

Teams in the Virtual Classroom A Sharing of Practical Experience

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Abstract: The rise of remote workers has demanded a change in the way employees work together. While teams have contributed to organizational success for many years, and will continue to play an important role, the new paradigm necessitates that teams complete a greater portion of their work in without face to face interactions typical in an office environment. Educational institutions will need to educate employees on the new skills that are required. Incorporating team projects and providing support for team success in the classroom will be instrumental in helping organizations continue to achieve success in incorporating virtual teams into their workplace and culture.

Introduction

The future of economic growth in an increasingly interconnected global economy will rely on employees who are educated and trained in the skills required for new jobs. Many of these new jobs and skills required to be successful in them have evolved due in large part the increase of remote work, brought on by the still unknown long-range impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Manpower (2020), an internationally recognized staffing and talent management organization, reported that in the United States 69% of employers reported talent shortages, more than 3 times higher than it was a decade ago. Their findings also reported that globally this number is 54%, the highest in a decade (ManpowerGroup, n.d.).

According to the Job Outlook 2020 survey conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), employers cited their top requirements for graduates included proof of problem-solving skills 91% and the ability to work in teams 86% (Key Attributes Employers Want to See on Students' Resumes, 2020). The online learning methodology, which is an option for students and one that is growing in popularity (Clapp, 2016), can be an integral part of preparing workers to gain the skills required by employers.

This paper will share best practices in virtual team preparation and competency building using personal experiences in an MBA program supported by applicable research.

Preparing Teams for Success in Remote Work Conditions

As seen in the NACE (2020) data, the ability to work well with others in teams is seen as a key skill that employers look for in educational program graduates. The American Society for Quality (ASQ) defines a team as “a group of people who perform interdependent tasks to work toward accomplishing a common mission or specific objective” (2020, para 1). Robinson (2020) discusses the rise in remote work and virtual teams accomplishing the organization’s work due to the impact of COVID-19 and cites studies that predict this will become the new normal for workers going forward. Berry (2011) suggests that virtual teams that are designed, managed, and implemented effectively can produce results 24x7 irrespective of location. On the downside, however, if the teams are not effectively constructed and managed, failure is the likely result.

The virtual classroom should act as a model for skills development which then can be applied in the workplace. In the Purdue Global University School of Business and Information Technology, the MBA program courses are 6 weeks in duration. The courses are based on an asynchronous model (Bryn Mawr College, 2020), and all courses are developed using a prepare, practice and perform model (Kaplan Schweser, n.d.). Team projects can be a component of a course requiring high levels of support for students who will need to work together accomplishing assignments possibly with others who they have never met. This type of team is like a project team, where members are brought together for a limited period of time to complete a task. These team members may come from different departments or locations (stakeholdermap, 2017).

This researcher incorporates team projects into one of the core classes in the MBA program, Business Fundamentals. Students start working in teams in the first week of class, in anticipation of beginning work on a competitive business simulation, which lasts throughout the class and a final report is required on the team experience in the final week of class. As this class is early in the program, and team skills may not be developed, extensive support has been incorporated throughout the 6 weeks to ensure students are able to go through a successful team experience.

Multiple Touchpoints to Support Students Throughout the Course

Support starts prior to the beginning of the term. In a welcome email, along with announcements in the classroom, information is provided to students on the upcoming team experience and what will be required of them.

In week 1 of class, there are multiple support options for students. First, a live, synchronous seminar, provides an overview of the class, including the team formation process, team member contribution measurement methods which include multiple peer and self-confidential performance evaluations, and the team components of the business simulation. The recommendations by Oakley, et al. (2004) for forming successful teams include providing clear expectations or guidelines; and including peer evaluations.

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Students are formed into teams of 6-7 people using a random selection methodology. Chapman, Meuter, Toy, and Wright (2006), cite Bowers (2003) who asserts that random selection more accurately reflects the workplace. For many team projects, members are assigned to cross functional teams to meet organizational demands.

When teams are formed, members will need to quickly build relationships, gain trust in each other, and start dividing up roles and responsibilities in anticipation of starting simulation game play in week 2. A consensus seeking icebreaker exercise is introduced to help the teams get to know each other in a fun and relaxed fashion (Robertson, 2017). To help students prepare for the team experience, teams, team leadership and the differences between face to face and virtual teams is discussed in the Unit 1 individual assignment, student classroom self-introduction and assigned discussion question for the week. Students are also required to view a video-based overview of the simulation as part of the requirement for the weekly discussion response.

The classroom has a dedicated team discussion space, which is confidential to each team. Students are advised to complete as much of their team discussions there as possible, so the instructor can review meeting minutes, student contributions and determine where additional support may be needed.

Week 2 continues to incorporate support for students as they commence business simulation game play. In the second live, synchronous seminar, students debrief the consensus seeking icebreaker exercise assigned in week 1 by presenting their results, the process they used to complete the exercise and any key learning points they can incorporate into the team process going forward. The content of the seminar is completely focused on the team experience and provides particular focus on team growth stages using the Tuckman Model (Project-Management.com, 2020), The Johari Window (Little, 2005), and the Thomas Kilmann Conflict Resolution Model (Cadle, Paul, & Turner, 2014). The reading assignments focus on team elements and how teams can be successful.

The first of three opportunities for peer and self-evaluation are completed via a confidential survey. This first evaluation helps team members understand where team strengths and weakness areas are, provides the instructor with data on team progress and can aid in problem identification, so additional support can be provided. In many cases, this first evaluation score can be a predictor for possible problems, and the instructor will be able to have immediate impact on student performance, oftentimes alerting the student's advisor for help. The team introduction assignment, due at the end of the unit includes information on how the team has prepared to conduct its work, both from a team organization and personal contribution perspective. A Team Charter is completed as part of this assignment, and specific content from scholarly sources on ensuring high performing teamwork is required.

In week 4 the second peer/self-evaluation survey is administered, providing the team and instructor additional data on team health and progress. The instructor compares the information from the original evaluation administered in week 2 to look for trends. If

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there are downward trends, then the instructor will be able to determine what next steps to take to improve team performance. If there are any individual outlier data points, i.e., a student had a precipitous drop in evaluation scores, it alerts the instructor to intervene and reach out to the student, often involving the student's advisor.

Week 5 ends the simulation game play. Students are evaluated in 2 sections, the ranking in simulation game play, 1st, etc. and the contribution to the team experiences. The multiple data points for the teamwork score includes the peer/self-evaluation and the contribution to simulation game play. If a student contribution is low, then the teamwork component of the grade will be low, and in some instances the grade for the ranking will also be reduced. The grading rubric for this scoring is introduced in the 1st seminar and it is also present weekly in the classroom.

In week 6, midway through the week, teams post a draft of their final assignment, a PowerPoint presentation for feedback by others. The final presentation includes an analysis of strengths and weakness in team process and lessons learned. Elements for feedback include overall feedback on adherence to the rubric and other general feedback to improve the quality of the presentation. As simulation game play has concluded, this feedback opportunity builds teamwork for the entire class, not just the individual team members. The final discussion question asks students to look back to look forward, and discuss what they would have changed or done differently to have made the team more effective? The final peer/self-evaluation is administered, with a focus on team member contribution to the final presentation. The final presentation is submitted for grading at the end of the week. Like the grade for the simulation, if a student contribution is low, then the teamwork component of the grade will be low, and in some instances the grade for the presentation will also be reduced.

Final Thoughts

Teams have been foundational to workplace performance for many years. The full impact of the migration to remote work from COVID-19 has not yet been felt, but one ramification has been the need to have highly effective remote workers, including those who can work successfully on virtual teams. The educational community plays a vital role in preparing students to work in this new landscape. While no one course can provide all the skills and competencies necessary to work well in virtual teams, student feedback has indicated this format has been helpful in achieving an increased level of skill and confidence in virtual team success in both their personal and professional lives.

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