Team Agreements Mitigate Team Nightmares

Facilitating Student Discussions to Create Team Agreements

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ABSTRACT

My experience shows me that students fear team assessments in general, and that this is even more common in computing science due to our longer term, or year-long student group projects. Staff also discuss these issues too. We can borrow ideas from the software development industry, and other professions to guide us towards solutions.

This workshop builds on previous ones done with MSc IT students as they prepare for the term-long group project as the final part of their degree, and aims to provide participants an experiential opportunity to explore the concerns their students have raised to see if collectively they might co-create solutions with fellow participants. Afterwards they can use the handouts and experience to guide their implementation of the workshop with their students.

CCS CONCEPTS

Software and its engineering --> Software creation and management--> Collaboration in software development --> Programming teams

KEYWORDS

Team collaboration, team charter, team agreements

1 Introduction

My own experience tells me that many students find team projects stressful. However, I also know that the high value of team projects as part of a computing science, or software engineering degree

means that they cause stress for more students, along with challenges for staff.

Students worry about 'who' their team members will be, how equitable the workloads will be, and whether they will have to pick up the work of other students, for example. Other concerns I've heard mentioned are about language barriers, and the skills of other students, as well as whether their friends will be on the team too.

Staff, meanwhile, seek to find a 'good' way to distribute x number of students across y number of teams, while also addressing the student concerns as part of the process for organizing the teams and deciding upon allocating individual member contributions to marks. 'Good' in this scenario can mean many things. While these are interesting questions, this workshop focuses on how staff might facilitate classroom discussion in order to mitigate the nightmares of team collaboration envisioned by the students.

I have found that students prefer transparency, and to be part of the process in deciding how something is done where team collaboration is involved. I have been using variations of a workshop that I did with Ellen Grove [1] at Lean Agile Scotland in 2015 to guide students in drafting team agreements based on the work of Larsen and Nies [2] using a Lego Serious Play approach for a number of years, but this has had mixed results.

With remote teaching this year I revised that session to also include aspects of a workshop that Ellen and I did at Lean Agile Scotland in 2016 and at Agile 2017, which that drew on the work of Edgar Schein [3]. The focus this time was on the small interactions that helped team members learn more about each other so that they could perform better.

The revised version of this workshop I used this summer with our MSc IT students started with the student fears so that they would know their concerns were addressed, and was set up as a prelude to them organizing a team charter, or agreement. This appears to have worked better and has helped defuse potential issues that have bubbled up this summer as they work together.

A team agreement is a collaborative contract between team members, which sets out their goals, values, ways of working, and other relevant information that will help the team achieve its' aims. This workshop sets up the background to the team completing an agreement, because it affords them the opportunity to air these other assumptions and concerns in an open manner.

While the session is aimed at students, this experiential version for staff will follow the same steps they follow with their students. The difference being that when students would discuss team issues, staff would explore similar issues they expect their students to raise.

2   Activities

The two-hour workshop comprises two sections, which are each approximately one hour long. The first block first draws out the student fears, and then explores mitigation strategies for each of the perceived nightmares, or risks.

(15') Introduction on aims of workshop, what brings people to the session, and review of Miro.
(20') Adding fears and concerns to Miro board, grouping, labelling, and discussing.
(15') Adding mitigations to potential threats and fears on Miro board and discussing.

The second block focuses on individuals within teams, and lets students see what each person brings to the team, both in terms of skills, and also in how they can support each other through the work together. Lastly, the second block moves towards the start of a team agreement by working through a template [4].

(05') Outlining the purpose of team agreements.
(20') Stepping through personal goals, what people bring to the team, ideal team member and other issues, and discussing these with the team as they are added to the Miro board.
(20') Stepping through team issues about participation, support and other issues on Miro board and discussing.
(15') Closing discussion.

3 Organisational Requirements

The workshop can be delivered in either Zoom or Teams with some parts done in breakout rooms. The use of Miro as a working space for participants to share their ideas, and do their work, is also needed. Any assistance that might be possible with a helper to manage the chat during the session, would be welcome.

4 Expected Outcomes and Impact

Participants will have an opportunity to voice their students' nightmares and see how everyone can co-create mitigation solutions. These can be taken back to their classrooms, or shared with their colleagues. This is a common challenge, which is infrequently discussed, so the opportunity to explore these professional skills will provide a useful practice session, and for them to see how someone else facilitates a session.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

REFERENCES

[1]   Ellen Grove. https://www.linkedin.com/in/ellengrove/ Accessed 9 July 2021.
[2]   Diana Larsen and Ainsley Nies, 2016. *Liftoff: Start and Sustain Successful Agile Teams (*Second Edition*).* The Pragmatic Programmers, Raleigh, NC.
[3]   Edgar Schein. 2013. *Humble Enquiry: The Gentle Art of Asking Instead of Telling.* Berett-Koehler Publishers, San Francisco, CA.
[4]   xxxx
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