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Student Accountability in Online Team Projects

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Abstract

Teams are an important functional business tool used to solve problems, and, as businesses become more globalized, virtual teams are becoming the norm. Today, between 50% and 80% of all U.S organizations are incorporating the use of virtual teams (Germain, 2011). This shift has created a need to build more effective teams and for universities to educate students on how to become more effective contributors to the virtual team environment (Gilson, Maynard, & Bergiel, 2013). With all teams, trust has proven to be an effective motivator and this is even truer in the online world (Anson & Goodman, 2013). Thus, researchers are exploring instructional strategies to address student accountability, believing that accountability and communication protocols drive trust. This paper will focus on how instructional design can influence student accountability within the virtual online classroom, and it will describe a method of instruction to effectively teach team collaboration.

Student Accountability in Online Team Projects

Global teams are quickly becoming the norm; between 50% and 80% of all U.S organizations use teams (Germain, 2011). Globalization has created the need to resort to the cost-effective approach virtual teams provide. Often, teams are found to be made up of departments in different countries and time zones, and they are populated with diverse cultural representation. They include an infinite number of different processes, consist of region-specific challenges, and have variable market demands. Within each team, the challenges are unique, thus creating successful virtual teams is no easy task. Effective teams tend to be those made up of individuals who have worked with one another before, but today, managers thrust teams together with little preparation and with members who have little understanding of each other (Wesner & Hobgood, 2012; Chen, Wu, Ma, & Knight, 2011; Germain, 2011).

In a recent conference attended by college professors, several students were invited to share their student experiences. Within their address, they pleaded with the group to remove all group assignments "at least until you figure out how to fairly grade each student's individual contributions" (Glenn, 2009, para.1). It is a common instructional practice – setting up teams to create an engaging environment and to develop collaborative skills, all for the purpose of supporting employer needs to develop graduates with these skills.

Highly Effective Global Teams

Effective global teams start with a vision and clear outcomes, and a leader who communicates these continuously. Leaders of effective teams take responsibility for the team's results, openly discuss conflict in a non-personalized manner, and communicate work horizontally rather than vertically. Consequently, communicating the vision and working toward that vision has worked for served leaders well (Guttman, 2013).

Literature points to specific qualities inherent within high-performing teams. Leaders set this tone by creating alignment that defines roles regionally, as well as individually. Rules of engagement are also well-defined and incorporated into the team's charter. These rules support decision-making protocols that balance team emotions and utilize communication to end potential conflict (Guttman, 2013).

Getting to this point, leaders address a number of questions that arise in all team environments. As teams form, they will meet to address common challenges found within the problem that the team was formed to solve. They will identify gaps and explore ways to address a fix. Team members will (a) develop work processes around the team's common strategy and vision; (b) consider how the team can take a broad view approach with an enterprise mindset; (c) challenge the silo mindset and create processes that form a more integrative approach to problem solving; and (d) create an operating agreement that clarifies individual roles, responsibilities, and milestones for deliverables (Guttman, 2013).

The 'Trust' Factor in Teams

The attributes of high-performing virtual business teams can be reconstructed into successful online learning teams within graduate coursework. Most research has identified a single outstanding component that ensured team success. That single trait was "trust" (Germain, 2011). Since the turn of the century, global teams have been created to address problems found in challenging new markets, but they have also underscored the need for leaders to improve their understanding of how to lead these new virtual teams. A positive, rational notion to today's virtual teams lies in their ability to address new market realities and to adhere to budget constraints due to less travel being required, but leaders have not yet figured out how these positive elements can balance the culturally diverse challenges that make up these new global teams. This has created team cohesiveness issues leaders are now grappling to address.

With the goal of creating a winning deliverable for the team project, there are measures to build trust within a virtual environment, and research has pointed to some common trust-building measures in high-trust team environments. Some of the key aspects to build trust include (a) starting early on their projects; (b) interpreting due dates for deliverables with milestones incorporated that ensure compliance; (c) discussing communication strategies; and (d) discussing time-zone differences and aligning frequency of communication (Wesner & Hobgood, 2012; Chen, Wu, Ma, & Knight, 2011; Kirstein, 2011). Further trust building tactics include an

understanding that feedback closes the communications loop, identifying individual strengths and weaknesses, and defining strategies to address conflict resolution (Germain, 2011).

Translating high-performing team values into team learning requires instructional design, student-centered metrics, and faculty interventions. Assessments need clearly stated outcomes, a rubric that shows graded metrics, and a course timetable where the instructor checks in with the teams (Germain, 2011). Setting clear expectations in the assessment creates the vision for team learning. The vision supports an environment for the team to focus on other team essentials such as establishing individual roles and expectations, identifying specific outcomes, and tracking deadlines that help the team stay the course (Guttman, 2013). As each member helps to develop the team's accountability standards, they ensure that they have a license to speak and a clear and established channel open for members to be candid in a non-personal communicative manner that supports resolving outstanding team issues (Guttman, 2013).

Trust as a Success Driver

Trust is a major factor to the success of virtual teams (Wesner & Hobgood, 2012; Chen, Wu, Ma, & Knight, 2011; Germain, 2011). It is historically important within "psychology, sociology, negotiation, strategy, and organizational behavior disciplines" (Germain, 2011, p. 31). Trust is the emotional link that bonds between the distance that make up the virtual team and the success that the team experiences (Germain, 2011). Chen, Wu, Ma, and Knight (2012) found that communication, expectations, and clear decision-making protocols significantly improved team performance. Trust is the ingredient that gives the team an opportunity for success and has been considered more important within virtual teams where face-to-face communication does not exist (Germain, 2011). Risk is a factor inherent within virtual teams where each team member works independently; trust is an inherent component to the success of the team. Yet, trust among team members takes time to build and over time its development expands (Kirstein, 2011). This reliance on trust and the risk associated with the independent variable can be incorporated into the team's communication strategy without appearing to be a managing technique on members just by virtue of incorporating the expected communication protocols (Germain, 2011).

With heightened trust among team members, successful team attributes begin to appear. Teams develop a spirit of cooperation where collaborative relationships are formed. Individuals adapt to change, solve difficult problems, develop leadership traits, and improve information sharing and flow regardless of how diverse team members may be from one another (Germain, 2011).

Virtual Team Tools

To facilitate online team learning that will help advance student interaction leading to successful student learning, universities might incorporate a team charter or operating agreement that defines the practical measures needed for virtual team accountability. This charter or agreement includes contact information, a skills inventory, student availability, operating rules, communication protocols, milestones, and a section on accountability. Team charters and agreements have been shown to elevate team performance when incorporated into team projects (Germain, 2011). Many schools and faculty members incorporate team contracts into their requirements, but do not follow through to ensure these contracts are completed and followed. Instructors are advised to provide strategic interventions into the team experience throughout the course.

Conclusion

The goal of this paper involves studying the characteristics of high-performing teams in the global marketplace and identifying the gaps that currently exist. Having a clear understanding of these gaps is necessary to incorporate them into online student learning where appropriate student training can occur. Instructional designers are to incorporate these mechanical elements needed for high performing virtual team environments into student learning assessments and outcomes while students develop their team charter or agreement. These communication protocols will support the accountability measures needed to build the trust necessary for teams to thrive and become high performing themselves. These

learning strategies will become valued lessons learned within the student learning environment that support employer needs required in today's global workplace.

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