**Making Remote Student Teams Successful :**

**Tips from Business Teams**

# To the Instructor: About the Remote Student Teams Section

Teamwork is tough enough in the best of circumstances.  It is even harder when adding challenges students face in teams–simultaneously learning content, figuring out your instructor and team members, plus (often) no team member has authority and experience to sort it all out.  Then imagine trying to pull your team together remotely.  You can’t look them in the eye, shake their hand, or buy them a beer to work it out.  And don’t get me started about factoring in Covid-19!

Fortunately, a few weeks back an email from Trello dropped in my inbox.  Trello markets a fantastic, flexible tool for teams to manage their project work–teams in my senior projects class have used it for years.  Both Trello, and their parent Atlassian, have extensive experience with remote teams–creating tools to support them, and using them internally.  They leveraged this experience, together with other companies known for innovative remote teams, to create a free online guide called “[How to Embrace Remote Work: The Complete Guide to Setting Up Your Team for Remote Work Success](https://trello.com/remote-work-guide?utm_source=alert-email&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=trello_remote-campaign-q4fy20)“.  The actionable advice, while directed at teams in the business world, applies as well to student teams in an educational setting.

My goal here is to make this information even more relevant, and digestible, for you and your student teams to access. I cooked Trello’s [Remote Team Work Guide](https://trello.com/remote-work-guide?utm_source=alert-email&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=trello_remote-campaign-q4fy20) down even further, pulling excerpts and adding some further material.  Then I collated and edited the excerpts to focus it, in an abbreviated fashion, on topics student teams need to master in order to work remotely.

Feel free to use this distilled guide in whole or in part. [You may download and edit a single consolidate document of this entire section](https://peerassessment.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Making-Remote-Student-Teams-Successful-Tips-from-Business-Teams.docx) But please make sure to give credit to Trello for making the original guide available. \*

The topics include:

* Critical Collaboration Tools for Remote Student Teams
* Choosing the Right Communication Tool
* Video Conferencing Etiquette
* Holding Productive Video Meetings
* Creating a Strong Remote Team Culture
* Fast Team Building Activities for Remote Video Meetings

\* I am not affiliated with Trello or Atlassian in any way.  I am only a grateful customer.

## **Critical Collaboration Tools for Remote Student Teams**

Your team needs to pick a few basic tools for team collaboration and set up some explicit guidelines for using them. Everyone on the team needs to use the same tool set, or there is a real chance they could self-destruct. *(Note: I’ve resorted the list below in order of priority for student teams.)*

1. **Document Storage:** Whether it’s [Google Drive](https://support.google.com/drive/answer/2424384?co=GENIE.Platform%3DDesktop&hl=en&oco=0) or [Dropbox](https://www.dropbox.com/features), teams need to pick one document storage tool and stick with it. Using different group storage, or individual storage, is a recipe for losing or overwriting documents if someone is out sick or leaves the team.  Also, as important as the storage space, is a simple to follow plan to organize it with standards for naming files, using folders, and versioning.
2. **Writing and Reviewing Documents:** In addition to storing documents, student teams need a way to collaboratively create and review them. Within [Google Docs](https://blog.trello.com/trello-and-google-drive-an-integration-made-in-office-heaven), teams can create/comment/chat back and forth in real-time or asynchronously.  *Students especially need to know how to use Comments, Version History and  Share to recognize Google Docs potential for teams.*
3. **Video Meeting Space:**  Video conversations are second only to in-person gatherings as a means to understand someone’s tone, meaning, and reactions. They are also invaluable to building more cohesive team relationships. Remote teams can be as effective as in-person teams by adopting a tool like [Zoom](https://zoom.us/meetings), [Skype](https://www.skype.com/en/features/group-video-chat/), or [join.me](https://www.join.me/) that supports video cameras and screen sharing.  *Video meetings take some work to become productive. Some practice applying video meeting etiquette and productive video meeting techniques is a priority.  Plus help students use screen sharing strategically to focus the team and get work done.*
4. **Shared Plan:** Teams need to know what each member is up to and where projects are in different phases. Without a roadmap or planning tool, managers get sucked into hours of meetings that could be eliminated by having an updated overview that’s accessible at any time. [Trello](https://trello.com/) is a visual project management tool that is hands on for the team.  It is used to both manage tasks progress and organize work products for the task itself.  *In my experience, students love Trello once they have a clear plan for how to use it.  I start them with a template and some norms for using it, then let teams evolve from there. Like any project management technique, Trello requires some discipline.*
5. **Collaborative Discussions:** Across a project, teams need to be able to engage in a variety of different conversations to generate, refine, link, research, and debate ideas. Today’s leader in organized team chat rooms is [Slack](https://slack.com/). *I would suggest Slack for longer, larger and more intensive student projects, or where it is leveraged across a program of classes.  In my opinion, it is much more than the standard 3 credit classes I normally teach requires.*
6. **Common Calendar:** Using the same calendar tool makes scheduling meetings immensely easier within a team. Whether it’s [Google Calendar](https://gsuite.google.com/products/calendar/) or [Fantastical](https://flexibits.com/fantastical), giving team members equal access to a shared calendar will put a stop to endless email threads discussing schedules and time zones.  *I do not push Google Calendar with my students, as many have other work preferences, our LMS manages assignment due dates, and Trello is usually sufficient for team projects.  However, students have a devil of a time figuring out when they can meet up.  A super simple app called*[*Doodle*](https://doodle.com/en/)*is great for finding when we can all get together.*

### Sources/For more information

* [How To Master The Art Of Remote Team Communications](https://blog.trello.com/master-remote-team-communications), By [Stella Garber](https://blog.trello.com/author/stella-garber)on, November 21, 2016 in [Productivity](https://blog.trello.com/topic/productivity), [Remote Work](https://blog.trello.com/topic/remote-work)
* [When To Use Which Tools For Remote Work Success](https://blog.trello.com/tools-for-remote-work-success-infographic), By Lauren Moon, March 19, 2020 in [Remote Work](https://blog.trello.com/topic/remote-work).

## **Choosing the Right Team Communication Tool**

There are so many ways to communicate at work that it’s overwhelming. Every day, I find myself asking the same question: should I email, instant message, phone, video, or text this information? It’s a mundane question, but it’s important. Because if you don’t choose the right mode of communication, you’ll be ignored, misunderstood, put on the back burner, or dismissed with a vague, insufficient response.

The tools below are listed from most to least communication bandwidth.  Video, second only to face to face, has the largest bandwidth to simultaneously convey our words, tone of voice, gestures, expressions and full array of non-verbal information.  That bandwidth allows us to express our meaning in multiple ways to ensure we are correctly understood.  Consequently, when using tools with less bandwidth--phone, text, and email--there is a greater chance we will be misunderstood.

**VIDEO**

* **Pro**: Video is the next best thing to in-person communication. The real-time communication of video makes sharing information fast and reliable, which makes it easier to convey complex topics and resolve sensitive issues more quickly and with less misunderstanding.   Also, video is just naturally more engaging, personal and sociable.  So it is indispensable for building trust and forming relationships.
* **Con**: Effective video communication requires appropriate video technology. Bad video communication can make for extremely infuriating and ineffective communication.

**PHONE**

* **Pro**: When video or in-person communication is not feasible, use the phone to communicate information that’s sensitive, complicated, or immediate. A phone call is more intrusive and formal than a text/chat, but is less so than video. Talking things through is how we fix miscommunication, so it’s one of the clearest communication methods we have.
* **Con**: It has generational issues--young people are less inclined to make a telephone call or answer a call. Also, there is no electronic "paper trail"to check our memories so we could walk away with different memories about what was said or agreed to.

**TEXTING**

* **Pro**: Texting allows for more relaxed collaboration and discussion than email. And because it’s a more familiar way to communicate, you can build closer relationships with colleagues as you include memes, gifs, and emoticons. Rapid give and take responses is perhaps the best thing about instant messaging.
* **Con**: If your topic is too complicated or includes too many people, messaging can become messy and burdensome.  Also, many of us formed habits of quick give and take with our close friends who intuitively understand each other.  However, if we apply those texting habits to work team communications we can quickly end up misspeaking or misinterpreting, with consequences.

**EMAIL**

* **Pro**: If it’s not timely information, email is super convenient.  You can send general information to a whole host of people on your own schedule and receive their replies on their schedule.  It is especially important when a record of the communications is needed. Its longevity and formality means you need to pay more attention to what you say and how you say it.
* **Con**: Email is less effective in establishing a human connection; it’s formal, faceless, voiceless, and often tone deaf. Also, without this human connection, it also raises the probability of miscommunication.

### Sources/For More Information:

* [**Channel** **Tips for Internal Office Communications**](https://blog.jive.com/workplace-communication-email-chat-video-phone/), By Hillary Gamblin, September 27, 2017
* [**How to Communicate in the Workplace-infographic**](https://peerassessment.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/How-to-Communicate-in-the-Workplace-infographic.pdf), By Hillary Gamblin, September 27, 2017

## **Video Meeting Etiquette**

If you aren't that familiar with the additional expectations placed upon you in a video meeting, that's okay. We're here to help you learn the dos and don'ts of video meetings. Take the following information into consideration so you don't find yourself committing a major faux pas at your next team meeting. Or, share this with a coworker to help them out the next time they're making one of these mistakes.

### **PREPARE**

#### **Make sure your technology works correctly—before the meeting starts!**

* **Do**: You need to do a few test runs with a friend before your first big meeting. Open up the video tool your team will be using and try it out.  Especially important is the mic and camera.  Make sure they work.  And see how it looks and sounds from another computer, before you know you are ready.
* **Why**: You don't want to delay a meeting with an important client--or even your colleagues or friends--because your video system isn't working properly.  Just make sure that everything will run smoothly before you start the real thing!

#### **Be on time**

* **Do**: This is standard for any meeting, but worth a reminder. It is especially important in a video meeting, as it can be a bit harder to catch up.
* **Why**: When you walk in late, you'll be making noise and distract anyone who is speaking in the room. Additionally, when you're on time for a meeting, it'll make getting set up with technology easier and less painless so the meeting can start on time.

#### **Wear work-appropriate clothing**

* **Do**: While it might be tempting to work in your favorite sweatshirt all day, wear at least what would be appropriate if the meeting were face-to-face.  Doesn't have to be extra fancy and formal, just make it appropriate.

### **READY TO ROLL**

#### **Frame the camera correctly**

* **Do**: When you're on video, make sure you frame your camera in a way that feels natural and allows you to look at the camera. Try to sit at eye level to the camera lens and position yourself so that it shows midsection up.
* **Why**: Placing the camera too high leaves other participants staring down at you like a bad tv show. If the camera is too low it will create unflattering and awkward angles.

#### **Get the light right**

* **DO**: Make sure that there is enough light on your face and in the room.  Your entire face should be lighted and easy to read.  Don’t create shadows that make you look like a shady character from a [1930s horror film](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1qNeGSJaQ9Q).
* **WHY**: Poor lighting conditions have an enormous effect on your video quality.  Make sure your non-verbal expressions are easily see.

### **SHOWTIME**

#### **Look into the camera**

* **Do**: It takes some practice, but you need to look at the camera lens, not at the pictures of people you are speaking to.  Look into the camera.
* **Why**: Looking into the camera lens is the equivalent of looking into the person’s eyes. If your camera is not on your monitor, this takes some practice to get comfortable. Not looking into the camera will make you come across as more aloof and not paying attention.

**Pay attention**

* **Do**: Do NOT check emails or work on your PowerPoint presentation during video meetings!  Likewise, prove to your colleagues that you are paying attention by keeping your camera on, and on you.  Turning off your camera during a meeting invites others to question your engagement.
* **Why**: Not only does research suggest [only 3% of people can multitask effectively](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2017/may/08/people-think-can-multitask-deluding-themselves-concentration), but you also look rude to your participants.

#### **Mute yourself when not speaking**

* **Do**: Make it a practice (out of common courtesy to your colleagues) to mute yourself when you're not talking. For most video conferencing software, it's as simple as the click of a button.
* **Why**: Even when you think you're being quiet, most microphones will pick up minor background noises, like coughs, sneezes, or typing. These sounds can easily distract other video meeting participants and potentially even cause annoyance.

### **Sources/For More Information:**

* [**Do’s and Don’ts of Video Calls**](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lzdqlYhaOWA), (Video, 1:48 min) **Great video of Video Call Etiquette** created by the students and staff at UC Riverside. Demonstrates best practices of framing, lighting, etiquette, sound, etc.
* [**Video Conferencing Etiquette: 10 Tips for a Successful Video Conference**](https://www.owllabs.com/blog/video-conferencing-etiquette)**,** by  Meredith Hart, March 25, 2020

## **Critical Techniques for Productive Video Meetings**

How often are your meetings productive? Be honest.  Between meeting attendees arriving late and your coworker loudly typing an email at the other end of the conference table, it can be hard to stay focused. If you're holding a video meeting, it can be even more challenging to manage your time effectively.

People are more likely to multitask and miss a point if they don't have someone next to them to hold them accountable. It's harder to communicate deadlines and deliverables, and technical problems can stop those attending remotely from hearing or seeing everything in the meeting room. According to the online collaboration company [Wrike](https://www.inc.com/minda-zetlin/its-official-half-your-meetings-are-a-waste-of-time-.html), 46% of those surveyed answered "rarely", "never", or "some of the time" when asked if they leave meetings knowing what the next action item is.

### **Don't arrange a call if something simpler would suffice**

* **Do**: Use video conferencing tools when a text or email doesn't suffice. For example, when you find yourself writing multiple paragraphs or a topic would be easier to discuss "face-to-face", then a video meeting is a good idea. Likewise if you need to make sure they got the message.
* **Why**: It is all about making the best use of your time. If the issue isn't pressing or doesn't require more than a couple of sentences for clarification, you're better off writing out the message.

### **Use an agenda**

* **Do**: Create an agenda that outlines the topics to cover, who is responsible for what, and how long the meeting will take. Then, include 5-10 minutes at the end to share final thoughts, discuss next steps, etc.
* **Why**: An agenda is critical for a productive conversation. Distributing an agenda before the meeting makes everyone aware of subject material and saves time from unnecessary and irrelevant brainstorms. And finally, meeting agendas help you, the organizer, keep track of the meeting—what was covered, what still needs to be discussed, and action items and next steps in order to move forward with a project.

### **Appoint a meeting facilitator**

* **Do**: Designate a meeting facilitator to keep track of the meeting agenda and conversation during the meeting. Either rotate the job, or assign someone permanently; but someone needs to be responsible for the meeting. The facilitator is responsible for the following:
  + **Review the agenda.** Start by reviewing the agenda, then come back to it to move the group from one item to the next.
  + **Guide the conversation**. Keep track of discussion topics and help attendees stick to their time limits. Your time and your colleagues' time is extremely valuable; it's inconsiderate and unreasonable for team meetings to run over the allotted time.
  + **Referee the conversation**. The point of a meeting is to give information to and get feedback from the group.  That can't happen if one person dominates. The facilitator respectfully asks questions like "What do you all think of this?" to create an opening and encourage those who have not had the chance to speak.
  + **Wrap up.** Five to 10 minutes before the official cutoff time, bring the conversation back to a plan of action to complete the next steps. It is good to reiterate details like deadlines, timelines, and task assignments.  But most important is to make sure everyone leaves the room united around the mission of why the team gathered in the first place.
* **Why:** A 2019 study of Remote Work found that interruptions and being talked over are two of the biggest meeting challenges. These, in addition to managing the organization and flow of the meeting, are the facilitator’s primary responsibilities.  Doing these effectively can be the biggest single determinant of the group’s ultimate success.

### **Designate a note-taker**

* **Do**: The note-taker is responsible for noting the topics discussed under each agenda item, and recording agreed upon action items, decisions, task assignments, and deadlines for deliverables. After the meeting, the note-taker should share documentation with the entire group for their review and post it to the group’s online storage.
* **Why**: If the meeting is important enough to hold, it is important enough to record its decisions and task assignments.  It helps those who missed the meeting catch up.  And it also prevents rehashing the same decisions made at the last meeting, or people not knowing what tasks they are assigned.

### Sources/For more information:

* [**How to Hold a Productive Video Meeting**](https://www.owllabs.com/blog/video-meeting),  by  Colin Duff, March 23, 2020 with OWL Labs
* [**12 Tips for Running a Successful Meeting**](https://www.owllabs.com/blog/meeting-tips), by Sophia Bernazzani, September 19, 2019 with OWL Labs.

## **Creating a Strong Remote Team Culture**

Some people are wary of remote teams because they fear a lack of team camaraderie. It’s true that there are no silly interactions in the kitchen or casual hallway “stop and chats” on remote teams.  However, with effective planning, these social moments can be baked into a remote dynamic.  Talking with people in dozens of remote teams confirms that you really can create a strong remove team culture.  There are two things you need to do.

**First, establish a clear set of norms** or "rules to live by" with 100% buy-in across the group.  Here are a few good ones to consider.

1. **Always assume positive intent.** Tone and nuance can get lost over texting or email, so assuming your colleague is coming from a positive place helps with any potential misunderstandings.
2. **Keep important information accessible for everyone.** Make sure to log side texting decisions, record video meetings, and always take notes to share in public spaces.
3. **Embrace communication across distributed time zone work schedules**. This takes planning ahead: No decisions are made last minute. It may seem like extra work, but it’s actually more organized.
4. **Expect Structure.** Establish a process, structure, and agenda around meetings and updates so everyone can follow along no matter their location. Assign a meeting lead and note taker to ensure key decisions are captured in writing
5. **Different Yet Equal.** Accept this fundamental reality: All remote team members are equal, but their experiences differ. It’s OK for co-located teammates to get together in person. But be considerate. If it is a company-sponsored event, provide an alternate perk for remote folks.

**Second, keep people communicating** through a healthy system of meetings, events, and habits.  Here are two types of social interactions that you can easily set up for your remote team:

1. **Company-Wide Town Hall --**This should be an open forum for questions, discussions, and (short) team presentations occurring periodically. Why does the Town Hall work? It’s curated, plus it’s energized, as well as democratic. It’s on a set schedule, and you get to see each person’s face in their own video screen. Try doing that in a room of 100 people!
2. **Oh Hey There, Mr. Rogers --**As companies grow, you can’t guarantee everyone knows or talks to everyone else. Enter “Mr. Rogers,” a 15-minute weekly random grouping of team members who connect on a video chat to, well, just chat. Post-session, a screen capture of the members and highlights are logged. Why does Mr. Rogers work? It reveals common interests and sparks conversations that can be picked up at the annual offsite. It provides a break from work talk and builds personal relationships at a reliable cadence.

### Sources/For more information:

* [**How To Embrace Remote Work: The Complete Guide To Setting Up Your Team For Remote Work Success**](https://trello.com/remote-work-guide?utm_source=alert-email&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=trello_remote-campaign-q4fy20), Trello, 2020.

## **Fast Team Building Activities for Remote Video Meetings**

Even video conferencing, which allows you to pick up on facial expressions and some body language (which constitutes [55% of communication](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Albert_Mehrabian)), has its limitations. When the person you’re talking to is a two-inch-tall disembodied head that magically transforms into a buffering wheel every 15 seconds, deciphering facial expressions and body language can be a challenge.

But remote meetings [don’t have to be that awkward](https://blog.trello.com/6-tips-for-better-video-meetings). Building rapport and understanding helps fill in the communication gaps during those technologically-challenging moments. Here are five quick icebreakers to help your team kick off your next remote meeting on the same page.

#### **1) Point Your Camera Out The Window**

One of the great aspects of videoconferencing is that it allows you to catch a glimpse of an unfamiliar city in real time, without ever leaving the comfort of your office. If you live in Minnesota and someone is joining your meeting from New Zealand, you’re going to want to peek out their window. The opportunity to play tourist for five minutes will be fun for everyone involved and will help the team get common perspective of their surroundings.  If people don’t know where everyone joining is located beforehand, you can turn it into a fun guessing game.

#### **2) Desk Show And Tell**

Explaining the story behind a piece of artwork or an accessory on your desk helps other people get to know you better.  Alternatively, you can use the objects on your desk as the basis for a game: Which item within reach would you take with you if you were stranded on a tropical island? I already know my answer: My laptop charger. In lieu of a proper rope, it would be the ideal instrument for rappelling up trees to pick coconuts.

#### **3) Two Truths And A Lie**

This is a [popular segment on Jimmy Fallon](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=40dnEuHWySU), and there’s no reason to believe it won’t be popular during your remote meetings. The rules are simple: Write down three statements, two of which are true and one is false. Read all three statements out loud and give everyone else a minute to guess which of the statements is false.

#### **4) Team Coffee Or Team Lunch**

It’s [scientific fact](https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/07/the-importance-of-eating-together/374256/) that eating together promotes bonding. Most companies that pride themselves on having a strong company culture have picked up on this, and just because your team can’t physically meet at the same restaurant doesn’t mean that this tried and true team-building ritual is off limits. It’s fairly straightforward to hold team lunches remotely via videoconferencing: [Have food](https://blog.trello.com/food-to-help-you-stay-focused-at-work), eat in front of the camera. It may feel weird, but it works. Breaking down virtual barriers by breaking bread is simple to organize and something everyone will have in common.

#### **5) Summarize Your CV In 60 Seconds**

Everything becomes more exciting when a time limit is involved. Your colleagues are going to want to know a bit about your background, but they don't want to know about it in Proustian detail. By forcing everyone to summarize their careers in 60 seconds, you’re not only sharing information that will help cement bonds between team members, but you’re doing it in a way that would nab solid ratings if your meeting were broadcast on TV.

#### **Bonus Activity!   Your First Paid Job**

This is Rob's favorite for new teams just starting out. Give each person 1 minute to identify their very first paid job and one thing they learned from it (relevant to the team's task at hand?)

### Sources/For More Information:

* [**5 Fast Team Building Activities For Remote Video Meetings**](https://blog.trello.com/team-building-activities-video-meetings), By David Humphreys on April 07, 2017