Do What Works:
Using the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning to Improve Student Engagement in Group Projects

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Abstract

The scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) invites professionals to examine their own classroom practice, record their successes and failures, and ultimately share their experiences so that others may reflect on their findings and build upon teaching and learning processes (Hutchings and Schulman 1999). SoTL…involves systematic study of teaching and/or learning and the public sharing and review of such work through presentations, performance, or publications (McKinney 2006).

During the 2019-2020 academic year I was awarded a fellowship from the Davis Educational Foundation. I participated in a faculty learning community (FLC) with an interdisciplinary team of scholars to examine our teaching practices and how they impact student attitudes towards group project assignments. Our Collaborative FLC was comprised of a chair and nine professors, with professors from five of the seven colleges at our university. Members of the FLC shared their classroom experiences with one another to learn tactics and practices that could be adapted in each of our classes.

For my class, Introduction to Performing Arts Management, I was interested in exploring the "What Works" question: will allowing students to determine their role within a group project based on their preferences and experiences lead to greater engagement and satisfaction in collaborative efforts? The FLC also explored the "What Is" question: do students in self-forming groups express greater satisfaction on group projects than students who are sorted into groups by the professor?

To gather data on student attitudes regarding group project participation, we created a pre-project survey comprised of Likert scale questions (quantitative) and a post-project survey that included both Likert scale and open-ended questions (qualitative).

Analysis of my class' data suggests that student autonomy in selecting their individual roles within groups had little impact on their reports of group performance satisfaction. Students who formed their groups had increased reports of overall group satisfaction. However, a larger question that went unanswered was: how prepared were students to perform collaborative work based on prior education or training in my class or other classes?

Keywords: Davis Educational Foundation, collaborative work, group projects, SoTL, faculty learning communities, music industry education, performing arts education

Background

During the 2019-2020 academic year I was awarded a fellowship from the Davis Educational Foundation. The Davis Educational Foundation grant supports faculty learning communities (FLC) that seek to integrate high impact practices (HIP) or essential learning outcomes (ELO) in collaborative work, oral communication, or written communication into new or existing courses. I participated in the Collaborative FLC with an interdisciplinary team of scholars to examine our teaching practices and how they impact student attitudes towards collaborative work on group project assignments.

Our FLC was comprised of a chair and nine professors, with professors from five of the seven colleges at the University of Hartford to ensure cross-disciplinary dialogue. Members of the FLC shared their classroom experiences with one another to learn tactics and practices that could be adapted to each of our classes. The objective of the FLC

activities was to use the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) to inform instructors of effective pedagogical methods and possible impediments to students achieving essential learning outcomes in their respective courses.

Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

SoTL invites professionals to examine their own classroom practice, record their successes and failures, and ultimately share their experiences so that others may reflect on their findings and build upon teaching and learning processes (Hutchings and Schulman 1999). SoTL…involves systematic study of teaching and/or learning and the public sharing and review of such work through presentations, performance, or publications (McKinney 2006).

The Davis grant supported faculty recipients in the design of a SoTL project to study effectiveness of new or revised course activities, assignments, assessments, and/or syllabi. Our FLC was tasked with introducing the high impact practices (HIP) of Collaborative Assignments or Projects into our courses. In order for a particular assignment or assessment to be considered a HIP, the University of Hartford requires it to be embedded in a credit-bearing course, count for at least twenty percent of the final grade in the course, and present student teams with a real-world problem to solve. Students must also evaluate each other's performance as team members and present their projects or findings within the course or in some public forum.

Our FLC used the definition of teamwork as described by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) in the Teamwork Value Rubric. The AACU rubric defines teamwork as behaviors under the control of individual team members (effort they put into team tasks, their manner of interacting with others on the team, and the quantity and quality of contributions they make to team discussions.) We pulled teamwork assessment tools and resources from ITP Metrics at https://www.itpmetrics.com as referred to in "Team Dynamics Feedback for Post-secondary Student Learning Teams" (O'Neill, Deacon, Gibbard, Larson, Hoffart, Smith, and Donia 2018).

Scope of Inquiry

The taxonomy of SoTL questions generally falls into four lines of inquiry. "What works" questions seek data regarding the relative effectiveness of different pedagogical approaches. "What is" questions seek to describe features of a particular event or phenomenon. "What would it look like" questions explore vision of possibilities. Theory building questions seek to build new conceptual frameworks that lead to new inquiry questions (Hutchings 2000).

The FLC as a group explored the "what is" question, "Do students in self-forming groups express greater satisfaction on group projects than students who are sorted into groups by the professor?" For my class, Introduction to Perform-

ing Arts Management, I explored the "What Works" question, "Will allowing students to determine their role within a group project based on their preferences and experiences lead to greater engagement and satisfaction in collaborative efforts?"

Scope of Study

Our study consisted of an attitude survey of 150 students across nine class that were offered in fall 2019. Students participated in pre- and post-teamwork surveys administrations.

The courses involved were:

MUM 120	Introduction to Performing Arts Management
M 110	Modeling with Elementary Functions
POL 390	Buying Global Change
MGT 310	Management and Organizational Behavior
M 140	Precalculus
BIO 352	Molecular Cell Biology
ECE 361	Electronics Fundamentals
CS 391	Wireless Networks
UIST 190	The Martian Way

My Class project, Introduction to Performing Arts Management, is a 100-level course that serves as the prerequisite to all subsequent department courses. Thirteen of the twenty students enrolled were first-year students. Students were spread across four performing arts majors including Music Management, Performing Arts Management, Music Production and Technology, and Technical Theater. Students were nearly evenly split among eleven men and nine women. Of the twenty students, only one was clearly identifiable as a person of color. However, as racial data was not specifically collected, it is possible that there may have been additional students who identified as being of color.

Students were arranged into five groups of four members. Three groups were student-formed and two groups were randomly assigned by the instructor. Student groups researched the creation of a company, product, or service. The groups were responsible for explaining and demonstrating how the four major functions of management: planning, organizing, leading, and controlling would be researched and implemented in their proposed startups.

All groups determined their own business ideas, individual workloads, and extra-class group work schedules. All students were required to provide feedback data on their group peers and their own performances. Groups prepared Keynote or PowerPoint presentations explaining their business concept, organizational management structure, environmental scanning results, strategic positioning statement, and organizational goal planning. Group projects were presented to the entire class during the final two days of the

semester. The groups determined how they would split or share the work during the class presentations.

Methodology

Participation in the survey was voluntary and students were given the opportunity to opt out if they chose. Although the assignments involved were graded, students were not graded on their participation, or lack thereof, in the survey itself. Students were given surveys by professors other than the professor for the course in which they were enrolled.

The teamwork measurement surveys administered to students consisted of eleven items to solicit data that would help us better understand student perceptions of teamwork on collaborative projects. There were two surveys administered during the semester. A pre-collaborative project survey measured students' attitudes regarding their most recent prior collaborative class projects (in previous classes and semesters) with quantitative Likert scale questions. A post-collaborative project survey measured students' attitudes regarding the then current class collaborative project with quantitative Likert scale questions and qualitative, open-ended questions as well.

The FLC agreed on eleven survey questions which worked across disciplines. Ten of the eleven items (all except question no. 8) hung together in a single construct measuring teamwork processes. The survey questions were:

1. We divided our time and efforts equitably
2. We knew exactly what was expected of each other
3. Team members encouraged a "we are in it together" attitude as they negotiated their differences

4. Team members treated conflict as a mutual problem to solve
5. Our team members coordinated our activities with one another
6. I could rely on those with whom I worked in this group
7. Team members listened carefully to each other's opinions
8. My instructor expected me to assess myself and my team members for the collaborative project
9. I was comfortable receiving feedback from and providing feedback to my team members
10. Even when we disagreed, we communicated respect for each other
11. My teams' members will provide reliable feedback regarding my performance in the team

We used the five-level Likert items ordinal data ranking system of:

1. Strongly Disagree
2. Disagree
3. Neutral
4. Agree
5. Strongly Agree

Quantitative results

We conducted a Wilcoxon Signed Rank test to compare pre- and post-administration for individual items. The Wilcoxon Signed Rank test showed that there was a significant difference between pre- and post-scores for items 3, 4, 6, 7, and 11 on the teamwork measure.

	1. post We divided our time and efforts equitably. - 1. We divided our time and efforts equitably.	2. post We knew exactly what was expected of each other. - 2. We knew exactly what was expected of each other.	3. post Team members encouraged a 'we are in it together' attitude as they negotiated their differences. - 3. Team members encouraged a 'we are in it together' attitude as they negotiated their differences.	4.post Team members treated conflict as a mutual problem to solve. - 4. Team members treated conflict as a mutual problem to solve.	5. post Our team members coordinated our activities with one another. - 5. Our team members coordinated our activities with one another.	6. post I could rely on those with whom I worked in this group. - 6. I could rely on those with whom I worked in this group.	7. post Team members listened carefully to each other's opinions. - 7. Team members listened carefully to each other's opinions.	9. post I was comfortable receiving feedback from and providing feedback to my team members. - 9. I was comfortable receiving feedback from and providing feedback to my team members.	10. post Even when we disagreed, we communicated respect for each other. - 10. Even when we disagreed, we communicated respect for each other.	11. post My teams' members will provide reliable feedback regarding my performance in the team - 11. My teams' members will provide reliable feedback regarding my performance in the team
Z	-1.930[b]	-1.175[b]	-3.408[b]	-3.464[b]	-.954[b]	-3.321[b]	-3.247[b]	-1.527[b]	-.991[b]	-3.536[b]
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.054	.240	.001	.001	.340	.001	.001	.127	.322	.000

Quantitative Z-Score Results

Question	Pre-Survey Avg	Post-Survey Avg	Difference
1	3.84	3.89	0.05
2	4.01	4.07	0.06
3	3.73	3.9	0.17
4	3.82	4.05	0.23
5	3.98	3.99	0.01
6	3.72	3.95	0.23
7	4.03	4.21	0.18
9	4.15	4.24	0.09
10	4.26	4.23	-0.03
11	3.91	4.14	0.23
	185 Responses	164 Responses	

Quantitative Averages

Interpretation of Quantitative Data

Statistically significant higher scores on fifty percent of survey questions tend to indicate greater student satisfaction with their most recent collaborative project (the projects from the then current fall 2019 semester).

Although students were not asked to compare their experiences between the two teamwork projects from the pre- and post-surveys, some possible reasons for the increased satisfaction rates on the most recent project may include:

- Recency of current project provided more concrete examples and data for students to consider
- Students may have paid more attention to details since they were aware of survey project
- Students may have expended more effort since they were aware of survey project
- Perhaps this was simply a more satisfying project

Interpretation of Qualitative Data

Students provided open-ended feedback on the post-project survey. Students provided self-evaluations and peer feedback with the understanding that only the instructor would see the responses and the data would not be shared with the other group members. Qualitative results were not shared with professors until after the final grading of the class to avoid any influence in the assignment grading.

Qualitative feedback tended to be more or less critical along the two lines of group make-up. Members of self-selected groups tended to evaluate their peers more favorably. Members of self-selected groups were more likely to use broad approval terms such as "great job" and "team player" when assessing their peers. They were also more likely to use the same descriptive evaluation (blanket terms) for each team member of the group. Members of self-selected groups tended to discuss the work habits much more than individual personality traits of their peers.

Members of instructor-selected groups tended to evaluate their peers less favorably. They tended to use more specific and critical terms for each group member. Criticisms more often focused on specific habits or personality traits of their peers when compared to evaluations in the self-selected groups. Members of instructor-selected groups discussed work habits of their peers in about equal instances as they discussed individual personality traits.

Although students were not asked about their perceptions of being in self-selected or instructor-selected groups, some possible reasons for the differences in their qualitative responses may be:

- Some members in self-selected groups were familiar with one another
- Self-selected group members may feel more responsible for their choices
- Lack of interpersonal familiarity may have increased implicit biases among members in instructor-selected groups

Analysis

Overall, students expressed greater satisfaction with group member performances on their latest collaborative project from the then current fall 2019 semester. Analysis of my class' data suggests that students who formed their own groups had increased reports of overall group satisfaction. Reviewing the discrepancies in qualitative responses between the self-selected and instructor-selected groups led me to an additional inquiry: how prepared were students to perform collaborative work based on prior education or teamwork training either in my class or prior classes? Although students are often asked or required to work in groups or teams for class assignments, it is not so apparent that instructors give them the training or guidance necessary to be successful in collaborative settings.

Real-world collaborations often form more similarly to the instructor-selected groups where participants are put together in teams with little to no input as to who their partners will be. Nonetheless, members of professional teams are expected to successfully navigate differences in opinion, experience, race, gender, age, and seniority in order to complete business tasks. If we expect our students to be successful and satisfied in group or team environments, how can we properly train and prepare them to collaborate?

I've identified a couple of pedagogical techniques which I plan to employ starting in spring 2021 classes. In the introductory course, I will teach a collaborative module prior to the group exercise. This lecture will focus on teamwork concepts and not necessarily on any performing arts management principles. I will also build collaboration skills as-

sessments into the exercise itself where students will take interval breaks to review collaborative practices in the context of their current projects. The final strategy I plan to employ will take some time to put into practice since it will require a curriculum change. Students in our Performing Arts Management program are required to take Management and Organizational Behavior, but not typically until their junior year of study. I plan to require courses in group management and conflict resolution earlier in the degree program.

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Marcus Thomas is an educator and entertainment attorney who is also trained as a screenwriter and publicist. During his twenty-five-year career, he has maintained a boutique entertainment law practice and held several in-house positions with entertainment companies including a major record label, major-affiliated music publisher, and the nation's largest education music print publisher.

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