



Teamwork: effectively teaching an employability skill

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to present a case study on improvements to professional teaching practice within an undergraduate university business programme to more effectively teach an employability skill and enhance the student experience of teamwork.

Design/methodology/approach – A three-phase approach to teaching teamwork was introduced. Tuckman's model of team development was explicitly taught and used as the conceptual framework for the student teamwork process. Assessments were constructively aligned to address team skills and engage students in team processes. A questionnaire was developed to guide team member expectations of teamwork. Two online surveys tracked the development of student team skills and were used in feedback loops for student learners and facilitators. The use of reflective weblogs provided insights to student perspectives.

Findings – Student engagement in teamwork was aided by the use of team surveys to assist students to explicitly make connections with the generic skills underpinning effective teamwork and a questionnaire to establish team norms. The teaching strategies employed developed a greater level of awareness in students, contributing to the development of their team skills.

Practical implications – The student experience of working in teams can be enhanced by providing a clear, conceptual framework for developing team skills. The teaching practices implemented can be replicated and address student perceptions of working in teams in order to effect positive change and develop transferable team skills.

Originality/value – The case study highlights the applicability of explicitly teaching team skills to positively enhance the student experience in a unique generic skills programme.

Keywords Team working, Assessment, Skills, Higher education

Paper type Case study

1. Introduction

Teamwork is incorporated within higher education (HE) curricula for a number of reasons including: assisting students to construct knowledge with alternate viewpoints, improving communication and providing students with the opportunity to practice the generic skills required for the workforce (Staggers *et al.*, 2008). In addition, teamwork also enables facilitators to more effectively utilise their time by reducing their overall workload (Devlin, 2002). However, experiences involving the implementation and subsequent assessment of teamwork are often met with a number of difficulties. Taking a collaborative approach to learning in the HE environment is often challenging for both students and assessors. In essence, the HE environment often seeks to norm-reference students competing for grades, such that some students may perceive that poor teamwork results will impact their future career or higher degree aspirations. This perception may also then work to disrupt the collaborative process (Krifik and Mullan, 2007). This paper discusses the practices implemented in a generic skills programme to address student perceptions of working in teams in order to effect positive change and create transferable team skills.



2. Business Edge and teamwork

The Business Edge (BE) programme is a set of four integrated core units offered as part of the Bachelor of Business degree at Edith Cowan University (ECU) in Western Australia. The employability skills framework (Business Council of Australia and Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, 2002) developed by the Business Council of Australia and the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry was drawn upon to create the framework for this programme. The BE programme was developed specifically to provide business students with the opportunity to develop key employability skills.

The employability skills framework (Business Council of Australia and Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, 2002) maintains that teamwork is exemplified by the following behaviours (in no particular order):

- working with people of different ages, gender, race, religion and political persuasion;
- working as an individual and as a member of a team;
- knowing how to define a role as part of a team;
- applying teamwork to a range of situations;
- identifying the strengths of team members; and
- coaching, mentoring and giving feedback.

Within the BE programme, students are exposed to many teamwork activities across the four units and as a result, they are provided with the opportunity to learn by experiencing, developing and refining a wide range of the generic skills associated with working in a team. It has been argued that the process of working within a team provides an effective vehicle to both experience and develop many of the generic skills that form the foundations of teamwork (Watson, 2002). The formalisation of generic skills teaching is seen as critical pedagogy in the BE programme.

3. The generic skills required of an effective team

There are a number of generic skills which form the foundations of an effective team. Oakley *et al.* (2004) suggest that members of an effective team often: work together by assisting one another to the greatest possible extent; are effective at managing conflict; and ensure that each team member is responsible and accountable. Watson (2002) suggests that skills such as time management and organisation, record keeping, planning and goal setting as well as the ability to lead, make decisions and communicate are all required for a truly effective team. In addition to these skills, Watson (2002) also suggests that reflective practices such as an awareness of interpersonal strengths and weaknesses, as well as the ability to analyse and evaluate the team's performance can also greatly contribute to the overall effectiveness of a team. Factors such as understanding group norms are also essential for effective team management. Group norms for example, include aspects such as attendance at meetings, constructing and adhering to timelines as well as having an expectation of group members' performance (Houldsworth and Mathews, 2000). Watson (2002, p. 2) explains that in order to be an effective team member, students should "show an aptitude for many or at least some of these generic skills". Therefore, in order to ensure that assessment of teamwork is clearly valid, it is these generic skills that should make up the assessment criteria. It is important

to note that these skills should not be simply assessed; they also need to be taught and made explicit. Palinscar *et al.* (1993) suggest that students will need significant support with developing skills, particularly with reflective practices such as evaluating a group's progress or overall performance. However, teamwork dynamics are complex. If one considers that interpersonal and small-group skills form the basic nexus among individuals, and if individuals are to work together productively with inherent stresses and strains, they must practice these skills to survive (Johnson and Johnson, 2009). Therefore, it could be argued that unskilled group members cannot cooperate effectively without these requisite skills. Other factors such as student perceptions of inequality and unfair assessment outcomes can also result from poorly performing teams.

4. Student perceptions of team assessment

Volkov and Volkov (2007) suggest that unfair assessment of teamwork is a common complaint amongst students. In early evaluations of the BE programme, working toward a team assessment was shown to be an issue in student feedback received from two of ECU's unit and teaching evaluation instruments. As illustrated in the student comment below, the value of the team process was not made explicit because the focus was on assessing the product:

I have a huge workload. Having to carry another two students doesn't help, not to mention that I don't get any credit for it and these students get to cruise through their degree on other students' work!

Addressing this perception can be achieved in a number of ways. Krifik and Mullan (2007) suggest offering team contracts where individual team member's grades are scaled according to contribution. Keyton and Beck (2008) posit that exposing values by establishing team processes from the outset supports the evaluation of the team and individual members. Scott-Ladd and Chan (2008, p. 244) further suggest including peer-evaluation feedback as part of the assessment process "so students knew they were accountable to their team". Pfaff and Huddleston (2003, p. 38) state that, "not including peer evaluation in the grade may adversely affect student attitudes toward teamwork" and "a sense of fairness may prevail when students know they can provide input and create an impact on the grades of team members" (p. 40).

Another pertinent issue for implementing teamwork into the curriculum lies in determining exactly what and how teamwork is to be assessed. Students may successfully demonstrate a set of objectives related to a specialty area, but the final assessment mark that is attributed to teamwork is predominantly a measure of the end product, rather than the process by which the product was achieved. For example, the assignment may not adequately cater to the necessity for forming a team to complete it. If a group of students were to work relatively independently, then pool their ideas together to form a final product of a high standard, this final product may not necessarily be valid evidence for assessing team skills.

5. Valid assessment

Burton (2004, p. 2) states that, "in order for assessment to be valid, it must be directly aligned to the unit objectives". Constructive alignment (Biggs, 2006) ensures that the assessment supports the students' understanding and development of process skills. This is in order to more fully engage them in the task and further embed process

knowledge as a sustainable skill in the longer term. Quite often however, assessment criteria for teamwork are geared towards meeting “course-specific outcomes that do not always correlate with learning the skills and intricacies of teamwork” (Volkov and Volkov, 2007, p. 61). Assessing only content may lead to conflict over grade aspirations by individuals within teams. Therefore, when determining exactly how to correctly assess the skill of teamwork, it is important to remember to also assess the process skills behind the final product, thus constructively aligning the intended learning outcome with the activity and the assessment.

Recent literature forecasts the success of teamwork when grounded in: critical pedagogy (Ding and Ding, 2008; Keyton and Beck, 2008; Kolb *et al.*, 2008; Seibold and Kang, 2008), practices of team development (Bushe and Coetzer, 2007; Frederick, 2008; Kriflik and Mullan, 2007; Staggers *et al.*, 2008; Scott-Ladd and Chan, 2008; Tuckman, 1965) and preliminary explicit generic skills teaching (Kriflik and Mullan, 2007). However, Scott-Ladd and Chan (2008, p. 234) maintain that there is still a gap in research in the area of “giving students practical skills for building team cohesion and managing team processes”. This gap provided the impetus for the authors, who are BE programme facilitators, to adopt a teaching approach that explored team processes that enabled generic skills development.

6. A three-phase approach to teaching teamwork

Phase one: re-establish a critical pedagogy

In this study, facilitators in the BE programme began by “critically questioning whether their assignments really valued the process of teamwork” (Frederick, 2008, p. 446). This was achieved by making generic skills explicit; assessing both teamwork product and processes; and incorporating self reflections in individual weblogs and team reflections through surveys.

Table I illustrates how assessment criteria were aligned with unit outcomes to assess the final product and the generic skills behind the process of teamwork.

Phase two: define and track team processes

Phase two began with student involvement in the task. In teams of four, students developed mission statements and team norms to guide expectations about team processes. Facilitators set up team wikis to measure participation in project development through textual tracking of their online activity. Teams submitted minutes of meetings to measure the team’s ability to assign tasks, display time management and demonstrate individual accountability.

Phase three: evaluate

In the final phase, 160 students completed an anonymous online survey midway through the assessment task and again at the end of the task, where the response rate increased. Students evaluated themselves, their peers and their team’s overall performance. Processes and behaviours were surveyed and upon completion of each survey, formative feedback was exchanged between team members.

The first two phases delivered a clear framework for assessment and the ability to apply the criteria to team processes with a high degree of transparency. Phase three proved challenging in terms of instrument design and facilitating

Table I.
Assessing process and
product in a team
assignment

Task	The formation of an effective team is required to research Work Life Balance (WLB) initiatives over a six-week period. Within a workplace scenario, the team will demonstrate intrapreneurship (the ability to see business opportunities within an organisation) by communicating a timely implementation plan and an evaluation strategy in a well-researched report. An effective oral presentation to staff will be required			
Intended learning outcomes	1. To effectively demonstrate the ability to work in teams 2. To demonstrate higher order communication skills, including the effective research and presentation of data in oral and written forms 3. To understand the importance of intrapreneurship behaviour in business organisations 4. To develop problem-solving skills by using brainstorming and reframing techniques to solve more complex business problems			
	<i>Content</i>	<i>Product</i>	<i>Communication</i>	<i>Teamwork skills</i> <i>Peer evaluation</i>
<i>Academic standard</i> Adherence to correct conventions of English	The theories of WLB are current and relevant		Presentation skills (eye contact, tone of voice, etc.)	Teams develop mission statements and team norms to guide expectations about process Midpoint peer evaluation survey and team feedback
Sources are correctly referenced	The WLB vision relates to the context of the organisation The scope of the WLB plan covers a range of employees		Typography of slides used for the presentation Appropriate formatting of written document	Endpoint teamwork evaluation survey Peer feedback on final oral presentation of another team (not graded)
Summative assessment	Summative assessment	Summative assessment	Overall persuasion	Self-assess own team performance
			Summative assessment	Formative assessment

the feedback exchange. The process could be improved by debriefing the feedback exchange and improving the qualitative aspects of the final survey instrument.

7. Explicitly teaching teamwork

The teaching of explicit team skills is not a linear process; however, it can be aligned with the Tuckman stages of team development in order for the facilitator to ensure timely delivery of theory and skills. The role of the facilitator is an important one in teaching team skills. Expert facilitation can help elicit teams that “are more likely to become highly developed” (Bushe and Coetzer, 2007, p. 186). In this case, the authors referred to their research on generic skills required of effective teams and Tuckman’s model of group development. A limitation to using the Tuckman model is that it has not been empirically validated and, in this case study, is used only as a guiding framework to facilitate the teaching and learning process.

Tuckman (1965) hypothesised that small group development progressed through a number of stages. He completed an extensive review of the relevant literature in order to propose four stages of group development which he labelled forming, storming, norming and performing. In 1977, he amended the model “to include a fifth stage: adjourning” (Tuckman and Jensen, 1977, p. 426). Each stage was characterised by an attempt to distinguish between group structure (the interpersonal relationships and behaviours of group members) and group orientation to the task (the specific content of the task); however, he noted that these could both develop simultaneously. Reaching the performing stage of mutual trust and accountability is imperative to the achievement of completion of the task. Working in teams within an HE environment often requires students to complete tasks where they will move through all of these stages rapidly. In this study, an effective team is defined as four individuals working together toward a common goal, demonstrating relevant team skills in each stage. The following is a description of how team skills were implemented within a BE unit over one semester using Tuckman’s model as the conceptual framework as per phases one and two. A detailed facilitation manual has been designed for use by all facilitators in the programme in order for them to be able to replicate effective and consistent teaching of team skills in future semesters.

The forming stage

Tuckman (cited in Staggers *et al.*, 2008, p. 478) believes that individual behaviour is driven by a desire to be accepted by others. The forming stage is a time to get to know and develop opinions about each other. It is considered to be the polite stage where a premium is placed on avoiding conflict.

Clarity of purpose. According to Krifik and Mullan (2007, p. 21), “clarifying the group work activity assisted students to perceive the benefits of the activity”. The most important first step in engaging students in developing sustainable team skills was to allow time in class for discussion of effective team skills, theory and past experiences. The unit teaches Tuckman’s (1965) teamwork model in order for new teams to be able to relate their experience with each stage of team development. The facilitator scaffolded introduction of team processes and “work(ed) consciously to help teams work productively by offering skills and reflection at strategic points in the semester” (Staggers *et al.*, 2008, p. 476). This was achieved by scheduling project checkpoints in the team assignment with debriefing to help ensure optimal functioning of teams.

Team introductions and team building activities. Various icebreakers were completed in class time. The activities allowed students to interact informally prior to commencement of the team project.

Goal setting. Brainstorming in new teams was undertaken in class time to establish goals for the team and for explicitly clarifying each individual's grade aspiration. A mission statement was then written using specific, measurable, agreed, realistic, time-framed (SMART) objectives in order for team members to agree on a clear purpose for the team's existence. The team included their mission statement in their team wiki which continually reinforced the team goals over the life of the assignment.

The storming stage

This stage may bring conflict to the fore and obstacles encountered must be overcome for teams to prosper in the long term. It is the stage where team members may question the goals, the task and interpersonal relationships.

Establishing ground rules. Using collaborative discussion in class time, teams decided on norms for their team. Teams responded to a questionnaire based on the following items:

- *Work norms.* How will work be distributed? Who will set deadlines? What happens if a team member does not follow through on their commitment? How will work be reviewed? What are the guidelines for quality of work? How will individual work habits impact the team?
- *Meeting norms.* What is everyone's schedule (work and class commitments)? Is there a preference for when meetings are held outside of class? Who is responsible for organising team meetings? Where will they be held? What are the consequences of missing meetings?
- *Communication norms.* What is the preferred medium of communication: e-mail, phone or wiki? Importantly, how will conflict-management be handled? (examples adapted from Breslow, 2000).

Agreed norms were recorded on the team wiki within the week.

Roles and responsibilities. It is in the realm of the facilitator to provide constructive feedback and negotiate fluidity of roles across the life of the project. Teams were encouraged to rotate the leadership roles and record them in the minutes of team meetings.

Conflict management. Conflict management responses were explicitly taught to students in the unit prior to undertaking teamwork. Students developed awareness of Ruble and Thomas' five main approaches to conflict-management: forcing, accommodating, avoiding, compromising and collaborating (cited in Carlopio and Andrewartha, 2008, p. 345), through theory and role play.

The norming stage

In this stage, relationships are established and team skills are developed. The team begins to:

[...] function as a unit and team members become comfortable in their setting, they experience pressure to conform to emerging norms [...] they begin to value team goals more than their own personal goals (Carlopio and Andrewartha, 2008, p. 460).

Team skills. Team skills explicitly developed through in-class activities included:

- Active listening skills.
- Clarifying and summarising skills.
- Time-management skills.
- Flexibility with team rules.
- Conflict-management skills.
- Awareness of intra and interpersonal skills.
- Accountability aspects of teamwork.

The performing stage

In the performing stage, teams are generally effective and have established mutual trust between members. Individuals demonstrate loyalty and commitment to the team and as a result, facilitators are able to step back and allow the team to function independently.

Performance attributes. Attributes that were noted in high-performing teams included:

- Production of performance outcomes – satisfactory achievement of the goal/task.
- Specific shared purpose and vision.
- Mutual internal accountability.
- Blurring of formal distinctions – team members did whatever was necessary.
- Co-ordinated, shared work roles – one product, not a set of individual products.
- Efficiency – the team became more efficient than individuals working alone (Carlopio and Andrewartha, 2008, p. 466).

The adjourning stage

This is a debriefing phase that occurs when the project has reached its conclusion. Teams should be given a chance to recognise and discuss their achievements, “disengage and consciously move on” (Staggers *et al.*, 2008, p. 485).

Debriefing and peer evaluation. Facilitators explicitly debriefed the skills and attributes associated with teamwork development in a whole class forum to ensure every individual was aware of their ability to transfer and sustain these skills and strategies to new teams, either at university or in the work place.

Peer evaluation is seen to be a significant part of the process to students in the current literature (Ding and Ding, 2008; Fermelis and Tucker, 2008; Frederick, 2008; Kriflik and Mullan, 2007; Pfaff and Huddleston, 2003; Scott-Ladd and Chan, 2008). Peer evaluation formed part of the team assessment and occurred after the final oral presentations. The formative feedback between teams used a rating continuum based on both content and communication skills.

Process and generic skill evaluation in phase three. Students were asked to complete an end of semester teamwork survey which allowed them to rate skills and processes learned on a five-point Likert scale, anchored at either end of the continuum with “strongly agree” and “strongly disagree”.

8. Student perceptions of team skills and the Tuckman model

The end of semester teamwork survey allowed facilitators to learn more about student perceptions of their experiences with teamwork and to gauge the impact of changes to the teaching of teamwork in the unit. The survey attracted a 78 per cent response rate from 205 students in the second year BE unit. Students were asked to complete three questions.

The first question asked students to rate their experience with teamwork and focused on behaviours developed during the forming and storming stages of Tuckman's model. For example, goal setting, writing a mission statement using SMART objectives and developing team norms. The setting of team norms was introduced for the first time in the unit and had a positive impact on the student experience, evidenced by a 93 per cent agreement rate. A student weblog reflection provides insight into student perceptions of the benefits of this process:

The questionnaire assisted our group to come up with a set of norms in regards to work standards, communication and facilitation. This practice was particularly helpful, as it ensured that all of our team members were on the same track and shared some similar ideas.

The second question required students to rate generic skills, such as active listening and conflict-management skills, developed throughout the unit and demonstrated in the norming and performing stages of Tuckman's model.

The third question asked students to comment generally on their learning experience with the Tuckman model. Students noted the following when commenting on the final question about their journey through the team development process:

Forming is the first stage in establishing the team. We performed so well in this stage with areas such as introducing team members. We chose a place and time for group meetings. Each member talked about their expectations when working in a group. We agreed to choose a team leader and also identified goals for our group.

During the norming stage, there were some conflicts as some wouldn't turn up to meetings or communication was harsh. But during the performing stage, things went extremely well. In fact, encouragement and motivation influenced our performance as a team.

In addition to students commenting on team development through the use of Tuckman's model, general comments also indicated a greater awareness of interpersonal strengths and weaknesses. Students commented on the skills which their team performed successfully such as setting team norms, creating a mission statement and respecting others' viewpoints. Students also articulated the team skills which required further development such as time management and inclusive decision making. The explicit teaching of team skills and processes has effectively increased student awareness, ultimately contributing to the development of sustainable and transferable team skills. The following student comment is a clear endorsement:

Although our teamwork was not as efficient and effective as it could have been, the challenges that we faced were enlightening. The conflict that we were confronted with and the methods that we used to resolve this conflict gave us the experience for future teamwork situations.

9. Conclusion

In this paper, the authors suggest that the most important factor for engaging students in teamwork is having a clear, conceptual framework. In this context, elements of Tuckman's model were integrated within a three-phase approach to teaching

teamwork which provided the vehicle for student teams to both experience and understand the generic skills required for effective teamwork. The employability skills framework provided much of the impetus behind the actual skills that were to be assessed. Evidence from students' weblog reflections suggested that the use of a norms questionnaire and team surveys at various points in the teamwork process, had a positive impact on student perceptions of teamwork. This process-oriented approach continues to be investigated in subsequent iterations and is still considered innovative and useful in making generic team skills both explicit and valued. This case study provides a simple overview of a complex set of issues, attributes and challenges which underlie the processes involved in implementing, facilitating and assessing teamwork. Future research, through engaging past BE students in focus groups and the feedback loop, may further assist in identifying the processes considered most beneficial by the students themselves in developing transferable team skills.

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Further reading

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About the authors

Linda Riebe is the Program Coordinator for BE at Edith Cowan University (ECU). She brings both industry and educational experience to her position at ECU, having worked in the education sector for ten years and in the Australian investment banking industry for 12 years prior to that. She is passionate about the topic of leadership through emotional intelligence, which encompasses self-management and developing advanced communication skills enabling management and leadership of others. Her current research interest is related to developing teamwork as a transferable employability skill. Linda Riebe is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: l.riebe@ecu.edu.au

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