From the Classroom to the Boardroom: Team Development Interventions by Faculty in Student Teams

Dewaynna Horn, Jennifer L. Flanagan, and Margaret A. Young

Texas Woman's University, USA

Abstract. Teamwork is a part of not only the classroom but also the workplace, and team development and team learning are key components to team success. A student's meaningful team experience in the classroom informs their ability to later succeed in team environments in a professional setting. This study examines student perceptions of faculty efforts to develop teams and how they impact team cohesion, team interdependence, team conflict, and ultimately team satisfaction. The researchers also analyzed psychological safety as a moderator of team development and offer several tips for instructors to facilitate student teamwork in classrooms.

Keywords: business, education, groups, projects, teams.

1. Introduction

> "Great things in business are never done by one person. They're done by a team of people." – Steve Jobs

Teamwork is integral and unavoidable in business. Indeed, especially in small business, and with employees wearing so many hats and serving in so many capacities, it is virtually impossible to avoid working in a cross-functional team at some point. Any employer bringing new MBA graduates into their workplace has certain expectations of their employee's ability to interact with others, their effectiveness in working through problems, and their communication skills.

Employer expectations of employee performance and their actual skills at the outset often differ. Employers expect that graduates of business schools will have the necessary teamwork skills to succeed in the workforce (Ruiz, Bianey, & Adams 2004; Bisbey & Salas 2019). Lejk and Wyvill (1996) note, "Teamwork skills are the second most important attribute looked for in prospective employees" (p. 268). A survey revealed 96 percent of employers believe that

improving a student's ability to work effectively in a team should be an important goal for academicians (Hart Research Associates 2014). As such, "The use of student teams for class projects is now a common pedagogical practice in many business schools" (Chen & Lou 2004, p. 275).

Loughry *et al.* (2014) indicated that many instructors are integrating team activities into their classes and noted that 59.1% of instructors at four-year institutions reported they use small groups in all or most of their courses (The Chronicle of Higher Education 2009). It is important to look at team development processes and team learning. Team-based learning strategies integrated into the classroom by instructors help to develop teamwork skills (Hansen 2006; Lohmann, Pratt, Benckendorff, Strickland, Reynolds, & Whitelaw 2019) and ensure quality teamwork experiences, better team performance, and learning among individuals via teams.

The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) is a major accrediting institution for business colleges and schools, and has stressed the importance of teamwork (AACSB 2013 Eligibility Procedures). Colleges must document the places in the curriculum where students are participating in team experiences; show that team experiences exist across program types and delivery modes, including on-line courses; document that peer learning opportunities are of high quality and impact student learning; and finally, demonstrate that students in all modes of delivery (face-to-face, online, hybrid, part-time, and full-time) have equivalent opportunities to learn team skills (Loughry, Ohland, & Woehr 2014; Lohmann 2019).

Despite workforce trends, employers' expectations, and the fact that student teams are widely used in graduate and undergraduate programs of study in business schools, a gap exists between the mastery of teamwork skills expected by employers, and those demonstrated by graduates (Adams 2003). Employers highlight teamwork as a key skill deficiency among college graduates entering the workforce. In a survey of employers and students, only 37% of employers believed colleges prepared recent graduates to work in teams and 83% of employers thought colleges should place more emphasis on developing the teamwork and collaboration skills of students (Hart Research Associates 2014).

The teamwork skill deficiency may be attributed to poor preparation and guidance from faculty (Hansen 2006). Insufficient team training is often the cause of teams that perform poorly (Zemke 1993). Rotfeld (1998) stated that "Group projects are many but few faculty assigning them stress improving student speaking, writing, or group interactions. The classes do not teach these things except by contagion and therein lies the real problem" (p. 6). Faculty in business schools may lack the necessary skills and knowledge to train students to work in teams. Instead many professors simply place students into teams to complete projects in order to create the mere appearance of teamwork. Barker and Franzak (1997) stated, "placing students into groups for class projects is not the same as developing teams, even when the term 'team' is applied" (p. 304).

Lohmann *et al.* (2019) found that incorporating team-based learning (TBL) in the business curriculum and focusing on team-centered activities and support initiatives, even for online students, contributed to learner satisfaction and team success. Yet, many instructors assign students to work in teams by default, not by design, for the purpose of meeting the expectations of their programs, accrediting organizations, workforce recruiters and employers. The lack of a specific design is often due to a lack of know-how and experience in developing teams. Similarly, in practice, poor performing teams may often be attributed to lack of leadership and management.

The purpose of this study is to determine the effectiveness of our efforts to prepare, train, manage, and facilitate effective student teamwork by exploring contextual aspects of student teams. We evaluate student perceptions of actual practices of faculty in developing and administering student teams (team development initiatives, or TDI), student perceptions of psychological safety (interpersonal context), and the effects of these contextual aspects on team cohesion, team interdependence, team conflict, and individual satisfaction. Drawing on team learning theory we analyze the important contextual variables and processes on which professors might focus in developing and administering effective student teams. This study also provides notes and resources for instructors to use to facilitate successful teamwork.

2. Literature Review

Team Learning Theory
Team learning involves continual development that increases knowledge about working in teams and cultivates knowledge-sharing and positive interactions among team members to enable team effectiveness (Edmondson, Dillon & Roloff 2007; Van der Haar, Koeslag-Kreunen & Segers 2017). Team-learning research focuses on three different perspectives: overcoming learning curves for the purpose of outcome improvement; increasing shared knowledge to improve task mastery; and examining learning processes within teams or group processes (Edmondson *et al.* 2007). This study examines how contextual factors affect group learning processes in teams. We analyze the effect that teamwork has on individual satisfaction and propose an input-process-output model in which group interaction processes mediate the relationship between group inputs and outputs. Essentially, contextual aspects such as structure or managerial support affect team behavior, such as team cohesion, leading to an increase or decrease in team performance (Harvey, LeBlanc & Cronin 2019).

Teams in Graduate Business Education
A team, by definition, is a social system involving multiple individuals, which is embedded in a specific context, such as an organization or classroom, whose

members perceive themselves as such and are perceived by others as members, and who create synergies through coordination to accomplish a common task using complimentary skills for a period of time (Sagner 2013). Teams should be distinguished from groups. Although the terms are used interchangeably, teams and groups are not the same (Adams & Laksumanage 2003).

Groups are informally organized to enforce established norms within the group, whereas teams are formally organized to accomplish a specific task. The focus of a group may or may not be consistent with the mission of the organization, whereas the objectives of a team should be consistent with a specific mission or missions. There is greater synergy and accountability within teams as opposed to groups, and teams should be comprised of complimentary skill sets, as opposed to similar skill sets. Team projects enhance individual members' knowledge, skills, and abilities to work in teams, which is necessary to satisfy the demands of employers, working towards a common goal set by the employer (Bisbey & Salas 2019). The most effective teamwork leads to team performance that would be greater than individual performance (Bisbey & Salas 2019).

Teams are effective when team members are properly taught how teams work, how to communicate, and the need for distinct and specific roles within teams, engaging in a process that enhances the team and output (Kerns 2019). When students are taught how to collaborate with others, they gain experience working on complex problems (Goretsky l984; Henke 1985; 2019; Kerns 2019; Lohmann *et al.* 2019), they have the opportunity to emulate the real-world work environment (Williams, Beard, & Rymer 1991), and they improve their communication skills (Meyer 1994; Williams, Beard, & Rymer 1991). Moreover, students acquire better interpersonal, social, and team skills (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith 1998; Joyce 1999; Kunz 1994; McCorkle *et al.* 1999; Williams, Beard, & Rymer 1991), become active and advanced learners (Freeman 1996; Johnson & Johnson 1984-85; Williams, Beard, & Rymer 1991), develop persistence through adversity (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith 1998), increase their knowledge and critical thinking skills (Boyer, Weiner, & Diamond 1985; Nichols & Hall 1995), are more motivated (Denton 1994; Dommeyer 1986; Johnson, Johnson, & Smith 1998), have positive interdependence (Joyce 1999), acquire a greater sense of achievement (Freeman 1996; Johnson & Johnson 1984-85; Johnson, Johnson, & Smith 1998), possess a sense of meaningfulness (Robbins 1994), and develop improved multicultural relations, which are all increasingly important aspects needed among employers in the diverse workplace of today (McCain 1996; Slavin, 1990).

Working in a team is not always the best method to meet the goals of a project. Since the most effective team performance needs to be more productive than individual performance (Bisbey & Salas 2019), collaborations that lead to less productivity are not ideal and do not warrant teamwork situations (Robbins 2017). Much of the downside of teamwork comes from the negative perceptions of teamwork, often leading to resistance to working with other team members. This is true for students and employees alike. Some of these include free-riding