

Using Team Assignments to Teach Team Skills

Abstract

Most instructors have used a team-based assignment in a class at some point with varying degrees of success. When teams work well together, students are motivated as they learn valuable skills, and the final product is commendable. Unfortunately, when a team is dysfunctional, students can leave the class resentful and angry, and the assignment is often of poor quality. Join us for this lively, interactive session to explore how instructors can use activities, instruments, and assignments to help students build their team skills as they complete a required course project.

Keywords: Teams, Team Assignments/Projects, Teaching Teamwork

Introduction:

Most faculty across disciplines/subjects use some form of team-based assignments. Indeed, AACSB accreditation standards (AACSB, 2018) identify teamwork as a general skill that should be included in all undergraduate and higher programs to help students prepare for future careers. Team assignments have the potential to help students learn to collaborate with others to accomplish a task, and properly used, they can help develop problem solving, communication, conflict resolution, and other collaborative skills. While many classes today include some type of team-based assignment, there is often little done to help students learn how to function effectively in a team (Stoner, Finn, & Fairfield, 2015; O’Conner & Yballe, 2007). Students may disagree on what should be done or how it should be done. There may be differences in the team members’ expectations and willingness to put forth effort. One student might seek to earn an “A” on the assignment and be willing to go above and beyond to make that happen. At the other end of the continuum, another student might simply want a passing grade while expending the least amount time and energy on the assignment.

Communication between team members may be lacking, which can lead to uneven performance of tasks and an obviously fragmented outcome. Occasionally, team members will experience difficulties in their lives outside of class and simply disappear without a word, leaving the others to pick up the pieces of the assignment. Team assignments also introduce problems especially around fairness; one of the most common problems with teams is an unequal distribution of work (i.e., free riders/social loafing).

Necessary roles in teams may be lacking, and some members might exhibit dysfunctional roles. In our experience, it is very common for teams to function without leaders, which

exacerbates all the other problems. Thus, it is no surprise that students often dislike team assignments.

From an instructor standpoint, team assignments may be used to enhance student learning and creativity, teach teamwork skills, provide relevant business experience, complete a large project, and reduce the amount of grading required (Sashittal, Jassawalla, & Markulis, 2011). Whatever the reason for using team assignments, they should be structured and managed to maximize the success of the teams. College students often do not have the experience or knowledge to be an effective team member, and instructors too often mandate teams but never address the subject of how to function as an effective team (Stoner, et. al., 2015). Fortunately, there are things that instructors can do to actually teach team skills and make working in teams a learning experience. This session explores techniques to make team assignments more effective in management classes, whether they are undergraduate or graduate, face-to-face, online, or blended, and with traditional or nontraditional students.

Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications:

A national survey found that 83% of employers are looking for employees who work well in a team (Gray & Koncz, 2017). By working together, students can develop critical thinking skills, exchange knowledge, share expertise, increase motivation, and improve their attitudes toward learning. Team experiences can be positive when the students share a common goal to be successful in the class, communicate regularly, put forth effort, and all work together to accomplish their goal.

Because the United States evidences an extremely individualistic culture, it cannot be assumed that students will possess effective collaborative skills (McKendall, 2000). However, when teams are used in classes, students are often left on their own to manage team activities

because the instructor is unfamiliar with teambuilding or feels there is not enough class time available to incorporate it (Sashittal, et. al., 2011; Hansen, 2006). Without proper training, team projects can result in frustrating experiences and subpar outcomes for students trying to succeed with a dysfunctional team. Instructors who are motivated by a desire to increase student learning are more likely to use team-building activities (Sashittal, et. al., 2011). Research has also shown that training instructors in teamwork has a significant impact on their students' teamwork abilities (Burbach, Matkin, Gambrell, & Harding, 2010).

Karl Smith identified communication, decision making, problem solving, conflict management, and leadership as crucial teamwork skills; he maintained that such skills are important in a context that focuses on complementary contributions to a common goal, holds the individual and the group accountable, and periodically reflects on its processes and outcomes. McKendall (2000) chose to focus on individual differences/attitudes, planning, communication, problem solving and decision making, conflict, and group roles and leadership.

Research has shown that educating students in teamwork significantly improves their teamwork knowledge, skills, and abilities (Burbach, et. al, 2010; Chen, Donahue, & Klimoski, 2004). However, in order for instructors to help build team skills in their students, they must be knowledgeable in the principles of effective teamwork.

Fortunately, many management instructors have a background that included the study of groups and teams, and with a little review, they can effectively bring that material into the classroom. For those who teach Concepts of Management or Organizational Behavior, team activities are a natural fit and can easily be built into the course content. In other management classes, requiring students to examine the dynamics of their teams through a few carefully chosen readings can be used to teach a handful of basic team principals, and analysis of how

their team is doing can be assigned primarily as team homework assignments if the instructor does not wish to devote much class time to teambuilding.

Learning Objectives:

1. To have participants become more familiar with some tools/techniques to facilitate teaching of team skills in their classes.
2. To give participants the opportunity to plan how they might create new or modify existing team assignments in their own classes.
3. To discuss and exchange ideas about other techniques participants have used.

Overview:

In this session we will explore the following considerations for faculty when using team assignments.

Team formation Teams may be created by random assignment, instructor formation, or self-formation. Our session will cover the advantages and disadvantages of each.

Team Contracts Requiring teams to create contracts immediately establishes goals, expected behaviors, decision procedures, and actions for noncompliance. Instructors can use a standard form or have the teams design their own contract. When designing their own contracts, teams can be graded on completeness and clarity or simply receive credit for completion. The session will ask participants to examine and evaluate some contracts written by students.

Conflict: We will present one of the widely accepted conflict style questionnaires, which allows team members to identify their preferred conflict resolution style and speculate on the negatives and positives of such an approach. Session participants will be asked to fill one out on themselves, and we will demonstrate how to debrief it. Instructors can use this as a graded assignment, or students can share their analysis with each other.

Leadership: Teams can be asked to identify who is functioning as their leader, and they can measure their own leadership style. Because most teams do not choose leaders, they can be asked to address the ramifications of being leaderless.

Group Roles: Students can analyze and report on which members perform what kinds of roles in the team. Session participants will be asked to complete the analysis using the names of their department members. Student teams can, as a graded assignment or shared information, analyze whether they have a balance, whether anyone is in a dysfunctional role, and what can be done to improve.

One of the common dysfunctional roles is that of social loafing and free riders. There are some techniques the instructor can use that will discourage this behavior, which we will explain and demonstrate.

Planning: If the assignment is comprehensive, students can be asked to develop a plan for the team project, including goals, objectives, responsibilities, and deadlines. This can be submitted as a group assignment.

Decision making: There are well-known and effective group decision making techniques, but students typically only use brainstorming. After reading about or being taught some of the techniques, students can be required to use and document their experience with one of them.

Evaluation In addition to the instructor grading the team assignment, the other students can be asked to evaluate and provide feedback. Members of the team can fill out evaluations on each other and give identified feedback via a shared document. It is useful to require team members to give feedback to each other. Evaluations can be a graded assignment, and the

instructor can use the scores to either deduct or add points to the team score. We will share several team member evaluation and team evaluation instruments.

Presentations/sharing assignments Having teams share their assignments via a presentation is long-standing way to encourage quality work and help students learn from one another. Other students in the class can be asked to evaluate the presentation as a way to engage them and give teams feedback. While presentations can be posted in an online class an alternative is to have each team post their completed assignment to an online discussion board and require other students to provide constructive feedback on the assignments, which may or may not be graded. In addition to learning from other teams, sharing of assignments also helps students see differences in the quality of assignments, which can reduce the number of questions about grades and lead to higher aspirations in the future assignments. We will share some evaluation instruments.

Session Description:

Total time requested: 60 minutes, allocated as follows:

Introductions: 10 minutes

After a brief introduction of the presenters, attendees will be asked to introduce themselves and share their biggest concerns/difficulties with team assignments in their classes.

Approaches, tools, measures, and assignments for selected team skills: 30 minutes

A framework for teaching team skills and various approaches and tools useful for teaching team skills will be shared. Participants will practice using the some of the tools (e.g., contracts, group roles, conflict styles) while others will be covered via handouts. Thus, participants will take away a full complement of tools and techniques for using teams in their own classes.

Discussion: 20 minutes

As we discuss each topic, participants will be encouraged to share their own best practices for team assignments. We will compile a list of all suggestions and make those available along with sample activities, assignments, and measurement instruments.

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