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Sustaining teamwork and interaction in higher education

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Interactions, negotiation, role diversity, and debates are vital for learning and development, specifically in social sciences. Our ability to ensure that these elements are sustained will define the success of digitalisation in education. Otherwise, it will not be possible to prepare students for work life and help them develop relevant competencies. In this article, I argue that teamwork is vital for developing work-life competencies despite its challenges, and there are ways to tackle most of the associated challenges.

The importance of teamwork and interaction for learning and development

Education in general and higher education in specific is evolving, moving away; from a traditional teacher centred approach to learner centred approach, from subject teaching to constructing knowledge collaboratively. Students have a more active role in the process of their learning.

Changes in education, teaching, and learning also stem from the discussions on world views and beliefs about knowing and knowledge (epistemological beliefs). In social sciences, a shift from knowledge being objective and transferable to knowledge being subjective and socially constructed led to models like Social Constructive Model in education. It increased the support for collaboration in creating knowledge. All educational changes aim to make learning more effective and profound and transform students into critical thinkers, reflective and self-regulated learners, and self-authors.

Research in the field found collaborative learning as one way to engage students. (Smith et al. 2005). Another justification for collaborative learning is the objective of preparing students for work-life. According to Kirchner (2012), higher education must address competitive challenges, prepare students for the modern workplace, and move beyond the status quo. Teamwork skills are essential for graduates of business schools, but many institutions need more tools and strategies to assess these skills (Loughry, M. L., Ohland, M. W. & Woehr, D. J. 2014).

Skills developed in teamwork are soft skills, which are more challenging to train and measure than technical skills. Today's youngsters may lack social and face-to-face interaction skills due to their heavy use of technology and virtual interaction (Loughry et al. 2014). The Job Outlook 2011 survey, conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers, found that the ability to work in a team structure was the highest-rated skill that recruiters are seeking in college graduates.

A survey by Calloway School of Business and Accountancy of Wake Forest University (2004, in Loughry et al. 2014)) placed teamwork skills third in importance after communication and leadership skills. Other essential soft skills listed by the survey results

were adaptability, the ability to deal with ambiguity, people and task management skills, and self-management skills (Loughry et al. 2014, pp. 6-7). These are all soft skills developed collaboratively.

One reason for the growing importance of collaborative soft skills is the search for effective and efficient work through lean management. Organisations increasingly use work processes and control systems that rely more on lateral coordination than close supervision and central coordination (Loughry et al. 2014, p7). In a global and highly versatile economic environment, collaboration is often required within and across teams, organisations, and industries (Salas, Sims & Burke 2005). Teams, work committees, lateral and bilateral organisations, strategic alliances, and joint ventures require people to work together without hierarchy to achieve common goals. Working together effectively requires managers and employees who have teamwork skills.

Higher education institutions that aim to develop these skills choose collaborative learning and teaching as a method (Loyd, Kern & Thompson 2005; Smith et al. 2005). Some of the learning and development goals achieved through working in teams are leadership development (Raelin 2006; Bergman, J. Z., Rentsch, J. R., Small, E. E., Davenport, S. W. & Bergman, S. M. 2012; Volz-Peacock, M., Carson, B. & Marquardt, M. 2016), emotional intelligence (Moriarty & Buckley 2003), and displaying better teamwork behaviours (Deeter-Schmelz, Kennedy & Ramsey 2002).

The latest learning and development models propose that learning is a social process constructed through social interaction (Kraiger 2008). This means that people learn more effectively if they learn something in a way that allows them to interact with others. By implementing teamwork methods, educational institutions could help students more effectively and, at the same time, prepare them for work life by enhancing their soft skills in collaboration and teamwork.

However, teamwork has always been challenging despite the advantages and the evidence found in the literature for its merits. There is a risk that some educators will give in to the challenges or fail to support teams, especially in virtual platforms.

Challenges in teamwork

Although team learning methods are widely used, industry representatives report teamwork skills needing improvement. This situation could be partly due to a lack of proper guidance and support for effective teamwork by teachers who use team learning methods, which Vik (2001) calls a sink-or-swim approach.

Providing opportunities for working in teams is essential, but more is needed for developing skills. Forming teams right, creating a positive environment and trust, creating a feedback culture, and individual accountability are some of the critical factors for a positive teamwork experience (Ger 2023). A lack of these factors may result in resistance to teamwork.

Some of the challenges for teamwork or in teamwork could be

- straight resistance due to a prior negative experience or efficacy issue,
- dividing the work between students and completing pieces independently,
- too much focus on the performance rather than learning,
- social loafing/free riding,
- lack of interest,
- lack of interpersonal skills.

Education needs to do a better job of closing the gap between the industry needs and the skills of future employees. Higher education must address competitive challenges, prepare students for the modern workplace, and move beyond the status quo (Kirchner 2012). According to Banta (2002), the assessment was a tool for such continuous improvement, yet it has yet to achieve its rightful place as a process for transformation.

Peer evaluation turned upside-down: A transformative learning experience

There is a need for synchronisation of education and assessment to help institutions to close the gap more effectively. What could educational institutions and instructors do to improve student task engagement and teamwork skills? How can we increase the motivation for teamwork by enhancing its fairness and thus achieve better learning and prepare students to work life more effectively? Not all students have authentic motivation, interest and ability to learn. Additionally, assessment cannot be teacher centred and have a top-down approach when education is learner centred. Students are supposed to play an active role in their learning and development.

Could self and peer evaluations be turned upside down and used for better engagement and improved teamwork skills instead of for fair grading purposes only? Can teachers, by empowering and involving students in criteria setting, which enables them to set goals and tie the criteria to their goals, help them internalise motivation and achieve better task involvement and development of teamwork skills?

Past practices at the Porvoo Campus of Haaga-Helia UAS prove that turning peer evaluation upside down by engaging students in planning the evaluation criteria yields positive results. Peer evaluations create accountability for teammates and provide an incentive for displaying good interpersonal skills and contributing effort to help the team achieve its goals (Bacon 2005). In addition to creating accountability, peer evaluations make students aware of what their peers expect from them and how they perceive them, which can lead to greater self-awareness and facilitate learning (Mayo, Kakarika, Pastor & Brutus 2012).

There is no doubt about the importance of preparing students for the complexities of work life. After all, we want to open doors to worklife. Teamwork and face-to-face interaction are some of the most effective methods for doing so. By using proper and fair peer assessment techniques and engaging students to set assessment criteria right from the start, we can overcome some significant obstacles and achieve our mission. What we can not afford to do is keep throwing the baby with the bath water.

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