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## **Teamwork and Assessment: A Critique**

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### **Abstract**

*Australian universities commonly cite "teamwork" as a graduate attribute and an integral part of their set of flexible and transferable skills suitable for different types of employment. This paper raises concerns as to whether teamwork as experienced in the university education system can claim to achieve the imparting of team skills. Pedagogically, learning through team work may be a useful educational tool however when the concept of 'teamwork' is explored a number of inconsistencies arise in the tertiary environment. The outcomes derived from team work do not generally satisfy the criteria for effective and efficient teamwork. However, it is suggested that to utilise teamwork as a learning tool for a graduate attribute the assessment criteria should take into consideration how the team worked together - the team dynamics.*

**Key words:** *Team work, Assessment.*

## Introduction

Enrolments in the Australian university education sector have been steadily increasing. One-third of all Australians are students (Harker et al., 2001) and off-shore/off-campus and international student numbers are on the rise (Harman, 2006). While student numbers in Australian universities are increasing, teaching staff numbers are declining. As highlighted by an investigative report from a Committee of the Australian Senate the most critical issues facing the higher education sector were identified; early retirees from the system, an exodus of experienced teaching staff, difficulties in recruiting staff and staff-student ratios being the worst they have ever been in this industry (Collins et al., 2001). With over 40 public universities in Australia, students are in a better position to switch between courses, programs and universities to satisfy their educational requirements and gain the necessary skills to compete in the workforce (Perry et al., 2003). The tertiary education system has grappled with the question of what skills should be provided to students to be effective lifelong learners and to enable them to compete effectively in the workforce (Deckinger and Brink, 1989, McLarty, 2000, Evans and Nancarrow, 2002, Crebert and Bates, 2004). This issue has become a priority for universities with reports emanating from various sectors of Australian employers concerning the disparity between the skills and competencies of graduates and the requirements of prospective employers (Deckinger and Brink, 1989, McLarty, 2000, Evans and Nancarrow, 2002, Crebert and Bates, 2004, 2005).

Australian universities commonly cite teamwork as a graduate attribute. This attribute is invariably promoted by universities as part of a set of flexible and transferable skills suitable for different types of employment (see for example University of Melbourne, 2007, Monash University, 2007, Deakin University, 2007). The notion of teamwork as a key skill required by industry and business is arguably one of the factors driving the growth of teamwork in university education. The other, less discussed, yet no less compelling argument, is the need to cope with the increasing number of students and the declining number of academics in the university system. The submission of assessment produced by student teams, rather than individual assessment of students, can greatly reduce an academic's marking workload. However, the use of teamwork solely to reduce marking loads is not necessarily a pedagogically sound justification for using team assessment tasks. There must also be a level of concern that most students are not actually acquiring adequate teamwork skills by undertaking 'teamwork' assessments in their tertiary education.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate whether teamwork, as experienced within the university education system, can be claimed to fulfil the role of teaching individuals how to work in teams.

### Teamwork skills

Teamwork may be described as a social construct used to explain a relationship between staff in a working environment. To better understand an employers' vision of teamwork, the definition provided by Ellis and Bell (2005) posits that teamwork is the process "where two or more employees interact interdependently toward a common and valued goal or objective, and who have each been assigned specific roles or functions to perform" (p. 641). Accordingly, a team is meant to create synergy and go forward towards a common goal (Bacon et al, 1999). The concept of 'teamwork' may easily be misinterpreted as referring to a simplistic notion of 'groupwork' within an educational setting. At issue here is whether a team formed within the confines of a university course can achieve the same purpose and motivation that is claimed to be experienced in the workplace.

At a university level, student teams tend to be equivalent to project teams – they are formed merely for a one-time output such as an assignment. Therefore, if team-work is to successfully impart the requisite skills, students in such project-type teams (such as

that required for individual assessment items that comprise an individual university course) need to be drawn from different competencies, disciplines or functional areas. This, of course, is extremely difficult to achieve within the confines of a tutorial group. Firstly, student teams are usually self-selected or formed on a random basis with no conception of their own or other team members' skills or competencies with little if any consideration of the essential roles of team members (Cannon-Bowers and Tannenbaum, 1995). Secondly, the assessment criteria is for the most part focused on meeting course specific outcomes that do not necessarily align with learning the intricacies of the dynamics of teamwork. They are also incongruent with the expectations of employers as this type of 'teamwork' merely provides non-transferable competencies and do not necessarily align with the skills that would serve a prospective employer.

## Teams

Teams that are formed in classrooms can have a disturbingly negative outcome on the learning environment (Radencich et al., 1998, Sapon-Shevin and Chandler-Olcott, 2001). There are various problems associated with the operational activities of teams and the interaction of the individuals within the teams (Oakley, 2002). Free-riding or social loafing is a common complaint from students and lecturers. Further, those students who complete the task as required may feel exploited and may even reduce their own 'normal' efforts in response to the requirement of working harder to make up for less effort from other team members. Forceful students who are not practiced in the team norm of listening to others and reconciling different ideas and opinions may dominate team discussions, pressuring others to accept their perspective. Others may exclude team members or discount their contributions. The need to educate students as to the required team norms is one key issue to achieve a better understanding of what is involved in teamwork.

Tempone and Martin (1999) identified a schism existing in the perception of team work by students. When students are assigned to teams in order to complete a task their perception of the role of the team can be divided into two broad categories: in the first category students view the team as a means to getting the assigned task completed as efficiently as possible, whereas in the second category students perceive the team as a means to advance their individual and collective knowledge. This is hardly a satisfactory measure of learning and may well have a negative influence on students in an educational setting which could carry over to the workplace.

Students who are used to working in the educational setting as an individual, are conditioned to accepting rewards for providing the correct answers and differentiating themselves from their peers through the award of grades. The university education system is designed to reward individuals and to recognise individual achievement (Ames, 1981). Therefore, placing students in teams would appear to be a contradiction to the very essence of the university education system, which encourages individual work and otherwise discourages group work as a form of plagiarism. When teams create a single product, such as a class assessment item, they receive a universal grade despite the fact that student members may not have contributed to the task equally.

Students need considerable assistance in the process of arguing constructively (rather than destructively), considering alternate perspectives, justification of reasoning and to plan, and monitoring and evaluating their progress (Palincsar et al., 1993). A team of students coming together to work on an assessment item is not the same as a well-functioning team (Oakley et al., 2004). Students in any given team may sometimes work together, but they may also be inclined to work independently and only pool their work together at the completion of the assessment task with no discussion (Blumenfeld et al, 1996). Further, the students may spend a great deal of time in conflict and may not have the resources available to acquire help or to alert them to seek the help to

resolve issues (Nelson-Le Gall, 1985). In contrast, members of an effective team always work together, take on different roles and responsibilities, help one another to the greatest possible extent, keep any conflicts from interfering with the team task and are constantly aware of which team member is completing which aspect of the task (Oakley et al., 2004).

Effective organisational teams should be composed of team members who have been specifically chosen to match the roles and the mission of the work to be undertaken by the team (Cannon-Bowers and Tannenbaum, 1995). In the university setting student teams are unlikely to exhibit this desired level of composition. Student teams can be formed using numerous methods (e.g. random allocation, alphabetically, where they sit in a tutorial or friendships). These methods of allocating students to a team are hardly likely to result in the ideal team being formed and there must be some degree of scepticism that the resulting team will reflect the composition or co-operate effectively.

### **Assessment**

Assessment may be defined as a task intended to monitor student learning, improve academic programs and enhance teaching and learning (Zeliff, 2000). The challenge is to design an assessment task that evaluates the learning by individual students in terms of the learning outcomes for the course and at the same time maintains academic integrity (Byrd & Lott, 2003). Making a judgement in terms of evaluating the level of learning achieved by a student is a complex matter, especially in the limited timeframe of a semester.

Teamwork may provide a means of assessing the knowledge and understanding relevant to a specific set of concepts or topics within a course of study. However, the balance between the course learning outcomes and the desired graduate attributes still appear to be tenuous. The items which form the criteria tends to be focused on evaluating the concepts or topics rather than the team dynamics. For example, where students are required to complete a project as a team the evaluation is predominantly about assessing the components of the report in accordance with the learning outcomes expected to be covered by that report. On this point teamwork could be more appropriately described as groupwork because the assessment in essence tends to be about the ultimate piece of assessment rather than the process and subsequent interaction of the team.

### **Conclusion**

There appears to be some very compelling reasons for incorporating teamwork into a course curriculum. However, the manner in which the teams are formed and the learning outcomes being assessed remain questionable in light of the more transient aspects of team dynamics. When the 'teamwork' concept is considered within the higher education setting the notion of teamwork does not appear to adequately meet nor satisfy the criteria for establishing effective and efficient teamwork. For teamwork to be an effective teaching instrument, as opposed to a mere simplified assessment task, there are a number of issues that must be addressed, in particular the need:

- To educate students in the importance of team dynamics such as norms and expectations under which they may be expected to work;
- To develop a comprehensive reward system that recognises individual as well as team effort and success without the assessment being too onerous on students or academic staff supervisor; and,
- To ensure team composition is structured, organised and does not disadvantage any individual student member.

Prospective employers can be expected to continue to demand graduates who are experienced in team work. This is going to place further demands on universities to ensure that students are exposed to the team experience in their classroom environment. However, for teamwork to be more effective as a pedagogically sound

form of assessment it should encompass both the requisite skills required for effective teamwork as well as the elements of the particular course material and to achieve this there needs to be greater emphasis on addressing the dynamics of the team experience.

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