual work also permits a more accurate and individually tailored evaluation of each student’s strengths and weaknesses, achievements and needs for improvement. When it is allowed, collaboration gives students experience in 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.



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!

Why you can't ignore the rules...

Some students disregard rules against collaboration because they think they learn more from working with others, because they don't like the restrictions, because they have been permitted to work in groups in other classes and are used to doing so, or because they get frustrated when they can't figure out the answer. Students may NOT ignore the course rules for these reasons, nor can they avoid responsibility by saying they never knew there was a rule against working together – ignorance is not a defense.

For educational reasons related to the goals and purposes of the course, instructors may permit students to collaborate on some assignments, but not on others (such as on the first two “practice” problem sets only). Or they may permit students to work together on the early stages of a project or lab, but require the final write-up to be in the student's own words. It may be okay for students to discuss general concepts of a homework task, but they may have to calculate the final answer on their own. If you're not sure where to draw the line – ASK!

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 call SJA at (530) 752-1128 or see our website at <http://sja.ucdavis.edu>.

Example:

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 working alone, in the student's own words. Two student partners discussed their analysis of the data and worked together to create a joint 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 broke the rule.

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 SJA 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* requires students to work alone unless they have permission.
- 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.

But other students do it...

Students referred for unauthorized collaboration sometimes say they didn't know they were breaking the rules (stating, for example, “I didn't copy, I worked with a group;” “I've seen other students doing homework together;” or “I tried to solve the problems by myself and just checked my answers with a friend”). Remember, students must know and follow the standards set by faculty. If others break those rules, it doesn't justify unfair or dishonest conduct: the *Code of Academic Conduct* requires that students report the misconduct to their instructor or SJA.