

EFFECTIVE TEAMS WORKSHOP: A CASE STUDY IN HIGHER EDUCATION TO TEACH TEAMWORK COMPETENCY

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Abstract

The needs of the globalized world and the transformations that different organizations undergo make being competent in teamwork a necessity. Therefore, the educational sector must give it the appropriate relevance and concern itself with how to develop this particular competence in higher education. In a Colombian university, particularly in its administration faculty, some steps have been taken in this direction. This text presents a case study that seeks to identify the learning outcomes related to teamwork in the course Effective Teams Workshop. To achieve this, six months after the course was conducted, qualitative information was collected through surveys with students, semi-structured interviews with professors, and the products created during the course. This information was analyzed through predetermined categories based on the course objectives, allowing for the emergence of additional categories. The information analysis reveals a pedagogical design with an experiential methodology for the course, where teams are formed to carry out assignments, facing challenges in each class session. This approach enables students to practice what is intended to be taught, aligning with what is learned and assessed. Students who participated in this course acknowledge learning that commitment and effective communication are fundamental parts of a successful team. This result aligns with the professors' proposal to understand and apply strategies for configuring effective teams. Still, it does not demonstrate the achievement of the second objective regarding the identification of team members' roles and their importance for team performance.

Keywords: *Teamwork, collaborative learning, university education, teamwork competency, qualitative research.*

1. Introduction

It is essential to understand teamwork to differentiate a team from a group. A group working together is not necessarily a team. One difference lies in the performance results. Such an outcome should reflect a joint contribution of the team members and not a compendium of individual contributions. In a team, responsibilities and decisions are group-based, so commitment must be shared. Thus, Katzenbach and Smith, in the first definition of what a team is, postulate that it is "a small number of people with complementary skills, who are committed to a purpose, a set of performance goals and a common approach, for which they hold each other accountable" (Katzenbach & Smith, 2005, p. 3).

When analyzing team management, team members' leadership emerges, facilitating the team's mobilization. In this regard, Bernstein (2016) states that a team's construction, management, and commitment are the levers the leader can use to improve team performance. Therefore, an essential element for the development of teamwork competency is leadership.

Amid the urgency that has begun to be recognized globally about the importance of teamwork, the education sector, particularly in higher education, must give it the appropriate relevance and concern itself with how to train in this competence. However, despite its great value, interest, and importance, a great deal of research in the field has shown a phenomenon that has been commonly repeated in the development of this and other competencies: the use of lectures and passive interactions among students is not enough to be able to foster the development of such a complex competency as teamwork (Passow & Passow, 2017). On the contrary, developing competencies requires active learning, described as a set of activities designed to ensure student engagement and motivation (Felder & Brent, 2016).

In addition, there is a lack of accuracy and explicit elements when developing teamwork in a higher education classroom is the issue. On the one hand, teachers commonly understand teamwork as any activity developed in groups of students within an educational context. This action creates a misunderstanding and

an underestimation among teachers and students about what competence really represents. On the other hand, many teachers believe that exposing students to different work activities with their peers can implicitly lead them to develop teamwork. However, research in the field has shown that the absence of explicit theorization about teamwork and its characteristics can inevitably lead to an impoverished understanding of the topic, with subsequent unfavorable performance of the competency (Pinard et al., 2018; Therrien et al., 2017).

In a Colombian university and particularly in its faculty of administration, some steps have been taken on a path that seeks to generate an active learning experience in which participants also conceptualize what teamwork is and what characterizes it. This course belongs to a master's degree of the administration faculty and is offered under the name *Effective Teams Workshop*. The course lasted three weeks, and the work was focused on the participants learning how to build and manage teams that want to achieve high performance. There was one face-to-face session each week of four hours and approximately nine hours per week of extra-class dedication in work teams.

The keys to building effective teams are a good team atmosphere, clear rules of the game, and well-defined roles (Katzenbach & Smith, 2005). For students to learn how to build effective teams, the course design included challenging activities that tested communication skills, problem-solving, and joint decision-making. After the activities, best practices for top performers are recognized through reflection. The other activity consisted of a video project in which teams analyzed a conflict situation in a team and related it to their own process of building an effective team.

In the first session, the groups were organized and given the project evaluation rubric presented in the last session and the guidelines of the team contract defining the roles required for the project. The practical activity consisted of the team building a tower with wooden tokens, and there were three roles to play in each team: builders, leader, and observer. The activity consisted of three rounds; in one, the builder was blindfolded, and in another, the team leader could not speak while the builders were building the tower. The winning team was the one that could build the tallest tower. With this activity, we worked on leadership within a team and identifying what promotes good team performance and what does not.

The second session focused on team decision-making and internal problems, and a simulation activity on survival in a desert was conducted. A situation is posed in which a flight falls in the middle of the desert, and only five people (number of team members) and fifteen objects survive. First, individually, they must rank the objects from 1 to 15 according to their importance, with one being the most important and 15 the least. Then, as a team, they reach a consensus and propose a new order. Afterward, they must compare their new order with the order shown to them made by an expert. The team that comes closest to the expert wins.

In the third session, oriented towards communication and management within the team, a simulation activity was carried out to identify the culprit of a murder. Each member has a fragment of all the information necessary to find the culprit in this activity. The team that best reconstructs the facts and identifies the murderer wins the challenge. At the end of this last session, the video results from the final project are shown.

This document aims to identify what learnings about teamwork occurred in the course *Effective Teams Workshop* to guide how to design activities in academic environments to help students develop this competency.

2. Methodology of the study

This is a case study in which qualitative data was collected six months after the implementation of the course. Ethical considerations concerning the respectively informed consents, the care of anonymity, and the socialization of the results to benefit subsequent groups taking the course were considered. The learning outcomes were analyzed using the students' reflections in the course, semi-structured interviews with the two professors, and a student survey, which was answered by 70% of those who participated in the course. Thus, we identified the results that persisted around this competency and were enhanced in the course.

To do the results' analysis, a triangulation of instruments and actors was carried out in the categories of analysis predetermined based on the course objectives and giving space to emerging categories. The following section presents the results.

3. Results and analysis

The information analysis shows how an experiential design for the course, where teams are formed to act in front of some challenges, allows what is taught to be in harmony with what is learned and what is evaluated. In the survey, when we asked about "any valuable experience you had during the teamwork for

this course", two people stated that the activity of the towers was valuable for the recognition of skills. One spoke of the second activity, the desert activity, for learning about consensus building. Another referred to the third one: the murder case. One spoke about the final project and the leadership she experienced in that experience. Four people felt that meeting new people and working on soft skills was the most valuable thing. Three referred to communication, highlighting listening as a valuable experience, and one person talked about understanding synergy as a valuable experience throughout the course.

A more detailed analysis is presented in three categories: 1. Conforming a team, 2. The management of team members and their interaction, 3. No emerging categories were identified.

3.1. Conforming of a team

We interviewed the professor who directed the course when we asked him, "Beyond what is written and what you want to achieve with the course, what do you see in practice that the students take away from the course? When you create a team, there is a big difference between a team and a group. That is one of the main conclusions, and they differentiate it. When there is a demarcated interdependence and when there is a challenge, a team is formed; if not, no, with a group is enough." In this sense, the assistant professor says: "There is a topic that enters the clash and remains as learning, and it is the difference between a group and a team. They come from their work areas as if they were in teams; however, from the readings and the conformation of high-performance teams where each has a different participation role and contributes so that everyone can achieve the objective, they begin to understand that first definition of teamwork".

In line with this idea, a student writes in her reflection after the first activity that "it has been striking for me to understand that teams are made up of interdependent people, that is, that the work of each one is indispensable to reach a common goal" and "that it is necessary to be genuinely motivated to achieve commitment to the team and to take ownership of the role we play".

The results of this category, which agree with Felder and Brent (2016), show that students can conceptualize that a team is different from a group of people working together. This result is essential to validate the course design both in its experiential and active bet and in the student's reflection importance so that they appropriate the concepts exposed in the reading material.

3.2. Management of team members and their interaction

The teacher seeks with the activities that the students "really realize how a team that is interdependent acts" so that they identify "what things promote good team performance and what things do not promote it" and about leadership, "the good thing is that they realize how is the leader (guide) role within the team". In a reflection, a student expresses that: "many times leadership does not always fall on the same person; it will depend on the skills of each team member, in what phase of the project they are in and if an adjustment in roles is needed." Another student recognizes an essential characteristic of leadership: "The leaders who stood out the most were those who were able to put themselves in the shoes of their team members".

The teacher describes that, in the first activity, in the last round, the leader cannot speak but previously gives a confidence boost to his teammates, "the best results are achieved." "What I want is to generate the leaders achieve the ability to convince others and learn how to transmit a good message to their team when they face of a difficulty, how to approach things so as not to demoralize the team". In one of the students' reflections, characteristics of the leader are highlighted from the experience, the choice was "Julian, the leader because of his voice and good management of people" and she says that "with Julian's good guidance we were able to properly carry out the proposed structure and we stuck to the letter of what we were going to do" and that "when we started the construction part, Alba was nervous, Julian managed to calm her down at the right moments so that she could finish the activities properly and not feel alone, achieving the objective again in the second round" and which coincides with the teacher's wish: "In this phase we could not be with our leader, but it gave us the confidence that we already knew the strategy". This evidences Brestein's statement that "small differences in team leadership can have big consequences for the success of team efforts" (Bernstein, 2016) and that the internal management of a team, which has to do with trust among team members, makes good leadership possible.

To the question: "How were your communication and relationship skills with your peers tested during the course?" in the survey, of the fourteen people surveyed, only one referred to the information provided, and all referred to the practical activities. Four people referred explicitly to the towers' activity, where they had to communicate while blindfolded, and communication was tested even without speaking.

Leadership as a critical component in a team was put to the test in the course. 72% of the students surveyed considered that the course contributed significantly to developing their leadership skills, while 7.2% considered that it contributed little.

Concerning the commitment and the assignment of roles for a common purpose, another student wrote in her reflection: "I consider that it was of great importance to take advantage of the time given at the beginning to get to know each other better so that we could later focus on the planning of the tower design, the construction strategy and assign each member their work", a different student acknowledged that: "During the activity, we were able to experience how confidence in the skills and abilities of our teammates allowed us to work more efficiently and effectively".

In the survey regarding the characteristics of an effective team, to the question: "Mention three characteristics that a team must have to achieve high performance", it was found that the most named was *assertive communication* with twelve answers, the next with more repetitions was *commitment and enhancing individual skills* with four answers, followed by three answers: *trust and having a clear common goal*. With two repetitions: *empathy and leadership*, and named once: *analysis for continuous improvement, respect, relationship, teamwork, resilience, role clarity, flexibility, and discipline*.

These results show that students understand that "teamwork represents a set of values that encourages listening and responding constructively to the views expressed by others, giving them the benefit of the doubt, supporting them and recognizing their interests and achievements," as stated by (Katzenbach & Smith, 2005, p. 4), the most remembered characteristic is that of assertive communication.

3.3. Causes that slow down equipment and how to remedy them

One student acknowledged that one of the obstacles during the first activity was: "We were confident because we already knew each other and did not take the time to analyze each other's skills and define roles," causing: "us not to stop to think about what we were doing wrong as a team, and we focused only on changing the chosen design as if the mistake was all on this" This shows that one of the lessons learned in practice that the students had was regarding the adaptability and flexibility needed within a high-performance team, he concludes that: "yes it was evident that it helped us a lot in that last round to take the time to analyze what we were doing as a team, what was not working, what we could apply from the processes that other teams were doing, what was the design that was best for us to follow and who had the best disposition and skills to carry out the task."

To the survey question: "What did you have to fix in your team to advance with the goal you had to achieve as a team?" Four people recognized time as a constraint, and organizing schedules was challenging. Nine people talked about communication, and to fix it, they recognized that it is good not to assume and to listen actively. Moreover, one person talked about defining opportunities for improvement and proposing action plans.

An obstacle recognized by one of the students described it as follows: "When forming a team, people's skills are used as criteria to form the team and in many occasions in my personal experience this is not managed in this way, due to the availability of people in the projects or simply because they do not have the necessary equipment for such activities".

4. Conclusions

The contribution of the student mentioned above says that in his work, it is not always possible to know the team members' skills "due to the availability of people in the projects or simply because they do not have the necessary equipment for such activities." This answer shows us that in educational environments, we must always be aware of the distance between the academic and job worlds. This is the reason why in the surveys conducted six months after the end of the course, the relevance, which, in a first reflection, the students gave to the understanding of the importance of defining roles, did not prevail as much as that of assertive communication and the joint commitment that a high-performance team must have.

At the pedagogical level, a conclusion regarding the design of the activities that foster the development of teamwork competence is based on the fact that in order to analyze the learning generated in the course, attention was not focused on the final product of the project (the video itself), but on the learning and reflection processes that occurred at the collective and individual levels for its elaboration. This fact shows that in the designs for meaningful learning, the richness of the process in which learning is constructed is much more important than the content or the topics addressed.

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