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Doing More to Teach Teamwork Than Telling Students to Sink or Swim

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TEAMWORK IS REQUIRED in several, if not all, of most students' classes. Some business administration classes have both internal *and* external teams. However, few instructors do much more than assign the teams, and effective teamwork requires training in how to work in teams, how to troubleshoot team proj-

ect problems, and when to fire a team member. It also requires frequent feedback on how things are going, so the first time the instructor finds out about a problem is not at the crisis point, when a team member is fired.

We have been using at least one collaborative assignment in business communication classes at San Diego State University for more than 20 years and using three team projects in the "Accounting Communication" course since 1995. This article briefly discusses teamwork successes and failures, the use of peer evaluations to improve teamwork, and tips for reducing "social loafing" to help instructors work with collaborative projects more successfully. Another issue that arises is how to set up the teams, and I summarize the several approaches most often used and their relative advantages and disadvantages.

A number of good texts exist to help teach teamwork, and exercises (among them, those developed by the Association for Business Simulation and Experiential Learning) can help students learn to work with one another rather than against the team.

Improving Team Collaboration in Business Communication Courses

A survey at San Jose State University found that 72 percent of instructors in the business school assigned students to team projects in at least one class, but 81 percent gave "modest, limited, or no support to students assigned to teams" (Bolton, 233). This is unfortunately typical, as noted in a number of articles in the annotated source list at the end of this article.

Advantages of Teams

Collaboration is a current buzzword in business communication education. Students *do* need to have some strategies for working successfully in teams once they get on the job. Having good team skills will also make classes requiring teams easier and more productive. But we need to do all we can to help the process along, rather than assigning teams, sitting back, and hoping for the best. The grading load may be reduced, but the in-class interaction and

mentoring must be increased if we hope to do a good job of training students to work in teams.

Disadvantages of Teams

Instructors may receive projects that teams divided into sections and wrote individually, or, in schools using the same small cohort throughout classes, teams that divide up the coursework and have finance done by one person, marketing by another, etc. Dividing up the job, or not doing the job at all (also called "social loafing") and relying on more responsible team members to finish the work, are two of the most important disadvantages of teamwork in classes.

Another problem that faces the instructor is students who want the teacher to solve team problems. A preferable strategy is to stand back and let them work it out (or facilitate a discussion with *all* members and let them solve it), and let them fire a member if absolutely necessary. A key to resolving conflict is to involve every team member; don't allow subgroups to come to the office and complain about others.

Use of Evaluations

Having a confidential evaluation of each team member is one way to reduce social loafing, but warn students that their peers' evaluations of their work will count in their class participation grades. We use three team evaluations in a typical semester. The first evaluation (all use essentially the same form) is a team exercise that helps them discuss expectations, level of responsibility, and emerging problems. The second evaluation enables teams to evaluate progress so far and see how each person's effort and results measure up. The third, confidential, evaluation is the one that counts towards the participation grade.

Team project grades need to count enough to generate student enthusiasm for completing them but not so much that they can skew an underperforming student's grade. Our "Reporting for Accountants" course, for example, is a graduation writing class (a California State University system requirement), so students with

individual writing grades that are below par should not be able to raise the total grade to above a C through team grades alone.

Teamwork Basics

Consultants who teach teamwork and facilitate groups refer to four basic stages of team growth: forming, storming, norming, and performing (Dufrene & Lehman, 2000) for a recent summary of these stages.)

The ***forming*** stage is optimistic but cautious, individualistic, slow in producing any results, but an important part of developing a foundation so the team can better work together later. In a typical class, during this stage instructors can use icebreakers, short interviews in pairs or triads and subsequent introductions of others to the class, or a problem-solving case (lost at sea, which students should be accepted into college, etc.) to have members know each other better.

Storming is characterized by impatience or discouragement, depending on the mood swing of the group, but members begin to learn about others' abilities and responsibility level and productivity begins to increase, sometimes very slowly. During this stage, an instructor may have to referee some fights among members, change team membership in some cases, or guide the team toward successful accomplishment of a goal. Wilson (1999) has a very good troubleshooting section that may give instructors ideas on how to help teams in this stage.

A team in the ***norming*** stage begins to feel like a team and works together to accomplish goals, share responsibilities, and synergize individual efforts into a larger whole. The instructor needs to listen in to identify possible problems, but at this stage the members are finally becoming a team.

A ***performing*** stage team is productive, sharing problems and responsibilities, solving problems as they arise, and feeling trust and respect for others in the team. Not all in-class teams will get to this stage, but the ones that do are a joy to work with—they accomplish the assigned projects *and* seem to enjoy each other as people.

Setting Up Teams

Gardenswartz (1994) discusses types of team formation, with internal, external, and workplace diversity characteristics. In forming teacher-selected class teams, we use experience (jobs, courses completed) as well as English facility as criteria. If a team cannot have at least two members of one sex, we have formed single-sex teams. External teams often group around location to reduce driving time for meetings.

Self-selected teams are possible if students know each other well (as they do in our advanced accounting courses). Random selection (counting off, for example) is too unpredictable for our accounting projects, but sometimes works for the sophomore business communication course, where students have little business background and often live on campus.

Creating Successful Assignments

We use a combination of individual and team assignments because we have to evaluate individual writing skills. For example, an individual might write a memo to a boss describing and evaluating a not-for-profit for which the boss has been asked to join the Board. The team would choose one of these not-for-profits, design a fund raiser for it, develop a budget for the event, and write a proposal to a local corporation for seed money for the event. (Sample assignments are available from the author.)

Conclusion

Using teams in business communication classes helps teachers of larger classes deal with the grading load and helps students prepare for the collaborative work they will do later in other classes and on the job. Using teams *effectively* requires pre-planning and more class management by walking around, but the active learning and interpersonal skills learned make team assignments worthwhile for both teachers and students.

Helpful Resources for Team Work

Adler, R. B., & Elmhorst, J. M. (1999). *Communicating at work: Principles and practices for business and the professions* (6th ed.). Boston: McGraw-Hill. A good interpersonal communication text, very popular in community colleges. Strong multicultural focus, group activities, exercises for skill building.

Albanese, R., & Van Fleet, D. D. (1985). Rational behavior in groups: The free-riding tendency. *The Academy of Management Review, 10*(2), 244-255. Found that team members "social loaf" when they perceive that the net benefits (rewards less costs) of free riding exceed the net benefits of contributing their fair share. Peer evaluations help reduce this behavior's net benefits as students can identify the free riders and reduce their teamwork grade accordingly. Peer evaluations also sensitize students to the potential for reduced benefits and thus encourage them to contribute more fully to the group effort.

Bacon, D. R., Stewart, K. A., & Silver, W. S. (1999). Lessons from the best and worst student team experiences: How a teacher can make the difference. *Journal of Management Education, 23*(5), 467-488. Identifies which teacher-controlled variables have the greatest impact on how a student team experience turns out.

Bolton, M. K. (1999, June). The role of coaching in student teams: A "just-in-time" approach to learning. *Journal of Management Education, 23*, 233-250. Describes three sequential modules that instructors can use to improve teamwork in class.

Clark, T. (1998). Teaching students to enhance the ecology of small group meetings. *Business Communication Quarterly, 61*(4), 40-52. Classroom exercise to help student assess prior small group experience and learn to apply meeting management principles.

Colbeck, C. L., Campbell, S. E., & Bjorkland, S. A. (2000). Grouping in the dark. *The Journal of Higher Education, 71*(1), 60-83. Studies undergraduates working in groups with little guidance about how to work together effectively.

Decker, R. (1995). Management team formation for large scale simulations. In J. D. Overby & A. L. Patz (Eds.), *Developments in business simulation and experiential learning* (pp. 128-129). Statesboro, GA: Association for Business Simulation and Experiential Learning. Discusses methods of team formation: self-selecting, random, teacher-selected.

Dufrene, D. D., & Lehman, C. M. (2002). *Building high-performance teams*. Cincinnati, OH: South-Western/Thompson Learning. A short handbook with practice projects and useful forms for team work.

Gable, R. A., & Manning, M. L. (1999). Interdisciplinary teaming: Solution to instructing heterogeneous groups of students. *The Clearing House, 72*(3), 182-185. Offers a ten-step interdisciplinary problem-solving meeting strategy; helpful for using team exercises and case studies.

Gardenswartz, L. (1994). *Diverse teams at work: Capitalizing on the power of diversity*. Chicago: Irwin Professional Publishing. Discusses internal dimensions of diversity (age, gender, ethnicity, race, physical ability, sexual orientation), external (religion, marital status, educational background, income, parental status, appearance, personal habits, recreational habits, geographical location, work experience), and organizational (management status, work location, seniority).

Hardaker, M., & Ward, B. K. (1987). How to make a team work. *Harvard Business Review*, 65(6), 112-118. Describes IBM's process quality management (PQM) system for team building (set mission, brainstorm goals, rank choices, follow through). One of the basic articles on using teams at work.

Housel, D. J. (2002). *Team dynamics*. Cincinnati, OH: South-Western/Thompson Learning. Brief overview of teams and successful teamwork, with some case studies. Part of a professional development series, so essentially a brief text on the subject.

Jalajas, D. S., & Sutton, R. I. (1984-5). Feuds in student groups, coping with whiners, martyrs, saboteurs, bullies, and deadbeats. *Organizational Behavior Teaching Review* 9(4), 217-227. Self-selected team may be too homogeneous and lose the advantages that diversity would offer. Self-selected teams are initially more cohesive, which is a strong advantage in short-term groups.

Lumsden, G. (1993). *Communicating in Groups and Teams: Sharing Leadership*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth. A managerial approach to improving teams.

Marotta, S. A., Peters, B. J., & Paliokas, K. L. (2000). Teaching group dynamics: An interdisciplinary model. *Journal for Specialists in Group Work*, 25(1), 16-18. Uses five active learning processes to teach students adaptive behavior and critical thinking skills used to become more productive team members in the classroom and at work.

Mather, M. A. (1998). Team power. *Technology and Learning*, 19(4), 64. Lists Websites offering learning scenarios for middle school and high school team projects in non-business subjects. Might offer creative exercise ideas.

McConnell, C. A., & Sasse, C. M. (1999). An anticipatory case for managing teams and team projects. *Issues in Accounting Education* 14(1), 41-54. Introduces a four-part case that engages students in discussion of the potential problems of managing teams and team projects. If time permits, would be useful beginning to teamwork in class.

Murphy, S. H. (1998). Helping students learn to work together as a team. *National Association of Secondary School Principals NASSP Bulletin*, 82(602), 83-88. Discusses how high schools can integrate curriculum and foster active learning. Some good integrative tips.

Oyster, C. K. *Groups: A user's guide*. (2000). Boston: McGraw-Hill. Undergraduate text on group theory, with specific examples, student exercises for skill building. Informal, engaging writing style.

Prager, H. (1999). Cooking up effective team building. *Training and Development*, 53(12), 14-15. Describes an employee team-building program in which teams cook a banquet, but gives guidelines for choosing appropriate team activities.

Roebuck, D. B. (1998). Using team learning in business and organizational communication classes. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 61(3), 35-49. Students spend 80 percent of their in-class time working in permanent, heterogeneous groups, becoming active and responsible partners in the learning process.

Siciliano, J. (1999). A template for managing teamwork in courses across the curriculum. *Journal of Education for Business*, 74(5), 261-264. Includes an introduction to teamwork, the development of team member expectations, and an assessment instrument.

Strong, J. T., & Anderson, R. E. (1999, Summer). Free-riding in group projects: Control mechanisms and preliminary data. *Journal of Marketing Education*, 21, 61-67. Self-selected teams may offer higher initial cohesion and thus improve the team's overall performance. Peer evaluations can reduce social loafing in a team.

Tubbs, S. L. (1998). *Systems approach to small group interaction* (6th ed.). Boston: McGraw-Hill. Text organized around case studies relating to different aspects of small group work. Includes experiential exercises for skill development and readings.

Walley, C., & Kommer, D. (2000). Writing as part of the team. *The Clearing House*, 73(4), 232-234. Discusses teaching tools for middle school students but has good suggestions for developing active learning through teams and in-class exercises.

Watson, W. E., Johnson, L., & Merritt, D. (1998). Team orientation, self-orientation, and diversity in task groups. *Group and Organization Management*, 23(2), 161-188. Studied 50 student problem-solving groups and 80 diverse and non-diverse groups using a group style instrument.

Whelan, S. A. (1999). *Creating effective teams: a guide for members and leaders*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publishers. A handbook for teams at work.

Wilson, G. L. (1999). *Groups in context* (5th ed.). Boston: McGraw-Hill. Excellent text on small group interaction that includes a multi-page troubleshooting chart keyed to pages of discussion on team problems. Includes examples from a variety of contexts, such as neighborhood meetings, churches, social groups, civic organizations as well as work-based groups.

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