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College professor here.

I hated those group projects as an undergraduate. Hated, hated, hated them. There was always one slacker who didn't do his share of the work. There was always one or two who ended up doing twice as much work as anyone else.

However, as a college professor, I still assign group projects, and I think they are important—not because they are especially fair, but because they teach some subtle-but-vital skills.

In the real world, you will have employers or managers who will assign groups of workers to finish projects collectively. Always, always, always. In the real world, that manager or employer isn't going to sit on top of you all and supervise you constantly to make sure you are doing equal shares of labor. He's going to expect the group to produce the project, and he's not going to care very much about who did 41% of it and who did 10% of it, as long as the group completes it.

So, when your teacher sticks you in a group project, there's going to be some important learning going on. How are you as a group going to handle that problem of unequal workload and unequal quality?

Let's say Jake is the guy who's the slacker in our scenario. Are you going to....

1. Approach your teacher and complain about Jake not doing his share, assuming your teacher or boss will fix everything for you?
2. Are you going to conceal how Jake isn't doing any of the work and the rest of you are going to cover for him by stepping up to the plate? Are you going to let him take credit for work he did not do?
3. Are you going to have a frank conversation as a group about who isn't pulling their weight—including personally looking Jake in the eye as you critique him?
4. Are you going to divide the project up into sections and have each member of the group “sign” their section with attributions, so it's clear Jake didn't do much, documenting individual effort?
5. Are you going to include a brief narrative reflection in which each team member stops and discusses what he or she added to the project, and why—which also will help make it clear Jake didn't his share?
6. Are you going to ask each member of your team to send in a report to the teacher on your progress weekly, which will help document that Jake isn't doing his bit?
7. Are you going to let the project as a whole fall apart because some of your partners are slackers?
8. Or, are you going to develop the leadership skills and persuasion skills to find a way to motivate Jake to do his part?

I didn't appreciate that much when I was an undergraduate. The whole shebang felt unfair, artificial, and aggravating.

However, after I worked in the business world a while, and had similar group projects, I quickly realized how important it was for individuals to figure out how to handle that problem as part of a larger group and not just rely on the boss to constantly step in.

The CYA policy ("Cover Your Ass") in which you document work in stages is a good skill to develop. So is the ability to confront slackers and address them honestly and directly. So is group-decision making on how to handle faulty members of the group. So are the interpersonal skills of working together and motivating peers who are lazy or slackers. So is leadership. You may not master *all* of these skills, but master any *one* of these skills, and you will have a real leg-up in the business world and in your jobs.

Once I was teaching full-time, I returned to having at least one group project in most classes. I know, and I freely admit to students, that this sort of project isn't perfectly fair all the time.

However, it is perfectly realistic. It is actually valuable for students to learn about their own attitudes and behavior in a group dynamic, and learn how as a group to problem-solve situations in which one member of the group is dysfunctional or when the supervisor is distracted or unavailable.

I can list those suggested ways to handle the problem in an abstract lecture. I can model them for the class in hypothetical role-playing. However, the most important bit is *students actually doing* them with real people, repeatedly, until it's second-nature to them. Telling students how to handle it or assigning them to read instructions on how to do group work is like an experienced bicyclist verbally describing how to ride bicycles to people who've never done it—the listeners may understand the theory, but that won't mean they can apply it without practice.

Yeah, what the experienced cyclist tells his cyclist students is perfectly accurate, but hearing about how to ride a bike is not the same as figuring out how to ride the bike. It's not just a matter of knowing what strategies one can use to overcome that sort of dysfunctional group dynamic. It's actually having the gumption and motivation to pick one and follow through and practice the skills. That's what I hope students will get from group work, and it's almost impossible to quantify or measure in any meaningful way.

In this case, those skills are way more important than any other lesson you will learn from doing the project itself.