

Improving College Project Team Results

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Teamwork is essential in all organizations, yet many college students report negative experiences in this type of activity. This study examined the perceptions of 145 first-year college students solving a term-long project by working in teams during their very first college course. It covers five student cohorts over a ten-year period with the objective to assess if these students could learn the importance of working as a team, observe positive team learning outcomes and successfully contribute to a major term-long final project. Results focus on the importance of an alternative selection process of team members and how this approach can improve teamwork results. Successful teamwork serves as a valuable base for future professional workplace skills.

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Organizations depend on the use of teams to meet the challenges of their missions. With the wide focus on the use of teamwork by all types of government, non-profit and private organizations, educators are placing more emphasis on using team projects in classrooms. Interestingly, students often enter college with many preconceived notions of the value of class team projects. These perceptions usually have been fostered from earlier personal exposure to teams – either in sports, part-time jobs, earlier school activities, or hearing others speak about them, as well as comments on blogs and various websites. As a result, many students have developed negative opinions as they enter their first year of college, such as believing teamwork in classes is boring and not useful for developing success for the future. Students often do not seem to see the investment of their time and effort in this activity to be very beneficial.

The purpose of this study is to evaluate an alternative approach to student team selection which then may illustrate positive team results involved in solving a major classroom project during students' first term of college. The key focus areas center on college students (a) learning the importance of working as a team, (b) observing positive team learning outcomes as a result and (c) successfully contributing to a major term-long final project. This specific course was taught five times over the span of 10 years to different classes of students, all working in small 6-person teams as they developed solutions to a term-long course project. This was the first college course that these students took.

Student Issues with Teamwork

A full review of the literature related to the value of students performing classroom team work is beyond the scope of this paper; however, some key elements merit a brief discussion. In my experience working in government, private, and non-profit sector organizations, employers consistently mention teamwork and collaboration as essential critical skills needed in the workplace including collaborative learning, deep thinking, and improved interpersonal team skills. As such, team-based organization performance is critical for success. Part of the rationale for having students work in teams is to develop, or at least understand, the importance of obtaining transferable skills, such as conflict resolution, collaborative problem solving and goal setting when focusing on a major project.

Unfortunately there are many concerns that students have about working in teams. This negativity toward teamwork largely originates from students' previous negative experiences working in teams. Students do not always come away from team experiences with positive attitudes about teamwork and how it relates to effective performance (Pineda, Barger & Lerner (2009).

Specific problems that students face in team projects include: scheduling conflicts, interpersonal issues with others, concerns over team roles, working with those who are unfamiliar to them, and the preference to work alone, and concerns over group grading schemes. Many students are burdened with a history of weak performing teams and the academic frustration rooted in team-based assignments, by being "forced to rely on peers with the end result impacting their individual grade and ultimately the course" (Schultz, Wilson, & Hess, 2010, p. 20).

According to Oakley, Felder, Brent and Elhajj (2004), “students taught in a manner that incorporates small-group learning achieve higher grades, retain the information longer, are less likely to drop out of school, acquire greater communication skills, and gain a better understanding of the environment in which they will be working as professionals” (pg. 9).

A characteristic of team projects is the capacity to offer an increased role by the students themselves managing some of their own learning in a course. This active learning has individuals searching for alternatives to solve team problems as a way of fostering critical thinking through team building and problem solving while gaining a group identity. Each team member needs to be fully invested. Experiential learning in teams is facilitated when “knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb, 1984, p. 41). Students need the responsibility for their learning by being actively involved in the learning process.

In order to take responsibility for learning in a team, team members must trust each other. Trust is a critical function in the development of effective teamwork and a key factor contributing to successful projects. When team members trust each other, they are more sensitive to their colleagues’ needs and more willing to help them. This trust results in social exchange (Blau, 1964) which refers to voluntary actions motivated by expected and actual returns. When team commitment and trust are high, members value the relationship and are willing to spend effort making this relationship work. As such, the interests and goals of the team become important, giving members a sense of responsibility to help one another. Team goals also play an important role in influencing the relationship between trust and knowledge sharing in teams. Both trust and commitment are seen as key antecedents of knowledge sharing. When trust in the team is high, and team members perceive one another as competent and honest, team members are motivated to form an attachment to the team resulting in identification with

the team's goals and value, and enhance team commitment (Buvik & Tvedt, 2017). As a result, this team identification should develop stronger commitment to the team project which, in turn, make the students, as members, again more willing to share ideas and contribute to the project goal.

Critical Issue: The Challenge of Team Member Selection

Many different methods have been reported for selecting students for team projects. Chapman, Meuter, Toy and Wright (2006) found that “the method of group member assignment does influence group dynamics, attitudes toward the group experience and group outcomes” (p. 557). What follows summarizes key approaches to select students for class teams.

Selection by Instructor

Many believe that the best way to select student teams is to have the instructors themselves directly assign students to teams (Jassawalla, A., Malshe, A., & Sashittal, H., 2008) rather than allowing the students to self-select. Instructors could solicit information about the backgrounds of each student and balance the distribution of member resources.

“Blind” Self-Selection by Students

Chapman, et al., (2006) and others state that while self-selection of groups add more value to the work effort, it leads to less diverse teams and is often based on close friends or nearest seat locations. This still results in a lack of social context since no investigation of key team work skills were implemented. This may cause serious problems in solving key team issues. Prospective team members still need information about others who might be picked for the team.

Methodology

Developing a more beneficial team selection process

In this study, an alternative approach to team selection was performed which was believed to lead to improved team projects. Prospective team members need information about others who they might select to improve goal achievement. As stated earlier, the primary purpose of this first-year course was for students to learn the importance of working as a team, observe positive team learning outcomes, and successfully contribute to a major term-long final project. To accomplish these term-long classroom projects, student teams were required in each of the five cohorts over a ten-year period. Noting the concerns from literature on team selection problems, especially with no solid basis for choosing members, a fresh approach was needed.

As a result, key information believed needed for the selection process was made available by the students themselves at the very first class sessions. In each cohort's first class, just after the instructor revealed the course project details, students were told – with no advance warning – to step to the front of the classroom and for a maximum of 3 minutes introduce themselves to others by providing the following personal background information;

- Name
- Current major field of study
- The city they were from
- If they lived in dorms or commuted to class
- Which past activities they have been involved in
- Reasons why they believed they would make a good team member for this project

After all had completed their personal introductions, time was provided for each cohort to circulate throughout the room to help select their own 6-person team members based on the information provided from the individual students' introductions. A limited amount of time was provided for this team 'drafting' process. To avoid the problem of homogeneous self-selected

groups, the instructor also provided some criteria which had to be considered in the selection process. These were:

- A mix of university majors (course open to all degree programs)
- A mix of genders
- A variety of student housing options: dormitories or commuters, and provide
- Some student ethnicity mix in the team, given the class composition.

In some cases, if one or more of the caveats was missing in a particular team, some ‘trading’ with other teams had to be performed by the students to fill a specific criterion. Students were told that the best way to ensure these diverse perspectives was through cross-functional backgrounds

With the unique mix of majors, genders, ethnicity and other factors, it was hoped that “groupthink” mentality would be reduced. Groupthink is the practice of making decisions as a group in a way that discourages creativity or individual responsibility. If any student was absent from this initial class session, that person was assigned by the instructor during the next class to fill in any missing criterion gaps.

The purpose of this enhanced team selection process was that since the students were now personally involved in selecting their own team members, based on key factors to facilitate diverse perspectives, they would be encouraged to personally invest in all future team work efforts to a greater degree.

Specific Team Project Focus

The project specifically involved a class proposal that focused on the various contexts of the city’s expansive lakefront area. This focus served as the major emphasis of the course. Time was provided periodically during most class sessions for teams to meet and discuss issues. Classes frequently met with federal, state and local governmental agencies, museums and other

organizations, along with briefings from technical experts. These briefings were held with the purpose of having students obtain different views of the study area.

Guidelines for All Teams

Guidelines for appropriate team functioning was developed and discussed with and distributed to all cohorts. These covered the following:

- the importance of each team member helping on tasks
- the need to effectively communicate throughout the process
- the necessity to motivate all members to excellence
- the need to meet timelines
- having each member ‘pull their own weight’ as a committed member of the team; and
- the importance of equal work distribution

Required Outcome of Team Activities

The key outcome of this extensive term-long team activity consisted of a major project report developed with the input of each team throughout the term. Specifically, each 6-person team worked together to prepare a major project paper scenario, as well as to provide some selected alternatives to help reduce any related impacts, eventually providing a recommended solution to the issue.

Background of the Participants

The five course cohorts over the span of 10 years ranged in size from 24 to 34. Reported student majors and backgrounds of these cohorts are shown in Table 1.

Table 1.

Total Student Cohorts Characteristics

<u>Majors</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Ethnicity</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Number</u>
Business	77	Caucasian	59	male	84
Liberal Arts & Sciences	28	Asian/Pacific Islander	15	female	61
Computer Science	16	Hispanic/Latino	8		
Theater Arts	11	African American	6		
Education	3	Native American	2		
Other Academic Areas	5	Not Specified	4		
Not Reporting	<u>5</u>	Not Reporting	<u>51</u>		
Total (N=145)	145	Total	145		145

Table 1 illustrates the diversity of these students taking this first-year course over 10 years. As stated earlier, mix of majors, and ethnicity were important due to the team composition requirements.

Table 2

Cohort Composition

<u>Cohort #</u>	<u>Cohort Size</u>	<u>No. of Teams</u>
# 1	34	(6)
# 2	29	(5)
# 3	24	(4)
# 4	30	(5)
# 5	28	(5)

Table 2 shows the number of students comprising each cohort, as well as the number of teams.

Over the period of the study, the cohort size and number of teams remained similar.

Data Collection

Student feedback was essential in obtaining information on their reactions to the team process over the length of the course and to see if they learned the importance of working as a team, observed positive team learning outcomes, and could successfully contribute to the major project. As such, two anonymous surveys¹ were distributed to all 145 students to obtain information on their teamwork activities. Survey completion by students was voluntary. Since actual team selection occurred in the first class, survey #1 was distributed to each student during their second class prior to the start of any team activities. Survey #2 was distributed at the end of the course after all final team project reports had been turned in to the instructor, but not yet graded.

It was important to distance the instructor from student completion of these surveys to avoid any undue pressure. Accordingly, for each survey, the instructor left the room and had each course's "student mentor" (an upper-class student assigned to each cohort to help students navigate their first-year at the university) personally distribute and collect these anonymous surveys. Each term these mentors placed the surveys in a sealed envelope for the instructor without providing comments or annotations. In this way, neither the instructor nor the student mentors would know who responded to any of the surveys. Students were told that the survey data collected would not in any manner affect their grades since the surveys were anonymous and voluntary. No student ever mentioned any personal invasiveness involving any survey items or introductory content.

¹ Both anonymous surveys provided for student completion were approved in advance by the university's "Institutional Review Board" (IRB) prior to distribution.

Survey #1 - Pre-Project Survey Results

Students' views on previous class teams.

It was important to obtain key information prior to the students actually engaging in team activities. These were needed to form a baseline of information to compare any lessons-learned during the course. This first survey asked for general views of teamwork and some basic student personal experiences while in previous teams of any nature.

From this Pre-Project survey, of utmost interest was how these students usually selected teammates in the past. After all, the alternative process used for team selection in this study for these cohorts was uniquely different. These responses are shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Student Past Experiences in the Selection Process

<u>Strategy</u>	<u>Percent of References</u>
Picked friends	42%
At random	15%
Assigned by instructor	15%
Chose those who seemed willing to help	15%
Chose those met in class	5%
Picked someone who sat near	5%
Other	3%

Table 3 shows that students most commonly indicated that they had chosen group members who they already knew, and perhaps, felt comfortable with.

Students also identified multiple drawbacks they had encountered in the past working with teams, see Table 4.

Table 4

Student Drawbacks Noted from Past Team Efforts

<u>Concern</u>	<u>Percent of References</u>
Lazy students / Students that spend little/no effort	55%
Lack of commitment / Take no responsibility for work	20%
Unequal workload results always occurs	12%
Conflict is present	5%
Other	8%

Overall the students indicated concern regarding those who do not devote appropriate efforts to team work in various settings.

In further examining other general results from the pre-project survey, some interesting responses were found in other areas such as problem solving, decisions, and working relationships. Table 5 illustrates students' pre-project reactions to these items.

Table 5

General Views of Students Working in Previous Teams

<u>Student Perceptions</u>	<u>Percent Agree/Strongly Agree</u>
Problem solving by groups gives better results than by individuals	78%
Group projects will help prepare me for work after college	67%
Individuals should accept team decisions even if they differ	37%
Individuals prefer to work in a group rather than by themselves	34%
Only those who depend upon themselves get ahead in life	30%
One does better work by working alone than in a group	29%
Groups never seem to get along together	16%

Table 5 shows that students perceive that working in groups is valuable both for better results in class and in their careers. Given this favorable view of working in groups, it is not surprising that fewer students valued the statements indicating that working alone was preferable.

Students' views on selecting current teammates.

At issue now was why students selected their current team members after hearing the self-presentations. This was assessed prior to any actual work being done by students as a team

on the term-long project. Table 6 shows the most important element students focused on in selecting their current teammates.

Table 6

Reasons Why They Selected Their Current Teammates in This Course

<u>Student Perceptions</u>	<u>Percent Agree/Strongly Agree</u>
Believed that the person could help with the project	66%
Someone who resembled themselves	12%
Selected the person to diversify team ethnicity	12%
The person used humor in their introduction	10%

Table 6 indicates that students strongly preferred to choose teammates who they could trust to put sufficient effort into the work of the group. This perception is consistent with the perceived drawbacks to group work students reported in Table 4.

Students also responded that the key reasons why they picked students for their team were: (a) if the individual said they would work hard on the team, (b) if the individual said they were good at report writing, and (c) if the person spoke of “team” and not “me” in personal views. A total of 81% of all the students stated that they found the personal introduction approach to be extremely useful in focusing on those students they believed could help with their team project.

Survey #2 - Post-Project Survey Results

At the conclusion of the term-long team project in class, students were again surveyed about their actual experiences during their team projects which had just been completed and submitted for a grade. This post-project questionnaire focused on the total team experience during the entire course.

Key students’ views on usefulness of team work activities.

In analyzing all these 6-person team experiences in each cohort, the post-project questionnaire focused on the actual team activities. The summative data of all students show

strong positive views, illustrated in Table 7, supporting the usefulness of team work on the cohort's projects.

Table 7

Post-Project Views on Team Activity

<u>Student Perspective</u>	<u>Percent Agree/Strongly Agree</u>
I was able to help my group on the project	91%
The team really listened to my views	76%
If on another group project, would want my same team	73%
We worked well together	72%
Individuals worked more as a team than by themselves	71%
Each member did their appropriate share of work	62%

These results show that students offered strong positive perceptions of group work occurring in the five cohorts over the 10-year period of the course-long team projects.

Utilizing Collaborating Evidence as Results

It was also important to determine if student responses were supported by other collaborating student evaluations. These involved (a) student peer assessments, (b) student optional responses to open-ended peer items, and (c) the official university course evaluations.

Student peer evaluations.

Many authors believe that the use of peer ratings can improve team performance since it can encourage deeper group participation in project activities. These ratings can motivate students for stronger engagement on a team and serve as a powerful incentive for active participation in working together. Students were required to rate the other members of their team, as well as themselves, as to how each individual personally contributed to the development of the final project.

As for actual peer ratings in these cohorts, they were conducted by students alone and not in a group format. For the most part, these ratings of others focused on individual contribution to

projects and appeared to be thoughtful insights. Generally only a few team members earned very low peer grades awarded by their evaluators showing. All peer grades were factored into the students' personal final project grade, as they were earlier told.

Interestingly, on the plus side, several students added very positive sidebars to their evaluations in speaking about their team composition:

“I enjoyed working with this team and would work again with them over and over in a heartbeat. Everyone was prompt, reliable and hard working.”

“We found it very useful to have the interactive team selection process at the beginning

“As hoped for in the beginning, everyone participated and contributed evenly and no one missed a meeting.”

“I honestly felt that with this selected group nothing was difficult.”

“It helps to have different views on the team as a starting point, which we had not planned on when we selected each other”.

These students clearly valued working with others who contributed responsibly to the group, something they had been concerned about in the pre-team work survey. It is notable that some students valued the diversity that the team selection process brought to the groups.

Student Optional Open Ended Peer Items Responses.

Students were also asked two open ended peer questions about their team project experience and the end of the peer evaluation. The first question focused on the students identifying the most important level of team members' contributions to the actual term long project. This was of major interest in determining how these teams worked together. Results showed that 83% rated their team members with a “strong level of contribution”, with another 11% with a “good level”. This indicates that the vast majority of the students did indeed

experience solid success in working together, again based on the alternative team member selection process.

The second open ended question asked what each student identified as the most important learning outcomes developed by working on their particular team. Content analysis was used to aggregate the numerous responses. Student results were first grouped into three outcome areas: (a) being supportive of others on the team, (b) making better decisions, and (c) achieving personal growth. Then responses were listed under each group to illustrate linkages with each outcome area. Table 8 shows the outcome.

Table 8

Student Identification of Their Most Important Learning Outcomes

<u>Being Supportive of Others on the Team</u>	<u>% of responses</u>
All need to do their part in order to complete the tasks	44
Always need to be supportive of other members when on a team	
Need to work together cooperatively	
It is easier if you divide up the workload to entire team	
Team member selection process helped us to be more supportive	
Communication and cooperation are vital	
Partnership with others is important	
<u>Making Better Decisions</u>	<u>% of responses</u>
The need to compromise	36
Should not procrastinate	
The importance of putting different ideas together	
It is difficult to make decisions	
Importance of how to organize work effectively	
<u>Achieving Personal Growth</u>	<u>% of responses</u>
Understanding different views	20
Know what it takes to get a team project completed	
Need to take responsibility	
Time management is essential	
Important to remain open minded	
Teammates make good friends	
Working in a team can be fun	

The importance of teamwork that members learned as a result of the course by team members across all five cohort members is apparent in these three categories of outcome responses. It is interesting to note that these students so strongly valued the group work that they were more likely to value the learning outcome of supporting others on the team than achieving personal growth.

University Requested Student Course Evaluations

As normal practice at this university, every student is requested to voluntarily complete an official course evaluation. Instructors do not have access to these results until after all final course grades have been posted. Students are informed of this release-delay so as not to worry about any impacts to their final grades.

A key part of this evaluation focused on items covering various categories of related course elements. The composite Likert-scale ratings for key course components are listed in Table 9.

Table 9

Composite Ratings of Key Course Elements

<u>Course Element</u>	<u>Likert Rating Average</u>
Teamwork fostered mutual respect and tolerance of differences	4.54
The team was concerned with the progress of teammates	4.30
Value of working on team projects	4.24

(5 = strongly agree ---- 1 = strongly disagree)

The highest score of 4.54 (out of 5.0) was on regarding the importance of “mutual respect and tolerances of differences” in team projects, the high 4.30 regarding “team concerned about progress of teammates”, and the 4.24 score on the “value of working on team projects”, are all key measures of team work which help to validate the important lessons-learned by these student

cohorts. Together these results point to sustained positive reactions regarding the importance of team work, active learning elements, and the approaches taken.

Specific Linkages of the Research

The personal investment and sense of collaboration shows up strongly by linking back to the main focus of this paper. Using a ten percent random sample of responses from these 145 students in the 5 cohort courses provides some examples to demonstrate several key points:

(a) Students saw the importance of team member selection:

- “I was able to work in a group of selected people and come up with a final project”
- “My ability to work with a variety of people we selected from all over the U.S. was strong”
- “It helps to have different views on the team as a starting point, which we had not planned on when we selected each other”.
- “I can adapt in a hand-picked team to be able to look at things differently”
- “We found it very useful to have the interactive team selection process at the beginning”
- “The emphasis on teamwork by selecting these individuals based on the introduction process, allowed me to meet other similar students and make friends”

(b) Students could learn teamwork methods:

- “I learned that no matter how one works on his own, he must still rely on others to succeed”
- “Working in teams and dividing up the work is critical”
- “In order to get things accomplished, you need to work together with the rest of the people in your team”
- “Learning what needs to be done in order for team projects to run smoothly”

(c) These students saw how experiential learning improved teamwork, by stating:

- “I learned how to get along with different types of people and the art of compromise”
- “Most of the activities were hands-on so it gave us a lot of time to work together and build team working skills”
- “Being able to work well within a group by learning together”

(d) Lastly, they could observe positive learning outcomes, as they stated:

- “Working on a big project with a few good people. It was easier to finish the final project in team”
- “Learning how to work with a big team to complete a project”
- “Working with an international group in the classroom was a new and positive experience”
- “Learning to work cooperatively with other people was important”
- “I was able to effectively work in a team to complete the project”

They also noticed how this effort could possibly contribute to their future workplace skills. This key point was stated by 73% of cohort members who said that this process served as a valuable base for the future, illustrated by the student comment, “team projects will help prepare me for work after college”.

Discussion

It has been shown that students regrettably often report negative views of in-class team work, believing it to be boring, not useful for their future, and with many not doing their fair-share but still receiving identical grades as those who work hard. What makes this even more alarming is that all organizations – public, non-profit and private – need individuals ready to engage in team activities to help guide that organization towards success.

Pleasantly, the outcomes involving these five cohorts, totaling 145 students over a 10-year span, who selected their own team members based on the alternative selection approach discussed earlier, illustrate some very encouraging positive perceptions in student involvement in teamwork. The emphasis in these cohorts was on collaborative learning where teammates would learn from each other and work well together by completing the class project successfully. Based on this experience, many said that they felt that this positive outcome was a result of the alternative team member selection process at the first class.

As McKendall (2000) states “learning to work as a team takes time – considerably more time than group projects typically encountered...students must meet and invest time not only in the project work, but also in analyzing and evaluating the team dynamics...” (p. 281). In this study, students saw that they need to be open to collaborate with each other in order to gain a strong level of personal contribution to the project as well as to their colleagues. Fortunately, from the student responses, it appears that having the ability to select one’s teammates based on shared key personal information provided a shield of trust and commitment among the team members.

Limitations

As in all research, some limitations exist. The students were told that surveys were anonymous and voluntary. As a result, the cohorts had varying average total response rates from 65% in the pre-project survey to 80% for the post-project survey. Self-reporting of actual success in specific teams could not be verified due to the anonymity involved, so no tracking of individual members’ level of active involvement could be accomplished. It was hoped that these students would learn team work skills to use in other college courses and perhaps even later as they apply for future internships and jobs.

Additionally, these five cohort courses were the only “First-Year” category courses taught by this instructor and therefore it was not possible to compare data by withholding this unique selection process from some other similar courses. The instructor did not alter any selection process among the various cohorts. No inquiry was made of other faculty to see if they used teams in courses and how selected. Longitudinal study on these cohorts was not possible to determine if any were successful later in either internships, part-time jobs or careers requiring teamwork after graduation. In the future, it is hoped that researchers analyze a structured

comparison study to examine if other factors may impact post-project results and student team perceptions.

Conclusion

Part of the rationale for having students work in teams was to have them understand the importance of working together, while at the same time have them obtain transferable skills and abilities for use in the future. The key three research questions using the alternative team member selection process discussed earlier were answered by results related to (a) learning the importance of working as a team, (b) observing positive team learning outcomes as a result and (c) successfully contributing to a major term-long final project.

All organizations require teamwork among employees to maintain successful planning and implementation of projects in both domestic and global operations. As a result, employers value team work skills such as problem solving, collaboration, time management, effective communication and innovation as they seek to effectively utilize individuals within and outside their organizations. The earlier in college that students can be exposed to and involved in teamwork, the quicker they can hone those skills for future use in careers.

The alternative approach for student team selection of personal presentations and criteria based group composition contributed to successful working relations and outcomes. This was more than just working on a project, it was gaining personal growth and experiencing team learning. A majority of the teams' final projects were successful, and this success reflects well on this team member selection process. In conclusion, this research study found that this selection process by team members allowed them to use an improved approach to work closely together, to take more ownership of the team, and to learn how to develop skills to use in the future.

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