‘Yes, but … Yes, and …’: a teamwork game for problem-based peer learning

Experiential Exercise Session (60 minutes)

**Introduction**.

The facilitators of this experiential exercise session teach project-based work integrated learning (WIL)[[1]](#footnote-1) courses in which late undergraduate students work with partner organisation on co-designed projects to produce implementable deliverables. Problem-based peer learning is central to the design of these courses with students forming teams within the first week. As students have often had negative experiences working in teams, the facilitators run a workshop before team formation on the ‘why and how’ of effective teamwork, which includes a game called ‘Yes, but … Yes, and …’ (Leong 2019). The game is aimed at students experiencing ‘blocking’ versus ‘affirming’ behaviour to highlight how their own behaviour can limit or enhance their team’s endeavours, and the importance of building a culture of trust. Students also learn that there is a place for both ‘Yes, and …’ as well as ‘Yes, but …’ as part of their creative thinking and problem-solving deliberations.

This experiential exercise session will begin with a short review of the role of effective teamwork in improving the overall quality of student learning as well as for developing skills sought by employers, with some insights as to how the facilitators moved their teamworking fully online with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. It will then provide the opportunity for participants to share personal experiences with the ‘pitfalls and delights’ of teamwork, both in person and virtually. The facilitators will then share the details of a structured class designed as an early intervention for effective teamwork, and then take the participants through the ‘Yes, but … Yes, and …’ game. The session will conclude with a debrief on how participants might use the game in their own courses, in either a face-to-face or remote teaching environment.

**Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications**.

Team-based activities at university are often resisted by students who consider themselves more capable and are vocal in their opposition to ‘carrying’ weaker students in group-based assignments. Yet employers consistently highlight the importance of graduates having ‘the ability to work in a team and relate with co-workers, clients, and collaborators—skills that, in many cases, prove to be just as important as, if not more important than, the graduate’s technical knowledge’ (Hernández‐March et. al. 2009, p. 7; Mishra 2015; AAGE 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020).

Teamwork as a form of peer learning is identified in educational theory literature as a tool for enhancing the overall quality of student learning. This is because working in teams requires students to articulate and test their knowledge, providing the opportunity to clarify and refine their understanding of concepts through discussion and rehearsal with peers. Teamwork can also develop cultural competency and leadership skills as students adapt to team dynamics by learning tolerance and adjusting to ambiguity (Lloyd and Härtel. 2010; Morgeson et al. 2010), while enhancing collaboration skills as students learn conflict management and resolution through negotiation and compromise. With others depending on their timely completion of tasks, students can also develop organisational and time management skills (James et.al 2002).

Teamwork is particularly effective for problem-based learning as problem solving is accelerated in the company of others. By activating analytical and cognitive skills, teamwork provides the opportunity for students to challenge individually constructed ‘wisdom’ while solving problems through negotiation, collaboration, and consensus building. As Mansbridge et al. argue, ‘through deliberation, weighing, and exploring their mutual and conflicting interests [students] discover how to resolve the apparent conflict by expanding the borders of the problem or introducing new perspectives’ (Mansbridge et al. 2010, p. 71).

**Learning Objectives**.

To realise these outcomes, students require guidance as to the ‘dos and don’ts’ of teamwork as under ‘less than ideal conditions’, teamwork can become a ‘vehicle for acrimony, conflict and freeloading’ (James et al. 2002, p. 47). Challenges associated with teamwork are amplified in a fully online environment in which non-verbal cues are often lost thus placing greater importance on verbal communication. For this reason, when COVID-19 required all teaching to move to a fully online mode of delivery, it became an imperative that class activities were designed to enable all students to have the chance to communicate their ideas verbally both in small groups and whole-of class discussions. As it turned out, moving to Microsoft Teams as the LMS for the course meant that it was easier to specifically call out individual students to contribute to class activities including debriefing sessions following team activities (conducted in virtual break-out rooms). Working virtually has therefore provided a ‘value-add’ through providing a supporting learning environment that has enabled enhanced student participation, which has in turn assisted students develop communication skills while building deeper relationships across the cohort and with the academic. Learning how to engage in online teamwork has been of benefit for academics and students alike.

**Exercise Overview**

In this experiential exercise session, the facilitators will provide an overview of a online lesson plan that guides students through a series of exercises aimed at: encouraging reflection on what works (and does not work) when undertaking teamwork; how students engage with others, particularly when conflict arises and how to manage disagreement in a constructive way; the role of communication in building great teams; and developing the practice of balancing creative thinking with problem-solving through the ‘Yes, but … Yes, and …’ game developed by Dan Klein, Lecturer in Theatre and Business at Stanford University (Leong 2019). A summary of these activities that will be identified in early part of the experiential exercise session are:

* Facilitating small group discussions on what has worked well in previous team experiences and why, and what has not worked and why; followed by capturing examples provided in a whole class debrief
* Facilitating small group discussions during which students self-identify their conflict management styles followed by whole of class discussion of different conflict-handling styles informed by Thomas (1976) . For further consideration encourage students to watch Julia Dhar’s TED talk, ‘How to disagree productively and find common ground: <https://www.ted.com/talks/julia_dhar_how_to_disagree_productively_and_find_common_ground>
* Discussion of Sandy Pentland’s (2012) research on the role of communication in building a great team:
  + Team performance can be improved by developing patterns of communication where each team member communicates often, equally and energetically with the team as a whole, with each individual team member, and with external entities that can bring fresh perspectives to the team.
  + Further, the ‘group dynamics that characterize high-performing teams [are] … energy, creativity, and shared commitment to far surpass other teams’ (Pentland 2012, p. 62).
* Leading the class in playing the ‘Yes, but … Yes, and …’ game to provide students with the experience of ‘blocking’ versus ‘affirming’ behaviour to highlight how their own behaviour can limit or enhance their team’s endeavours, and the importance of building a culture of trust. The game is designed to teach how to:
  + - Pay attention and listen to each other
    - Build ideas rather than cut them down
    - Not fear looking silly or saying the wrong thing (commonly held concerns that can hold us back from coming up with new ideas)
    - Make your partner look good (builds trust)

This latter exercise will be the focus of the experiential component of the session.

**Session Description**

The overview of the session is captured in the timeline below, which identifies for the activities, including how participants will be involved, with an estimated allocated time for each activity.

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| **Activity** | **Time** |
| Session introduction | 5 mins |
| Facilitator-led discussion of the role of teamwork in student learning and employability. | 5 mins |
| Participants share experiences of the highs and lows of incorporating teamwork in class activities and assessment, and the impact of having to transition to a virtual environment in the wake of COVID-19. | 10 mins |
| Facilitators share experience of approach to teamwork as part of project-based WIL and the method used to transition to fully online. | 10 mins |
| Facilitators introduce ‘Yes, but …’ game (The Shared Fake Memory) – partially agreeing, partially blocking; participants work in pairs to engage in the activity. | 10 mins |
| Facilitators introduce ‘Yes, and …’ game (The Shared Fake Memory) – agreeing and rolling with the idea; participants work in pairs to engage in the activity. | 10 mins |
| Facilitators lead debrief on impact of the two activities: creative thinking versus problem-solving; communication and trust building in team-building. | 10 mins |
|  | 60 mins |

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1. **W**ork **i**ntegrated **l**earning (**WIL**) is used here to refer to work learning experiences undertaken by students as part of their degree program. WIL enables students to work directly in or with an industry or community organisation to gain real-world experience in preparation for a future career. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)