

collaboratively themselves, have developed a matrix and several variations on the business communication report as a team project. Sectioned into problem, group, process, and evaluation design, the matrix can guide instructors through decisions about their group report assignment, considering such factors as their pedagogical goals for the course and the characteristics of their student population.

Tim Krause continues the theme of collaboration among students on team projects but applies that focus to Web site design for non-profit organizations. Specifically, he relies on Lean Six Sigma principles to direct student efforts and on various software programs to help students manage their work, to assist communication among all parties involved, and to keep their projects on schedule.

In the final article, Deborah Scarfino and Carol Roever introduce the Diversity Card Game, based on the Herrmann brain dominance theory, that maps students' preferences for learning and for communicating into one of four distinct quadrants. The authors suggest that the card game not only helps students understand their own and their teammates' preferences but also helps instructors form diverse teams, especially at the beginning of a course before they have gotten to know their students.

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TEACHING TEAMS ABOUT TEAMWORK: PREPARATION, PRACTICE, AND PERFORMANCE REVIEW

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REGARDLESS OF THE justifications we use for team member selection or the techniques preferred for managing team conflict, an often-overlooked yet critically important first step of collaborative

assignments involves teaching teams about teamwork. Prior to working on a team project, students need to practice the collaborative skills required to complete the assignment. Although teaching teams about teamwork is not a new concept (Vik, 2001), students are often left to “sink or swim,” and they mistakenly apply individual work processes to group experiences. Falling under the categories of instructional methodology as well as classroom strategies, concepts related to teaching teams about teamwork provide students with the tools they need to perform well in collaborative assignments. To enhance students’ collaborative skills, teamwork skill instruction should integrate the preparation, practice, and performance review stages of the collaborative process.

Preparing Students for Teamwork

Business communication instructors prepare students to write professional business documents before they expect students to create them on their own. In cases where students struggle with organizational or grammatical elements, they may be offered tutorial work, extra assignments, or practice sets to encourage them to improve their skills. However, the same kind of preparation is not always applied to collaborative skills. Although most business communication textbooks include at least some content on collaborative communication (e.g., forming, storming, norming, performing), instructors should provide additional instruction about the elements of successful teamwork (Ettington & Camp, 2002; McGraw & Tidwell, 2001). If students do not receive instruction about how to improve their teamwork skills, instructors should not be surprised when students perform poorly on assigned collaborative projects.

The importance of an orientation to teamwork in the business communication classroom can be compared to the importance of coaching in team sports. A good athletic team does not simply pick its players and run onto the field without preparation, practice, and performance review. Coaching students throughout the “game” provides the “just-in-time” support they need to apply collaborative skills in a learning environment (Bolton, 1999). Without the preparation that coaching provides, students may fail to apply the process of collaboration and team development to their group assignments

(Holmer, 2001). The content addressed in coaching (i.e., preparation) should be based on the students' needs and the requirements of the collaborative project. Examples may include instruction about learning style differences and effective interactions with divergent styles (Yazici, 2005) as well as training students for active learning experiences (Oitzinger & Kallgren, 2004). After these concepts are introduced, they should be practiced.

Practicing Successful Team Collaboration

Students need safe learning environments in which to practice their communication skills before they are expected to perform and be assessed (Holmer, 2001). Prichard, Bizo, and Stratford (2006) suggest that safe practice can be established by ensuring that team membership remains consistent from practice to performance. Changing the membership of student groups can eliminate the benefits of preteam instruction because of variable nuances, including differences in learning styles and leadership. In addition, Stone and Bailey (2007) studied students' application of learned teamwork skills to their collaborative experiences and found that "outcome expectancies affected behavioral intentions to use team skills in a significant way" (p. 258). If students are prepared and practice their team skills, they are more likely to effectively apply their skills in group assignments.

To practice successful collaboration, teams should be coached in the areas that best support the assigned collaborative project. A simple survey or class discussion about what students dislike about group work can reveal specific weaknesses. For example, many students complain that team meetings are unproductive, that some members do not participate, and that they end up rushing to complete the project by the deadline. The following in-class activities allow students to practice and model effective collaboration:

- *Focus attention on the purpose of the project:* In small groups, ask students to brainstorm methods of refocusing a group discussion. Ask students to role-play reactions to statements and list the methods in order of effectiveness.
- *Encourage participation and positive collaboration:* Address active listening, questioning, and restating techniques to ensure that students

participate and provide input during group discussions. Encourage students to engage in positive collaboration among team members and referee any unconstructive feedback or personality conflicts.

- *Establish a timeline:* Demonstrate how to create a timeline by working backward from a deadline. Discuss delegation and prioritization techniques to ensure a balanced yet productive group experience.
- *Keep the project on track:* Although individual team members may work on separate tasks, students should be coached to schedule team meetings throughout the project to discuss progress, encourage group feedback, and share ideas. They should also be coached to accept new ideas and revisions to the plan that enhance the project (rather than perceiving changes as negative aspects that prolong the team endeavor).
- *Negotiate conflicts:* Ask students to role-play the differences between affective and cognitive conflict and practice impartial methods to resolve any problems.

These suggestions outline just a few of the many skills and techniques students can practice prior to a collaborative project that may facilitate better group performance.

Reviewing Performance and Revising

During group practice, both formative and summative feedback should be provided to allow students the opportunity to review and revise their performance before their group work is graded (Holmer, 2001; Johnston, Knight, & Miller, 2007). Students use the feedback to reflect on their performance. Self-reflection is a method of performance review that can provide students with valuable perspectives (McGraw & Tidwell, 2001). To help students focus their reflection, provide targeted questions. However, avoid questions that cannot be measured, such as, “Was I a valuable member of the team?” Specific questions should be used to help students review and reflect on their performance:

1. How much information, analysis, and interpretation did I provide to the team?
2. Did I communicate my ideas even if they conflicted with someone else’s?
3. Did I participate in the implementation of a timeline? Did I meet deadlines?

4. Did I facilitate the decision-making process? Or did I just go with the flow?

Students' answers to these questions (and others that relate specifically to the group assignment) will help them determine how they can improve their collaborative skills. If deemed feasible, ask students to share their reflections with their teammates to confirm perspectives and determine additional revisions.

Summary

Focusing on preparation, practice, and performance review to teach teams about teamwork provides a well-supported and effective methodology that both enhances students' collaborative skills and contributes to an effective team project experience. Preparation includes aspects of coaching to introduce and explain effective group processes. After students have a foundational understanding of the collaborative skills, they practice these skills in a collaborative, yet supportive, environment. Practice involves applying the skills to in-class activities that are monitored and discussed. Finally, when students are given the opportunity to review their collaborative performance and revise their strategies prior to an actual graded activity, they are more likely to be effective team members. Preparation, practice, and performance review can help teach teams about teamwork.

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DESIGNING A SUCCESSFUL GROUP-REPORT EXPERIENCE

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REPORT ASSIGNMENTS AND collaborative assignments can both be fraught with risk. Report projects, if not well planned, can be too simple (which causes lack of motivation) or too complex (which causes frustration) and/or can leave students wondering what they are supposed to have learned—all while creating a major grading burden for the instructor. Poorly planned group projects can cause similar difficulties, with the added danger of creating interpersonal stress in the student groups.

Yet for many reasons, the report assignment is the perfect choice for the collaborative project. Because of its extra length and complexity, the report enables several students to contribute meaningful research, writing, and document design decisions to one product or a related set of products. If the project goes well, each student will learn important lessons both about report writing and about teamwork.

To maximize the likelihood that the project will go well, the instructor must think through a wide range of variables and decide, based upon his or her learning objectives, what the features of the project will be. To assist with this process, we have generated a

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