

Critically reflect on your experience of the role play scenarios to identify the key challenges in successful project delivery when working as a team

Introduction

Whilst effective teamwork is valued and its cruciality to success recognised in the field during archaeological investigation and excavation (Dowson 2005), its application and significance within more administrative aspects of project delivery is less well perceived. Despite identifying project team structure and communication methods within it being key parts of compiling a MoRPHE-compliant project design that ensures successful project delivery (Historic England 2008; 2015), in practice there are often many obstacles that arise within the project lifecycle that stem back to problems with teamwork. The role play scenarios presented as part of this module attempted to simulate decision making processes within archaeological projects, and covered different elements of project delivery from health and safety to project management styles. This critical reflection considers my experience of these scenarios and my takeaways from them regarding how teamwork works (or rather should work) in archaeological project delivery. By considering the parts of the scenario discussions that I consider to be the most significant and addressing both the strengths and weaknesses of particular approaches to teamwork and chairing, this essay aims to identify the key challenges to effective teamwork and collaborative practices. My own personal experience of project meetings and teamwork within archaeological project delivery is fairly lacking, so through this critical reflection I also hope to identify the primary learning outcomes of the scenario discussions that can help develop my approach to collaboration and decision making in the future.

Previous Experience within Project Delivery and Teamwork

As a fairly new and junior member within the technical team of the Department of Archaeology at Durham University, I have not yet had the chance to be heavily involved in teams with project delivery responsibilities. My role as an assistant technician means that most of the work I am assigned is focused within laboratories or on administrative duties such as health and safety compliance and risk assessment production. Whilst these responsibilities contribute directly to successful project delivery, especially through the production of project data via stable isotope analysis, very often once the work is complete, my involvement in the project ends. In my current role, the little involvement I have had within decision making processes has included attendance of monthly lab meetings for the

isotope lab focused on administrative needs rather than individual projects, and inclusion within mitigation planning to ensure both laboratory and teaching work could continue during emergency roof repairs. However, over the next year I am temporarily being stepped up to a more senior position to cover some responsibilities delegated from my line manager who is taking on a new internal role alongside her current job. Within this role, it will be necessary for me to liaise with contractors and stakeholders involved in renovation and development projects within the department, attend progress meetings, give feedback on progress to my line manager, and work with her to monitor and quality assess supplied documentation such as architectural plans. As such, I was grateful for the opportunity to experience practice project meetings as part of this module, and found it useful to identify both the potential pitfalls that can hinder decision making within teams, and the advantages of certain approaches to teamwork within project delivery.

Key Challenge 1: The Role of Personalities and Interests

There is no question that personalities can have a significant impact on collaboration and decision-making processes within project teams. The module's first discussion task involved us undertaking the Big 5 personality test (Truity 2024), with my results presented in Table 1. I was not surprised to see high scores in the Agreeableness and Neuroticism personality dimensions due to my self-awareness of being someone with a polite manner who values empathy and cooperation, but has a tendency to be sensitive to anxiety and stressors such as role conflict and performance pressures that may impact my ability to work as efficiently as I want to within teamwork contexts (Dietz *et al.* 2017). However, I was shocked by my low consciousness score as I feel I am and have been recognised within the technical team as being a highly responsible and diligent colleague who strives to honour all obligations to others. Linking these results and my observations of others during the role play scenarios to Belbin's team roles (Belbin 2024), I could suggest that our cohort's project team included a good mix of different team roles that when combined together in discussion tasks, allowed us to make quick progress and usually come to unanimous decisions. For example, Laura's strengths definitely lie as a "teamworker" as evidenced by her co-operative and diplomatic approach within all discussion tasks (Belbin 2024). Her commitment to ensuring everyone was given the opportunity to voice their opinions during her chairing of session 5's project management style discussion also highlighted this. By opting to use the raise hand function in Teams, Laura not only made the chairing responsibility easier for herself by enabling quick counts of votes, but also facilitated identification of team members who had not voted, so that she could prompt discussion about uncertainties and allow explanations from

representatives from each side of the argument before taking a revote where unanimous votes were subsequently reached. Conversely, James' approach to the role play scenario discussions emphasised the diversity of personality traits within our fictitious project team. Often choosing to play the role of "devil's advocate", James raised alternative viewpoints and challenged the established opinion on numerous occasions. Whilst this could be seen as a negative trait, this kind of approach is in fact crucial to project teams and their success in project delivery, as raising questions about the current consensus of the discussion promoted consideration of potential drawbacks of opinions put forward by that point (Kahn 2014). His bold statements even encouraged more introverted members of the project team to contribute to the discussion scenarios, especially if they disagreed with him. The overall success of our cohort's decision-making abilities due to the adoption of different approaches to the role play scenarios ultimately emphasises that a key obstacle to successful project delivery when working as a team is the composition of the team itself and the personalities within it. Although there was a balanced mix of personalities within our cohort team that allowed useful constructive criticism and debate, it is not hard to imagine that in a project team consisting of individuals with very similar or very different personality types, decision-making processes and overall project delivery could either be limited by a lack of critical analysis of decisions made, or confounded by disagreement and clashes. Indeed, Gander and colleagues (2020) observed that when more of Belbin's (2024) team roles are represented within a project team, teamwork quality is improved and performance is increased, thus highlighting the need for teams to be comprised of a well-balanced mix of personalities to ensure successful project delivery.

Table 1: My results from the Big 5 personality test (Truity 2024).

Personality Dimension	Personality Trait Scores (out of 100)
Openness	77
Conscientiousness	48
Extraversion	29
Agreeableness	79
Neuroticism	67

On a similar note, also highlighting the need for a unified yet diverse project team is the acknowledgement that specialist interests and expertise can play a significant role within a team's ability to effectively coordinate project delivery. This became apparent during the HER task in session 4, in which we were asked to consult the HER data (Derbyshire County

Council 2024) to identify heritage interests and features that may impact on the planning application for a proposed site of development in Derbyshire. We were instructed to choose four nearby sites to investigate over the session break and assign a heritage value to them on a scale of national to no importance. The majority of the cohort, including myself, not only chose to look primarily at the prehistoric heritage features such as the barrow cropmarks (Knight 2021), but tended to assign them higher importance than most of the other potential heritage assets. This by our own admission during discussion, was because of our own personal and specialist research interests in prehistoric archaeology, and many of us held the view that where prehistoric archaeological evidence is present it necessitates extra consideration due to its usual scarcity in the archaeological record. Furthermore, within this same task, only Connor identified the presence of historic and listed buildings within the area local to the planned development and raised these as potential heritage assets that may be impacted if planning permission is approved. Whilst this is not surprising due to Connor's own expertise within historic building surveying and recording, it serves to emphasise that without a project team consisting of a range of experts with different specialist interests, bias may be introduced to the decision-making progress and ultimately impact project delivery. If the judgements and implications from this task were extended to real-life contexts, it is likely that the produced scoping assessment would unfairly overemphasise the value of prehistoric remains in the local area and may ultimately impact the outcome of the planning application, causing potential financial implications for the developers. Overall, whilst specialist knowledge is undoubtedly important within project teams, individuals with other relevant expertise such as previous managerial, budgetary, and project assurance responsibilities should also be included within project teams to diversify the interests represented (Historic England 2015) and ensure project delivery is not impacted by bias and preference.

Key Challenge 2: Active Participation and Engagement

Another key challenge in successful project delivery when working as a team inferred from my experience of the role play scenarios, is establishing and maintaining active participation and engagement within project teams. Although the composition of project teams is established at the earliest stages of the project lifecycle, and specific responsibilities are assigned to individuals based on their strengths and experience (Historic England 2008; 2015), if these assigned duties are not actively maintained and any one individual disengages from their role within the team at any point in the project, this can have significant adverse consequences on project delivery. Whilst there was little disengagement within our cohort, the nature of the role play scenarios as online meetings revealed potential

circumstances where this may occur and the negative impacts it may have on collaborative discourse. For instance, whilst I appreciate that using the raise hand function is particularly useful in voting situations and provides everyone who wants to speak the opportunity to do so in a controlled manner, I also felt that in some circumstances, the dynamic nature of in-person discussion was lost in the online meeting format. Though I was able to contribute to most discussions and present my views effectively, there were often occasions where by my turn to speak, the discussion had evolved and moved on significantly from the original topic that I had intended to contribute to and it felt like going against the flow of deliberation to circle back to the previous topic. From this experience, I can infer situations where this slower format would not only deter people from contributing their ideas in fear of rehashing things already discussed and extending the meeting length, but may over time lead team members to disengage from active participation in discussions and thus restrict the application of their full potential to project delivery. This suggestion is supported by studies of the shift to virtual work meetings during the pandemic and their continuation in the post-pandemic professional environment, which report that remote meetings made it harder for individuals to feel motivated to behaviourally and cognitively engage in than in-person meetings (Kuzminykh and Rintel 2020). Despite this, online meetings can particularly benefit effective knowledge sharing within project teams through team member's readily available access to the internet to identify publications and resources relevant to current discussion. This was illustrated in session 2's project start-up exercise, as after the task briefing the cohort managed to find information online that was considerably more detailed than the initial information provided and significantly impacted their decisions about the archaeological potential of the proposed development site (Bell and Walker 2021; Living Levels 2024). Overall, these experiences underline the difficulties project teams may face in developing a communication strategy that works for them and their individual members. Effort should be made to define an effective strategy that lowers risk of disengagement early in the project lifecycle, to ensure all team members can contribute their full potential to successful project delivery.

Conclusion

Through this critical reflection I have identified two key challenges in successful project delivery when working as a team, with both ultimately implying that issues within projects can usually be traced back to a poorly integrated project team and/or an inadequate communication strategy within it. My largely positive experience of the role play scenarios has ultimately highlighted good standard practices that I can take into future work within

project delivery and professional collaboration, such as adopting different approaches to meetings and deliberation, depending on the topic to be discussed (e.g. taking votes in more formal meetings with established agendas, and allowing more dynamic fast-paced discussion in informal brainstorming or planning meetings). Whether these scenarios were entirely reflective of real-life team meetings linked to project delivery is debatable due to their restricted scope and timeframe, but despite this our cohort's unified approach to communication and successful decision making processes attest to the benefits of ensuring effective teamwork within all archaeological projects.

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