Skills and spills: tips for effective learning teams

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Abstract
Since 1994 the author has been designing a template, applicable across the curriculum, for delivering student centred, interactive learning in a self-directed, self-managing team format. The educational basis and management strategies underpinning such an approach were developed with the support of a University of Wollongong Strategic Development Grant, and the model was successfully trialed this year in the Faculty of Law core compulsory subject of Torts, meeting or exceeding objectives in terms of student learning outcomes on both substantive and process criteria. The pilot consisted of seventy six students, all at least in their second year of Law, organised for the semester into seventeen teams ranging in number from three to six individuals. Teamwork was compulsory, and each team member received the same mark for assignments prepared jointly. Assessment related both to substantive (legal) and process (teamwork) tasks. Normal seminar classes were held for two of the four timetabled hours per week, and teams were expected to meet as necessary outside class, not less than one other two hour period weekly. Many of these team meetings were conducted under formal observation, either by teaching staff and/or other student teams, the observation reportS forming part of the final assessment. Readings were prescribed each week for both law and teamwork, and the legal material was organised around a series of weekly modules consisting of ten to fifteen questions, problems, hypotheticals, etc. Various specific team tasks, not all directly assessable, were set. An introductory, one-day workshop was held which included outdoor and indoor exercises and activities related to teamwork. Findings from the pilot will be incorporated into the design of an extended trial over three subjects, planned for 1997, presently the subject of a CAUT grant application for two year funding. Implications for student learning, Faculty resources, and academic staff development will be considered.
Teams and teamwork have been a major theme in industry, especially in the USA, for the last two to three decades. Surveys report figures as high as 80 per cent for U.S. businesses using some form of teamwork. Interest is now strong in Australia and the UK as well, although higher education has been slow to adopt the teamwork concept.

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Background

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Context

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The old-style exclusive emphasis on domain-specific knowledge is an approach universities can no longer afford. In many fields of study, such technical knowledge will be obsolete by the time the student graduates. The ability to undertake continuous independent learning throughout one's life and career will be a key survival skill, together with attitudes supportive of ongoing learning and high levels of proficiency in the requisite skills. Capacity to manage change constructively will be just as vital. Flexibility, well developed problem solving,
analytical, and lateral thinking abilities, along with other
generic skills, will be mandatory. Awareness of the process
of learning, in this instance, learning in teams, is the key to
transferability, both within and outside the workplace, of
generic skills gained from the team experience.

The learning teams model
The teams model offers the student increased
opportunities for participation and interaction, thus
promoting deep learning and improved engagement with
the subject matter. At the same time it conserves teaching
resources, utilising peer assisted learning techniques, and
promotes learner independence, reflective practice, and
lifelong learning skills. Extensive generic and
interpersonal skills training is an essential feature. Many
studies document the high correlation between well
developed 'people skills' and employability. Use of
authentic assessment further enhances learning outcomes.
The teamwork model presented here must be understood
as a teaching/learning methodology which aims to develop
flexible learning skills in students, and promote flexible
delivery by academic staff, through the use of teamwork.
As it is a methodology, integration into substantive
courses is seen by the author as highly desirable, although
the model is capable of standing alone as a skills subject.

What are learning teams?
The most useful approach to definition is to consider the
presence or absence of various qualities. For present
purposes, a learning team may be defined as:

an intact and cohesive social system, formed for
the purpose of deliberate learning within an
institutional context, and possessing the following
attributes:

• clear boundaries
• shared leadership
• individual and mutual accountability
• specific and common team purpose or mission
• collective work products
• open ended discussion and active problem
  solving
• direct performance measures
• interdependence
• differentiated member roles
• complementary skills
• definite task(s) to perform
• operation within an organisational or larger
  social system context

Thus it is clear that seminar groups, the basis of the 'small
group' teaching method, are not teams, even when
working as sub-groups in the form of dyads, triads, buzz
groups, syndicates, mooting and role play groups, and so
on. The essence of the distinction lies in the longer term,
more committed, focused and cohesive nature of the
team, and above all, in the concepts of interdependence
and accountability inherent in teamwork.

How do I create effective learning
tools?
• Characteristics
• Composition
• Size

Characteristics of effective teams
• delineated criteria for success
• common commitment and mutual accountability
• balanced planned composition
• shared purpose, clearly articulated and developed
  by the team itself
• specific and appropriate performance goals and
  clear deadlines
• agreed strategy, rules, and procedures
• clearly defined work products
• clear and open communication
• constructive conflict
• shared/rotating leadership
• appropriate expertise, training and skills
• suitable reward / assessment system
• adequate resources and support

Effective team performance has more to do with the
creation of enabling conditions, that is, conditions which
support effective performance, than it has to do with
managing group behaviour. The importance of this,
borne out in the Law Faculty pilot study, is that there is no
one way to achieve success with teams, rather it is for each
team to develop its own methodology and modus
operandi, working within clear guidelines and structures,
as set out above.

Composition of effective teams
Teams can be selected in various ways, for example,
randomly from a class list; according to convenience
factors such as geography and timetabling; self selected on
the basis of friendship and personality factors; academic
criteria; and so on.

In our pilot we elected to allow students to determine the
composition of their own teams, for a number of reasons. Chief among these was the fact that a very substantial component of the final grade resulted from team (joint) assignments, and in the context of a compulsory and experimental model, it was felt that this measure of learner control was imperative. Self selection had obvious advantages in terms of both logistics and equity.

As a safeguard, students were asked to organise themselves into First Stage teams, which worked together on a practice basis for four weeks, completing one minor assignment, and then disbanded in favour of Second Stage teams. None of the teams opted for personnel changes at this point.

Whether students had known their team mates or not prior to working together appeared to bear no correlation to the team’s success. Students reported in both cases that they felt high levels of obligation and responsibility to the team, either because team members were friends or because they were previously unknown.

Size of Teams
There is no single correct size, although very large teams should be avoided. In deciding upon a suitable number, the nature and duration of the interaction, nature of task, and logistical factors such as meeting spaces and times need to be considered. Total student numbers and ratio to supervising staff is also important. Our teams ranged in size from three to six, all suitable sizes, although larger teams experienced more logistical difficulties and frustration. Size appeared unrelated to quality of outcome in our sample.

Training and skills

Skills
The repertoire of skills we identified as necessary for effective teams is equally necessary for effective individuals. These can be grouped as:

1. Team and interaction skills
   • communication skills
   • planning skills, including setting of aims, objectives, and goals, devising and implementing strategies to achieve these, setting priorities
   • managing and using conflict
   • leadership
   • meeting skills, including record keeping
   • team roles and responsibilities, ability to value differences among team members
   • evaluating individual and team performance, both own team and others, designing criteria to evaluate product and process, constructive feedback techniques
   • work flow and process analysis, incorporating reflective practice
   • personal management skills (time management, development of a win/win attitude)

2. Problem-solving and decision making skills
There are numerous standard problem solving methodologies which can be taught. Since our objectives included promotion of creativity and lateral thinking, we opted for De Bono’s ‘Six Hat Thinking’ techniques, and also screened a commercial training video featuring John Cleese. Mind mapping was used extensively to encourage conceptual linkages.

Training and reflective practice.
Providing learners with a ‘need to know’ gives the impetus to develop the learning, whether content or process, necessary for the project. Combined with training in reflective practice, which promotes critical exploration of experience at emotional as well as cognitive levels, resulting in the articulation of principles to guide further action, the ‘learning by doing’ or experiential model is apposite.

Training integrated into classroom activities in the form of role plays, modelling, de-briefing and reporting on team meetings, setting of specific goals for following meetings, practicing particular skills under observation and receiving feedback from the whole class, pairing teams for short tasks, and so on, is ideal. However, there are serious time constraints, given that formal class time is already halved, and substantive content must be thoroughly covered. Our students were expected to read the theoretical material supplied on teamwork each week, and acquire the skills largely through out-of-class team practice and completion of set tasks.

Assessment
Assessment was both summative and formative, much of the formative work being diagnostic in purpose. Initially an overanxious concern to ensure no substantive losses occurred led us to require an unreasonably heavy workload of written answers to module questions, weekly journal entries, and detailed minutes of all meetings. This was cut back in response to vigorous student complaint, and a number of options introduced. The final assessment scheme was a mixture of teamwork and legal tasks,
including a reflective journal or other reflective piece. Teaching staff need to be aware of the University’s Code of Practice (Assessment), currently under review as regards group assessment. Interestingly, despite vehement opposition to the initially compulsory nature of the team assessment in some student quarters, only one team of three opted to withdraw from the team format entirely after the first assignment, although several other individuals had withdrawn partially by the latter stages of the semester.

Cautions and tips

It must be acknowledged that there are risks associated with any innovation, particularly in the area of loss of comfort zones, that is, resistance from students and staff. Learner managed learning in any form is likely to be perceived as threatening initially, certainly by students operating from a dependent paradigm. For academic staff, learning to devolve control to students is difficult, requiring high levels of trust. Our experience of making classes optional demonstrated to us just how threatening this devolution can seem, and is one aspect which will be modified for the extended trial.

Competitive, individualistic behaviours, imbalances caused by personality, ability, cultural, gender, philosophical, attitudinal or other factors, confusion, and process losses, are all risks. The problem of freeloading often experienced in group work can be largely avoided by designing the assessment scheme with plenty of checks and balances, particularly team observations, learning journals, and regular progress reports. Staff vigilance and constant monitoring is of the utmost importance, and timely action where necessary. In one case a student was removed forcibly by the Course Co-ordinator because the team was unable to resolve problems of persistent absence and non-contribution.

Learning contracts, drafted at the beginning of semester by each team separately, and reviewed periodically, are very helpful in clarifying member expectations and obligations, and forstalling or managing conflict. Minimally, these should contain clear statements as to team goals and objectives; frequency, duration, and other details of meetings; rules of behaviour; required levels of attendance, participation and contribution, including expectations about leadership; procedures for resolution or management of conflict, including sanctions; procedures for decision making; standards expected as to quality, quantity and timeliness; provision for review of the contract; and should be signed by all members.

Careful record keeping by staff, including observation notes of individual progress and contribution, and adequate attention to practical matters such as availability of sufficient meeting rooms appropriate for discussion (disruption in the library can be problematic) is important.

It cannot be emphasised too strongly that appropriate skills training and monitoring is crucial, and that teamwork will not simply ‘just happen’ by putting students into groups. Strong leadership from academic staff, based on a deep commitment and clear vision, is mandatory.

Teamwork checklist

To summarise, the following is offered:

- relate all activities to learning objectives
- ideal size 3-6
- be aware of learning styles/use the differences
- appropriate skills training essential
- include a balance of individual components
- thorough advance planning is crucial
- pay attention to process as well as product
- ensure assessment rewards team behaviours
- be absolutely certain of your own goals and role as facilitator
- offer strong leadership and support
- be prepared for some resistance - look to your own support networks
- innovation and teamwork are not for the faint hearted!
- enjoy yourself!

This article draws lightly on a paper, presented at the 50th Conference of the Australasian Law Teachers’ Association in 1995, prior to conducting the pilot study. An extended version, containing a detailed survey of the theory and literature, will be published shortly.

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