

# The Use of Learning Teams in Ground vs Online Classes

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## Abstract

Managing, organizing and controlling the academic classroom format for purposes of maximizing student learning and evaluating individual performance for grade determination introduces different challenges in an online environment in contrast to the traditional classroom. Providing the optimum setting for obtaining the desired academic degree through online courses without losing the benefits of the classroom environment has presented educators with the need to not only provide a meaningful forum for the intellectual exchange of perspectives, viewpoints, observations and experiences among students but in assessing an individual's true learning outcomes. Without the face-to-face contact in a ground classroom learning can easily become "education in isolation" where learning occurs primarily through readings and print material without the opportunity to "bounce" ideas and thoughts off other students instantaneously. It is a "respond when you can" in the asynchronous online environment.

To remedy this drawback to interaction in the online environment students are often formed into learning teams (LTs) as an integral part of class format either through their own choice of teammates or perhaps by the instructor on a random or location/time zone basis when students are geographically dispersed. Presently, both in the ground and online classroom, LTs exist to discuss and submit some assignments. The well intentioned rationale for the use of LTs is several fold: 1) to allow students to develop the interpersonal skills needed for success in real world organizations, 2) to provide students with the experience of dealing with divergent attitudes, motivations, and abilities in work groups, 3) to permit practice of leadership skills in directing team projects, and 4) to hone evaluative processes in judging other's work efforts and submissions.

Personal experience with many online courses over 15 years supports the observation that there is often a disparity between the content, quality and scholarliness of student responses, for instance, to daily discussion questions posted to the class main forum for required comments, thoughts and illustrated examples in an open forum and the responses posted to individual only access forums.

Students do gain greater understanding of concepts and text material by reviewing others' inputs posted to open classroom discussion but when demonstrating their own application of concepts or material in response to graded individual assignments in individual versus open to all forums their comprehension often falters.

Acknowledging that some form of valid assessment of contribution to the learning team is warranted, several questions need to be addressed:

- 1) Should learning team assignments be weighted, if at all, in a final grade and if so how much?
- 2) Should learning team members assess each others' contributions and are they capable of being objective?
- 3) What criteria should be used?
- 4) What are the perspectives of students, faculty, and potential employers related to learning teams?

### **Shifts in Education Offerings**

In the academic world the advent of computers and the relatively inexpensive access to the internet opened a whole new realm of educational offerings to those seeking higher education. The sweeping introduction of online programs brought a shift from the traditional classroom environment with face-to-face interaction between students and between student and instructor to interaction via computer screen messaging. Online courses are now offered in increasing numbers by academic institutions eager to maintain or increase enrollment by affording working students, or those not geographically located near accredited institutions of higher education, degree seeking opportunities. In past years one in six students enrolled in higher education – over 3 million people – took at least one online course defying predictions that online learning would level off (Pope.2006). With vastly reduced job opportunities in today's economy employers are enjoying the option of hiring from a pool of educated applicants versus those with lesser academic qualifications. This, in turn, has encouraged non-degreed members of the eligible workforce to enhance their credentials by seeking degree programs through online programs while maintaining their jobs and avoiding layoffs.

Managing, organizing and controlling the academic classroom format for purposes of maximizing student learning and evaluating individual performance for grade determination also introduces different challenges in an online environment in contrast to the traditional classroom. With many business courses placing emphasis on experiencing teamwork as a precursor to successful integration into the workforce, the use of "learning teams" in academe has become the norm in a behaviorally oriented society.

Individualism is too self- centered and although in the final analysis it is the individual whose accomplishments usually dictate who is singled out for recognition of academic excellence or who reaches the top of the organizational pyramid in advanced leadership roles it may well have been participation in team efforts that garnered the recognition of individual performance.

### **New Challenges**

Providing the optimum setting for obtaining the desired academic degree through online courses without losing the benefits of the classroom environment has presented educators with new charges in not only providing a meaningful forum for the intellectual exchange of perspectives, viewpoints, observations and experiences among students but in assessing an individual's true learning outcomes. Having the exchange undoubtedly provides the mind

expanding element essential to meaningful academic growth and scholarly inquiry. Without the face-to-face contact in a ground classroom learning can easily become “education in isolation” where learning occurs primarily through readings and print material without the opportunity to “bounce” ideas and thoughts off other students instantaneously or ask the instructor to repeat the material (Pros & Cons of distance learning). It is a “respond when you can” in the asynchronous online environment. Although there is significant research in support of online learning that indicates that online learning is, in many ways, better than face-to-face, what is not addressed is the student ease of entry into online courses, the quality, experience in teaching and assessing student performance, and the dedication to academic rigor and standards of the large number of adjunct faculty teaching online (Nantel,2009).

With online courses, it was the intent of educators to avoid the aura of correspondence courses. However, a fundamental question/issue regarding online courses and learning teams is whether there should be some screening of students choosing to enroll in an online course versus the classroom. Experience has shown that some students are ill informed about the degree of competence or familiarity with the respective computer program to be used, the asynchronous nature of online courses, and the commitment to group work or teamwork in a distant learning environment. The third most popular buzzword right after downsizing and outsourcing is teamwork. One might be surprised to find out that what it takes to win on the sports field might not be the same as what is required to field a winning team at work. How suited are students to being an effective team member?

### **Why Learning Teams**

In an effort to manage the challenge of possible low level learning by students not in general contact with one another in a classroom, educators have increasingly turned to the use of learning teams (LTs) as an integral part of class format either through their own choice of teammates or perhaps by the instructor on a random or location/time zone basis when students are geographically dispersed (Assessing large classes). Presently, both in the ground and online classroom, LTs exist to discuss and submit some assignments.

The well intentioned rationale for the use of LTs is several fold: 1) to allow students to develop the interpersonal skills needed for success in real world organizations, 2) to provide students with the experience of dealing with divergent attitudes, motivations, and abilities in work groups, 3) to permit practice of leadership skills in directing team projects, and 4) to hone evaluative processes in judging other’s work efforts and submissions( Kagan,1999). There is also the added bonus for students in LTs of sharing the assignment workload by bringing more minds to bear on a subject or doling out parts or all assignments on a rotational basis. Some argue that team homework is better in every way than individual homework (Oakley,2008). For an instructor, LT assignments result in fewer individual papers to grade but, in turn, distort the grade given to an individual student as a true indicator of that sole student’s competence. In either case, the use of LTs should encompass the use of some method(s) to assess team member contributions. Writing about cooperative learning, Kagan advocates never using group grades. He feels group grades undermine the motivation and learning of many low-achieving students. It is viewed as a system in which a student’s grade, to a large extent, is not a function of what the student has learned or produced, but based rather on undefined and chance forces such as group dynamics and the ability, motivation, and performance of others (Kagen,2000).

Whereas the opportunity to submit written assignments authored by someone other than the submitter has always existed, there also exists in the traditional classroom setting the ability of an instructor to discern a student's academic prowess in class participation as a benchmark of the student's general academic depth of thought, scholarliness, verbal articulation and perceived competence. In the online environment such personal observation and subjective formation by the faculty member of a student's learning adaptableness becomes somewhat limited. Even a struggling student who might yield to a bit of plagiarism now and then to bolster a paper's content worthiness can be tripped up by computer plagiarism scans if the instructor perceives a significant disparity between classroom work and submitted assignments. In the online environment there is no opportunity to "get to know the student" in a way that could contribute to forming an opinion as to academic potential. The faculty member's ability to truly evaluate an online student's performance through traditional personal contact is lacking.

### **Disparity with Learning Teams**

Personal experience with many online courses over 15 years supports the observation that there is often a disparity between the content, quality and scholarliness of student responses, for instance, to daily discussion questions posted to the class main forum for required comments, thoughts and illustrated examples in an open forum and the responses posted to individual only access forums.

Students do gain greater understanding of concepts and text material by reviewing others' inputs posted to open classroom discussion but when demonstrating their own application of concepts or material in response to graded individual assignments in individual versus open to all forums their comprehension often falters. This further begs the question whether learning team assignment submissions are representative of a team member's learning and contribution or just the product of some other team member. In determining overall grades, there exists the need for the added dimension of re-thinking the more traditional assessment methods for individual learning team members where a portion of an individual's grade is based on a learning team's input. A survey of classes and other colleges indicate grading may vary from 20% for LT work to near 100%. If even 20% of a student's final grade is dependent on the LT grade segment and no contribution was made to the LT assignment, the true grade of the student could be a C versus an A.

### **Assessing Learning Teams**

Assessing student performance, then, in the online environment should be a composite evaluation of the written/oral (oral if in a classroom) inputs and the LT contribution segment. As mentioned previously, the faculty member's observation in the ground classroom could further endorse a student's LT peer assessment portion of an evaluation but in the online environment assessing a student's LT contribution must rely wholly on an input from LT members. It is this segment of the assessment process in online courses that can create the challenge to faculty in arriving at a true assessment of individual competence. However, if both the individual effort and the collaborative one are not assessed and graded students will tend to slight that portion that is not graded (Ko, 2004) meaning a student could have a "free ride" while being awarded the LT assignment grade.

Acknowledging that some form of valid assessment of contribution to the learning team is warranted, several questions need to be addressed:

- 5) Should learning team assignments be weighted, if at all, in a final grade and if so how much?
- 6) Should learning team members assess each others' contributions and are they capable of being objective?
- 7) What criteria should be used?

### **Various Perspectives on Learning Teams**

**Students:** A broad survey of online and classroom students regarding the least desirable aspects of online learning teams, aside from the lack of face-to-face contact with the instructor, centers on the reliance on others in a LT environment to “carry their weight” in accomplishing graded assignments when group work is a requirement. Student reasons for enrolling in an online course focus primarily on convenience. Students do not feel the need for personal, face-to-face interaction as in a classroom and seek to fulfill the course requirements as effortlessly as possible. Throw in the LT structure and the equation changes. Coordination is essential, time lines must be met, personalities need adjusting, and teamwork becomes essential. The achievers teamed with followers become dissatisfied with carrying others and yearn to work individually receiving grades commensurate with one's ability. Followers, in a LT environment, see a reasonable path to task accomplishment by making contributions as needed often settling for acceptance of others' inputs. The achiever, in the quest for top grades, is frustrated having others benefit from the achiever's efforts and, when doing team assignments, will often settle for taking responsibility for the assignment just to assure a better grade even if others benefit from the individual effort. The follower, grateful for the “free ride”, will readily accept the achiever's input for submission. Analysis of several years' peer assessment results from online students has shown a standard deviation of about two points with a mean of 97 on a 100 point scale. The principal limiting factors to achieving a wider distribution of assessment scores has been the “cooperate and graduate” attitude and the concern for possible retribution from team mates in subsequent courses if results were to be known. One of the strongest concerns that students have about group work is the possibility that group assessment practices may not fairly assess individual contributions (Assessing group work).

Students do, however, acknowledge the positive aspects of learning teams but only if fortunate enough to be with a group of students that are compatible. The majority do not favor the use of learning teams where meetings outside of class are necessitated and especially if students do not live on campus. They do value the exchange of ideas, perspectives, and viewpoints, the chance to play devil's advocate, and even the socialization in the class room but not at the expense of losing their own identity on work submitted.

**Faculty:** for reasons mentioned earlier, faculty like and use learning teams because they provide a stimulus for discussion in the classroom which is often difficult to achieve when trying to engage all members of a large group in a limited class time frame. Observing learning teams in the classroom is a meaningful way to discern the thought processes, ability to articulate viewpoints, and critical thinking skills of those students to be identified for recognition. In the online environment this may be more difficult is more difficult to see. However, instructors can

easily track who is interacting, how many times they interact, and what is discussed. Students can “hide” in the online classroom and online assessment may not necessarily avoid the problem of low-level learning or plagiarism (Assessing large classes).

The ability to “hide” in the online classroom occurs primarily in learning team assignment contributions because the conscientious student(s) on the team are often willing to carry the wayward team member and concentrate on developing a quality paper than devoting time to re-working poor contributions (Educator’s opinions on online learning). Unfortunately the use of teams raises the issue by some students that they are in class to learn from the instructor and not primarily from each other.

**Employers:** although an indirect perspective, focus group sessions with employers indicate employers want some assurance that the educated applicant being considered for hire is indeed the qualified graduate that transcripts indicate. “Although the acknowledgement of the validity of online courses is growing, there are still many individuals that may equate a degree from a regionally accredited institution to one from a diploma mill” (Bradford, 2009). Grades obtained through course work where reliance was heavily on team assignments may be a false indicator of the proficiency the employer seeks. Poor performance after hire reflects unfavorably on the institution doing the educating.

### **Criteria for students assessing each other**

When using LTs, the most common approach in assigning grades is to provide a single grade to all members contributing to a LT assignment. This practice leads to considerable dissatisfaction if students feel their individual contributions are not fairly reflected. To remedy this peer assessment can be used ( Assigning Grades). To minimize the subjectivity of peer assessment, the use of a rubric, preferably developed or sanctioned by the students, is desirable. When a rubric is shared with students, it can also help clear up some of the questions/concerns students have as they try to understand teammate expectations ( Koo, 2004). Supplementing the rubric with a Learning Team charter also developed by the team further defines the scope and direction of each LT member’s contribution. Guidelines for a LT charter should be initiated by the faculty member who should also be the reviewer of the rubric to be used. By involving the students and assuring anonymity of assessments submitted to the instructor, these assessments of student contribution to the LT assignments have greater validity when used by the instructor in final grade determination. Examples of suggested charter and rubric are attached.

### **Weighting of Student Learning Team Assessments**

If, as mentioned previously, the evaluation of student written assignments is compromised by the potential for the assignments to be others’ work, the weighting of such assignments should be established accordingly. Until such time as comprehensive written exams are an integral part of a student’s graduation portfolio, there has to be a degree of faith in the validity of grades received in courses shown on a transcript. With online courses that utilize LTs, the LT assessment portion of the overall grade should be more than a token input.

If the faculty member uses and evaluates some form of two way, online discussion between students or student and the faculty member as part of the grading scheme, then perhaps

a 50-25-25 weighting (papers/discussion/LT contribution) would suffice. With only graded papers and LT contributions, a 50-50 assessment weighting might be more advisable.

### **Feedback to Student Assessed**

Since peer assessment can also help self-assessment and improve the quality of learning in assessing others in subsequent work environments, the results of the assessment rubric should be discussed with or made known to the student being assessed. Rather than just a composite score derived from LT members' inputs, the faculty member should help the assessed students gain an in depth insight into their own performance. Self and peer assessment "promote lifelong learning by helping students to evaluate their own and their peer's achievements realistically, not just encouraging them always to rely on evaluations from on high" (Brown,1996).

### **Resolving the Learning Team Issue**

Learning Teams will continue to be used in academe but how they are used can spell the difference in the validity of student learning and assessment. Following are suggestions for consideration :

**Do not use learning teams** for graded assignments unless there are mechanisms to assure measured contributions by each team member in an unbiased manner. Peer evaluations of contributions by team members should include lengthy justification to include specifics in support of rubric scales. Classroom observation by the faculty member with observation notes should be in use. Online courses, regardless of mechanisms uses, should use learning teams for interactive discussions only with the instructor closely monitoring learning team communication between students. Let students benefit from the interaction and grade only the degree of interaction but not the teams submitted assignment.

In keeping with the above, if learning team assignments are a part of a student's overall grade, the percent of the final grade should be at a minimum unless there is written critique by each team member of other team member's contribution. For online courses it is possible for faculty to view what each student contributes to an assignment. For classroom, the faculty member could elicit from each team member the percent contribution to the team assignment with written support.

While there is no fool proof system to guarantee the validity of course grades, grades themselves should probably play a lesser role in determining overall competence for awarding of a degree. Students should be required to take uniform comprehensive exams developed by course faculty and graded by impartial faculty. Better yet, all students should be required to take a comprehensive exam at the end of their degree program covering all core courses taken.

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