Team Assignments: Planning a Collaborative Online Learning Environment

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ABSTRACT

Teamwork is an essential part of an organization's success. Yet many online business programs do not use a methodological approach for ensuring students are learning critical teamwork skills and effectively applying them during the course of a semester. The purpose of this paper is to present best practices for implementing teamwork into an online business class and how assessment rubrics can assist in making meaningful changes and improvements to enhance student collaboration in online experiences.

Keywords: teamwork, collaboration, online instruction, adult learner, assessment

INTRODUCTION

Business coursework can provide real-world work experiences for adult learners by providing opportunities for students to work effectively in teams. It is the instructor's role to make connections to academic teamwork theorizing and to showcase how academic study can present new skills and knowledge to improve workplace team experience. The MBA Global Leadership course designed and taught by the coauthor draws upon student experiences in working with teams by providing opportunities to explore and apply new skills aimed at increasing student effectiveness in the workforce where teamwork plays a critical role in achieving organizational goals. Working with the author in eLearning services, the course was evaluated to identify whether or not MBA program learning goals for teamwork and leadership in teams were met. The learning goals include demonstration of: 1) appropriate group techniques to participate in team tasks resulting in effective performance, and 2) effective leadership skills in a group project. Results were assessed using peer evaluation rubrics for both teamwork and leadership in teams. In addition, mid-term and end-of-term evaluations were used to assess the effectiveness of instruction and student satisfaction with the team building learning experience.

ONLINE TEACHING STRATEGY FOR THE ADULT LEARNER

Research by Czerkawski (2014) and Rosie (2000) argued that online learning can promote students' critical thinking skills, deep learning, collaborative learning, and problem-solving skills. However, designing, developing and delivering an online course presents instructors with new challenges since there are clear differences in teaching strategies for online versus traditional instruction. Some of the challenges include the change of role and responsibilities for instructors (Muirhead, 2000), use of technology (Valentine, 2002; Palloff & Pratt, 2003), interaction with students, and changes in interpersonal relations (Bower, 2001, cited in Yang & Cornelious, 2005). Ascough (2002), promotes the role of facilitator versus instructor since there is less control of the class environment in online learning. Also, since most instructors are more likely to have been trained in traditional instruction, it can be a new practice for them to plan interactive strategies in course delivery. Since the level of interaction is different, instructors must change from conventional lecturer to learning champion as suggested by Volery (2000). Therefore, as noted by Zheng and Smaldino (2003), the instructor must design instruction as well as facilitate learning. Since designing instruction for online learning is not always a role where instructors excel, Lawrence Technological University eLearning Services requires that instructors work alongside instructional technologists for designing, developing, and delivering online coursework.

In addition to online design and delivery challenges, designing instruction for the adult learner is equally important and has its own set of challenges. According to Merriam (2009), andragogy methods call for adult learning participation in the learning and drawing upon life experiences. Andragogy is defined as "any intentional and professionally guided activity that aims at a change in adult persons" (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2015, p. 39-40). This aligns with Czerkawski's (2014) definition of deeper learning that "promotes students' active engagement in learning environments, so they can continuously explore, reflect and produce information to build complex knowledge structures" (p. 29). Instructors who include adult learning theories in their teaching approach by focusing on human qualities and explanatory skills can have a positive impact on students' perception of quality teaching (Ramsden, 2013). Lawler and King (2000) stated that focusing on the learner and including active participation

embodies adult learning principles. Development of a course therefore needs to incorporate breadth of knowledge, industry-accepted best practices for design, and teaching and learning effectiveness.

The design of adult learning instruction typically concentrates on 'doing' and action learning while at the same time ensuring the learning is relevant to the student's professional experience. Knowles et al. (2015) recommends that designers of instruction assess existing knowledge, consider the experience of the adult learner, and provide motivation to develop an applicable learning experience. Thus, the instructor of adult learning takes on the role of moderator and coach performing the functions of assessing students' needs, engaging students in the planning process, and connecting students to learning resources. The inclusion of what the student is required to learn along with institution learning goals is recommended and reinforced using a variety of communication modes.

COURSE DESIGN AND FORMATION OF TEAMS

The Global Leadership class is typically the inaugural course in the MBA program. Most, if not all, courses in the MBA program emphasize teamwork since students who work in collaborative learning environments tend to learn at a deeper level, retain information longer, are less likely to drop out of programs, acquire greater communication skills, are more effective team members/team leaders, achieve higher grades, and gain a better understanding of the environment that they will be working in as professionals (Oakley, Relder, Brent, & Elhajj, 2004). Course assignments are structured to engage students in learning what a team is and bringing awareness to how teams function effectively. This begins the first week of class. Each course activity is purposely structured to teach and provide experience in the application of new knowledge. The authors followed the Oakley et al. structure for building effective teams (Table 1).

Table 1: Oakley, B., Relder, R. M., Brent, R., & Elhajj, I. (2004). Turning student groups into effective teams. *Journal of Student Centered Learning,* **2(1), 9-34.**

Form	When Used	Objective
Getting to Know You	First day of class	Divide students into teams
Team Policies	First day of class	Define rules and procedures for teamwork
Student Expectations Assignment	First week of class	Develop a team contract
Coping with Hitchhikers and Couch Potatoes on Teams	First week of class	Deal with dysfuntional teams
Evaluation of Progress Toward Effective Team Functioning	1/3 through semester, 2/3 through semester	Identify team problems
Team Member Evaluation	2nd or 3rd week, mid-semester, end of semester†	Peer rating
Peer Rating of Team Members	Mid-semester, end of semester†	Peer rating
Auto rating Spreadsheet	Mid-semester, end of semester††	Use peer ratings to adjust team grades for individual effort
†The first administration is a 'trial run'—the forms are filled out and shared among the team members but not collected by the instructor. ††This form is not given to students.		

To be successful as a team member or team leader, understanding what a team is and determining key attributes for effective teamwork are critical to "development of essential skills, as opposed to only knowledge acquisition" (Hobson, Strupeck, Griffin, Szostek, & Rominger, 2014, p.191). Getting to know the instructor and class members is the first order of business. Using the instructor's introduction as an example, the first class session begins with student introductions where each student posts a structured introduction including three questions related to effective teamwork: 1) what are the qualities of an effective team, 2) as a team leader, what attributes do you feel are most critical, and 3) as a team member, what attributes do you feel are most critical? This exercise prepares students with first steps in contributing as a member of a team and leader (Hobson, et al., 2014). Students learn from the student body by reading other student contributions placed in the discussion forum. Learning where potential team members differ, basic characteristics of quality team attributes, and other student experiences assist with students self-selecting team members for completion of weekly group assignments and class projects (Rico, Antino, Sánchez-

Manzanares, & Lau, 2012). Where students do not complete the self-select process by the end of the first week, the instructor places students in teams.

Instructional material reinforcing the importance of effectual teamwork for organizational success includes recorded lectures on the subject of team formation, communication, collaboration, and conflict resolution skills. Student teams then demonstrate their understanding of working as an effective team, with the completion of pre-work. This important work empowers team members to cope with hitchhikers, evaluating progress with assigned course work, and team evaluation. A team charter is developed documenting their understanding of the course work they will be responsible for. The charter includes agreement on rotating roles for completing course work, schedule of assigned tasks, methods of dealing with non-participation, and advancing team concerns to the instructor. This approach empowers the learner with ownership of their knowledge therefore becoming more interested in their learning in a safe inclusive learning environment (Missingham & Matthews, 2013).

The team charter is reviewed by the instructor and returned with supporting feedback or requests for follow-up. With this information the instructor monitors the team online collaboration space. Using the collaboration work space teams communicate, share documents, track progress, and discuss concerns. This collaboration space and assignment submissions are monitored to confirm teams are working effectively.

Clear instructions with specific guidelines in multiple communications are provided by the instructor for dealing with noncontributing team members (hitchhikers and couch potatoes). The ramifications include reaching team consensus for recommending firing a team member. This formal written request is presented to the instructor. Although the instructor makes final decisions for firing a team member, this rarely occurs for a number of reasons: 1) the student who has been terminated from the team would then need to request admittance into another team and 2) if other teams do not accept the fired team member, this individual will work independently to complete all remaining team assignments. For these reasons, most often team members are able to come to a productive understanding before the situation becomes unmanageable. This process provides students with real-world lessons regarding the importance of pulling one's weight for the good of the team and also helps to bond the team by promoting a collaborative effort.

MONTIORING TEAMWORK, FEEDBACK AND CLEAR COMMUNICATION

For the Global Leadership course, teamwork comprises 50 percent of the student's class grade. Teamwork assignments include weekly practical application exercises based on chapters in the textbook to lengthier and more formal projects such as researching, developing and writing a leadership research paper. Additionally, teams rotate leadership and followership roles weekly. This approach allows students to understand when to lead and when to follow. Students also learn from watching how different team leaders and followers approach work distribution and responsibilities. The instructor provides weekly feedback regarding the quality of team submissions (parts of submissions that were strong and the areas where improvements are needed). And, when improvements are needed, teams are allowed an opportunity to make revisions prior to submission of their grade (particularly when assignments are submitted before the due date). When merited, rewarding excellent work and providing positive reinforcement, builds team motivation and increases effort (Schwartz & Castelli, 2014). Collectively, these techniques provide students with direct experience in developing their leadership and followership skills; both of which are equally important in effective organizations.

Assignments are progressive during the course of the semester and start with small tasks, building to more complex and challenging work over the semester. This approach aligns with Tuckman's (1965) developmental stages of groups and teams. Teams start in the 'forming' stage with low trust, move on to 'storming' where intragroup conflict is heightened, progress to 'norming' where group norms and cohesiveness are developed, to finally 'performing' where group members are fully functional with interdependent roles and focused on achieving team goals. Understanding the phases of team development is critical for the instructor who will need to provide much more guidance and feedback to teams earlier in the semester versus later on when teams are fully performing. Additionally, it is recommended that the instructor start with smaller team assignments (such as chapter essay questions) and build to more complex projects (such as a team research proposal and paper).

Early evaluation and ongoing monitoring of progress toward effective team functioning is critical. Providing students with clear and timely feedback along with prompt grading is essential to maintain student engagement, motivation to perform, and the opportunity for students to plan for success with future assignments. Assignments are carefully designed to measure course, program, and university learning objectives. Using this approach allows the instructor the ability to evaluate each team's ongoing performance and monitor their needs for additional support. When a need for additional instruction or guidance is identified, or when a student communicates that she/he does not understand a particular part of an assignment or project requirement, increased communications for the whole class must be implemented promptly and comprehensively. The use of a "Question and Answer" forum is also beneficial in communicating clarifications to the entire class.

Resources supporting the research and development of course assignments include a listing of recommended resources available to students using the university's online library. Common resources, such as business journals and profession specific materials, assist students with learning about resources within their field of study. Helping students to move quickly to access needed resources and to acquire new information builds the confidence levels of teams and shifts the focus to accomplishing the assignment. The use of "FYI Leadership" forums wherein additional resources are posted throughout the semester builds the learning community as students are encouraged to post resources such as articles, blogs, skill-based survey instruments, etc. relating to global leadership and management theories and practice.

EVALUATION METHODS FOR ASSESSING TEAMWORK EFFECTIVENESS

The use of assignment rubrics are incorporated into the course and provide instructors the ability to communicate grading criteria assessing all attributes of the assignment and distribution of total points. Criteria of the assignment aligns with learning outcomes and assists with evaluating performance, providing feedback, and teaching. Students benefit from the use of rubrics as the interpretation of assignment requirements across team members is minimized. Also, since the student has access to all assignment rubrics, they can review the guidelines prior to submitting assignments to ensure all the stated criteria for success has been met.

For the final course project, students are required to write a reflective paper where former beliefs are contrasted with new beliefs as a result of taking the course. Additionally, students cite the specific ways they are now practicing global leadership skills more effectively as a result of the class. Even though students can be apprehensive about working in teams at the beginning of the semester due to prior bad experiences, at the end of the semester, many students comment on their improved collaboration and teamwork skills:

Comment by student one: "The course was invaluable. Teamwork is key!!"

Comment by student two: "I like how the course has a collaborative team effort, and allows all the work to be delegated as you would see in the real work place."

Comment by student three: "Class enables good teamwork which allows the intense work load to be easy to handle; by having this collaboration I consider this class one of my favorites and beneficial in my Master's experience."

Comment by student four: "…teamwork (this was the best team I have ever worked with)."

Students are required to evaluate their peers at the end of each semester for both team performance (See Table 2) and leadership performance in teams (See Table 3) using assessment rubrics. Students' ratings of their team members are anonymous, not used in grading, and are electronically entered by the student in the Student Tracking Evaluation Portfolio System (STEPS) assessment process. This electronic database allows for statistical reports each semester where charts showing numbers of students with corresponding scores per item are relayed back to faculty who are responsible for making changes and improvements for scores that do not meet the required benchmarks. Additionally, longitudinal studies that compare results each semester over an extended time period (3 to 5 years) are also helpful for outcomes assessment where progress (or lack of improvements) are graphically displayed.

Much can be learned about online team dynamics from peer ratings. First, peer evaluations provide students with data driven information regarding their strengths and development areas as a team player and team leader. Second, there are comment sections in the rubrics for students to provide constructive criticism to their peers so that they more fully understand their strengths and weaknesses. Third, students seem to genuinely value the feedback provided by their peers which they take quite seriously. Instructors can also learn a great deal about their

effectiveness in promoting teamwork in their classes since it is often a failure on the instructor's part if student peer evaluations scores are low. These failures generally center on lack of ongoing communication, not regularly monitoring team progress, and a lack of feedback that is not timely or helpful.

In addition to peer evaluations, students also complete the mid-semester course evaluation (formative) and the more extensive end-of-term evaluation (summative). These evaluations include a 5 point Likert scale for evaluation of the course and instructor performance. Additionally, comment sections are provided where the student can write remarks related to specific sections of the evaluation. The assessment results provide the instructor with concrete evidence to continue using sound practices that result in high scores, or to make meaningful changes and improvements to the course (mid-semester, and/or after the semester). Collectively, these quality improvements can be shared with all faculty during best practices assessment sessions.

CONCLUSION

In and of itself, online learning provides challenges to instructors. This can be further complicated since teamwork is a vital skill required for earning business degrees and, therefore, should be a critical part of the online learning experience. In order to be successful in building collaborative teams in an online class, the responsibility ultimately resides in the instructor's ability to understand the challenges of online learning. In addition, the instructor should consider the key theories and principles of adult learning, provide concise and timely feedback regarding the performance of team assignments, and intervene when needed. Finally, the instructor should use situational leadership skills to monitor the class environment, and should the need arise, quickly adjust and communicate the changes to the team and/or class promptly.

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Table 2: Peer Evaluation Rubric for Teamwork

Objective	Trait	Deficient (1…2)	Competent (3…4)	Exemplary (5…6)	Score
Graduates can demonstrate appropriate group techniques to participate in a team task that results in effective performance	Group Techniques Attendance: Student comes to meetings	Student attends less than 60% of scheduled meetings or student is frequently late to meetings or leaves early	Student attends 60-80% of meetings unless otherwise excused and student is normally on time and stays for full length of meeting	Student attends more than 80% of meetings and student is on time for all meetings and stays for the full length of meeting	
	Group Techniques Preparation: Student is prepared for meetings	Student fails to do reading or research prior to meetings or student fails to complete specific assignments prior to scheduled meeting	Student completes required readings and research prior to meeting and student completes specific tasks or assignments	Student not only completes required readings and research, but does additional research or readings to enhance group objectives	
	Group Techniques Contribution: Student contributes ideas to meetings	Student rarely speaks or contributes positive ideas/suggestions during meetings	Student participates in group discussions and makes an effort to provide positive input	Student provides both ideas and suggestions that greatly enhance the team effort and stimulate others to contribute	
	Group Techniques Positive attitude/ Participation: Student works well with team members	Student does not communicate constructively or work with other team members	Student works with team members in order to complete basic and assigned task at hand	Student complements the work of team members, such that the work of the team exceeds the efforts of the individual team members	
	Group Techniques Accountability: Student offers to take responsibility for group tasks	Student rarely volunteers or accepts responsibility for group work	Student normally volunteers or accepts responsibility for group work	Student frequently volunteers to accept responsibility for group tasks, and always accepts responsibility when assigned tasks by other team members	

Table 3: Peer Evaluation Rubric for Leadership in Teams

Objective	Trait	Deficient (1…2)	Competent (3…4)	Exemplary (5…6)	Score
Graduates can demonstrate effective leadership skills in a group project	Motivation: Student motivates team members to contribute to the accomplishment of team goals	Student fails to motivate team members to contribute to the accomplishment of team goals	Student motivates team members to contribute to the accomplishment of team goals	Student motivates team members to contribute to the accomplishment of team goals and inspires team members to surpass expectations	
	Delegation: Student assigns tasks and responsibilities to other members	Student does the majority of the work or assigns all the work to others	Student assigns tasks among members fairly and expects members to fulfill them	Student bases assignments on skills of members and helps when members encounter difficulties	
	Conflict Resolution: Student helps to find solutions to interpersonal conflict between group members	Student ignores interpersonal conflict or contributes to the problem by a lack of objectivity or fairness	Student helps to resolve interpersonal conflicts in a reasonable way	Student uses mediation and consultation to help members see other points of view. Student uses initial conflict as a way of generating new thought or strategies	

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