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Team Learning in the MIS Classroom

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Abstract

Information systems are no longer developed by individuals working alone; teamwork has become the catchphrase of the recent past and the near future. Therefore, organizations are in dire need of individuals who can work effectively and efficiently with others. Team-based teaching methods provide prospective information technologists with the opportunity to develop effective and efficient teamwork skills. This paper presents the concept of team learning and related issues encountered while using team learning in an MIS course.

Team Learning

Team learning is a team-based process by which a group creates knowledge for its members, for itself as a system, and for others (Kasl, Marsick, and Dechant, 1997). One of the important features of team learning is learning through conversation, debate, analysis, interpretation, and information sharing emerge (Alavi, Wheeler, and Valacich, 1995). Other features of team learning include (Michaelsen, 1992): permanent, heterogeneous work teams (enhances cohesiveness); and, the use of individual performance, team performance, and peer evaluation as a basis for grades (promoting individual accountability and incentives for team performance). The team learning environment is amenable to modification to suit specific instructive situations.

Team Learning Issues

The authors have uncovered several important issues during the changeover from a traditional lecture format to a team learning format. Of course, these issues are not generalizable to all professors but each professor will find issues relative to his or her circumstances.

1. The team learning format in its purest form has few lectures. However, the authors have found that our students prefer the lecture format because it usually requires less of them. Therefore, more lecturing was inserted into the team learning format without compromising team learning concepts.

2. The peer evaluation process must be clearly explained and directly tied to an individual’s performance within the group.

3. Students are either not comfortable evaluating their peers or lack the appropriate performance evaluation experience or both. Therefore, peer evaluation inflation is a real possibility. In-class training regarding performance evaluation is often needed. In addition, the importance of objective and truthful evaluations should be reinforced throughout the semester.

4. Individual exercises and exams should be used to emphasize the importance of individual accountability for learning. These individual activities should determine a significant portion of a student’s final grade, but not so significant as to diminish the importance of the group project on a student’s final grade. The authors believe that the group activity should determine at least 50% of a student’s final grade while the individual activities should determine at least 40% of a student’s final grade and the peer evaluation determines at least 10%.

5. Professors who choose to adopt the team learning format need to be more open minded and accepting of critical student evaluations. Students at the beginning of their academic program are less like to have encountered group activities in the classroom. Therefore, their disappointment with the team learning process is often reflected in their evaluations of the professor. This is to be expected.

6. Professors should be willing to spend more time than usual with their students both in and out of the classroom.

Summary

The purpose of team learning is to promote team cohesiveness and performance while facilitating individual learning. This is crucial to MIS courses where the emphasis is on a project that cannot be completed by students working alone.

The team learning environment provides an opportunity for student to contribute logistical and social support to each other, as well as fostering the development of employer-wanted skills. Therefore, team learning has a positive external for the student by preparing for the business environment in which they will function. However, the immediate benefit to the student is enhanced learning and problem-solving skills. The literature, as well as the authors’ experience, supports this finding.

Team learning, then, is proactive learning as differentiated from passive, which defines the lecture method. In addition, students are required to use two way communications that includes feedback. Success requires student participation, an act we know increases a student’s understanding, comprehension, and retention. In addition, students seem to do better in follow on
courses. It has been the authors’ experience that students seem more satisfied with the course. Of course, having all of these elements operating in the learning environment is what the professor wants.

While team learning is adaptable enough to be modify to meet the unique characteristics of your institution; there are several issues that the authors identify. Generally, the issues fall in to two categories; one deals with the professor and the other the student. Those faculty members embarking on team learning must realize that it does not shorten the workweek for you, but usually lengthens it. A professor’s ability to organize and facilitate becomes crucial for success in the team learning environment. Sometimes all of this may negatively influence the students’ evaluations of the faculty member.

For the student, there is no putting it into neutral as many do during a lecture. If you lack people skills (an important trait for business students), then you might find yourself shunned or outright fired from the team. This same fate may await the “freeloading” student, who wants to ride on the backs of other team members. Finally, it has been the authors’ experience that some individual activity, usually in the form of examinations, must be applied to the team learning process.

In conclusion, the authors have found team learning a challenge to implement, but if you persist to make it work, then you will see the real benefit to the students. Many times, we have had to modify, but each time we saw improvement, and we stuck with it until we achieved our goal of improved student learning.

References