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Teams and Team Projects: Differences in Online and On-campus Adult Learners’ Perceptions.

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Keywords: group projects; adult learners; distance learning; learning teams; cooperative learning

Abstract: Adult students’ perceptions of teams in accelerated business cohorts were examined in six areas: team attraction, performance expectation alignment, workload distribution, intrateam conflict, teamwork preference, and learning. Most students preferred individual work and did not believe teams positively impacted their learning, with more distinct perspectives among adult students in online programs.

Introduction

Many adult educators embrace cooperative learning in the classroom noting well documented benefits like considering issues from alternate perspectives, enhancing relationships with other students, and encouraging positive attitudes toward learning (Gottschall & Garcia-Bayonas, 2008; Phipps, Phipps, Kask, & Higgins, 2001; Sweeney, Weaven, & Herington, 2008). However, when in-class cooperative learning experiences are transposed to external, graded team projects, benefits are less clear. Free-riding, unequal work load distribution, poor quality work, and negative attitudes about group work cause poor team dynamics and can impede team functioning and influence future attitudes about team projects (Davies, 2009; Gottschall & Garcia-Bayonas, 2008; Roberts & McInerney, 2007; Sweeney, et al., 2008; Thompson, 2006).

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2015), over 8 million students enrolled at degree-granting post-secondary institutions in the Fall 2011 semester were age 25 or older. Many were likely enrolled in accelerated degree programs offered by at least 225 institutions across the United States (Wlodkowski, 2003). However, the literature investigating adult students’ experiences in accelerated programs is sparse, and empirical studies examining adult students’ attitudes about teams and team projects are lacking. Most studies have sampled traditional-aged students in semester-long courses. Far less is known about how working adult students perceive team learning activities and graded team projects, especially in accelerated degree programs, even though many of these programs utilize teams and team projects regularly.

With the explosion of online degree programs, it is also important to identify whether adult students’ attitudes about team projects vary by delivery modality. Adam and Finegold (2006) found that if given a choice, online postgraduate students preferred not to work in groups. Fletcher, Tobias, and Wisher (2007) postulated that for busy adult students who are already juggling busy lives and schedules, part of the appeal of online programs may be an expectation of learning on their own time with no group work. If this is true, requiring group work in online courses when students expect to learn alone and on their own time may cause negative attitudes about online learning, in general, (Smith, Sorenson, Gump, Heindel, Caris, & Martinez, 2011) and even worse attitudes about group work. Continual negative experiences with group work could potentially even influence adult student retention in online courses.

It is important to recognize that adult students enter the classroom with prior experiences and attitudes. Adults who have had poor experiences with team projects previously may have
preconceived negative attitudes about group projects and teamwork, in general (Williams, Duray, & Reddy, 2006). Conversely, adults with positive experiences or a preference for teamwork may embrace opportunities for team projects as an important aspect of learning. Williams and colleagues (2006) found that an orientation toward teamwork and perceptions of group cohesiveness predicted online MBA students’ perceptions of their learning. Additionally, students with a preference for teamwork were more likely to interact frequently, share information, learn more, and view interactions with other team members as important to their learning.

This paper examines adult students’ perceptions (N = 463) of teams and team projects in online (n = 159) and on-campus (n = 304) accelerated business degree programs at a small, private Midwestern institution serving approximately 1,300 working adult graduate and undergraduate students. Data was drawn from a larger study (Favor, 2012) that examined student perceptions of long-functioning academic learning teams in undergraduate and graduate business cohort programs to evaluate the effectiveness of the team-based program model.

Conversations with and documentation from student services personnel who provided assistance to adult teams when team-related problems arose and conversations with and anecdotal evidence from administrators and faculty who worked closely with teams led to six team dynamics-related areas of focus: 1) attraction to the team; 2) alignment of academic performance expectations; 3) workload sharing; 4) conflict; 5) preference for teamwork; and 6) impact on learning.

To establish context, all business programs at this institution utilized long-functioning, self-governing academic learning teams. Teams of 3-6 students were self-selected on the first night of the degree program and were expected to stay together for the duration of the degree program. Teams worked together during class as well as outside of class. Outside work included the development of at least one significant graded assignment in every course – usually a paper or oral presentation. All business degree programs are designed for working adult students and utilize a lock-step, cohort model with accelerated courses ranging from five to eight weeks in length. On-campus students attend classes in the evenings at one of five regional campuses. Online students complete 100% of the coursework online with no required face-to-face meetings with instructors or fellow students.

Methods

Validated instruments from several group scholars (Campion, Medsker, & Higgs, 1993; Carron, Widmeyer, & Brawley, 1985; Evans & Jarvis, 1986; and Rahim, 1983) provided a framework for instrument development. Additionally, because the primary reason for implementation of the original team-based model was to enhance learning in accelerated courses, four author-developed items measured students’ perceptions of the degree to which their teams contributed to their learning. A 5-point Likert scale with item response choices ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” was used. After a pilot study helped refine and establish initial construct validity and reliability, the final 32-item instrument achieved Cronbach’s alpha coefficients between .86 and .93 for all scales.

Sixty-five of the seventy-five adjunct instructors invited to assist in this study accepted and encouraged student participation in the study in one of three ways: (1) providing class time to complete the online survey; (2) writing the online link on the board and encouraging students to complete the survey; (3) embedding the survey link into their weekly online curriculum. Participation by faculty and students was voluntary, and all students read a voluntary consent statement as required by the Institutional Review Board.
Four hundred sixty three adult students representing on-campus (n = 304) and online (n = 159) programs in the Bachelors of Business Administration (BBA) and Master of Business Administration (MBA) were included in data analysis. The majority of participants were white (83%), between the ages of 26 and 35 (53%), and female (54%). Mean scores were calculated for each respondent in each of the six areas: attraction to team, performance goal alignment, workload sharing, intrateam conflict, preference for teamwork, and impact on learning. The five Likert responses were condensed into three groups: agree, neutral, and disagree prior to calculating overall percentages by degree program and delivery modality.

To evaluate the degree to which the six focus areas were related, a Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient was calculated using the Bonferroni approach to control for Type I errors across the 12 correlations. A p value of .004 or less was required for significance.

Due to differences in sample sizes of online and on-campus responses, two independent samples t-tests were conducted to evaluate differences in student perceptions by degree program and delivery modality (Keppel & Wickens, 2004). In these analyses, delivery modality or degree program served as the grouping variable and the Bonferroni approach was used to control for errors across the six variables, requiring a p value of .008 for significance. A Cohen’s d statistic was calculated to examine effect size.

Results

Regardless of degree program or delivery modality, over 65% of adult respondents felt generally positive about their teammates, as people. Additionally, 64 - 65% of adult students reported low levels of conflict in their teams. However, notable differences surfaced by delivery modality for preference for teamwork and impact on learning. At the bachelor degree level, 24% of online adult students preferred teamwork and 30% believed their teams helped them learn. For on-campus adult bachelor degree students, 41% preferred teamwork and 52% believed their teams helped them learn. Similar differences were noted at the MBA level as 38% of adult online students preferred to work in teams and 39% believed being in teams increased their learning. Conversely, 46% of on-campus MBA adult students preferred to work in teams and 52% believed their teams increased their learning.

Pearson Product-Moment Correlation analysis showed the six constructs were highly inter-related with coefficients ranging from .45 to .81. These high correlations (Green & Salkind, 2008) demonstrate the impact that student attitudes about their teams in one area have on other areas.

Independent-sample t tests found no difference in student perceptions of their teams by degree level, but statistically significant differences by delivery modality in two areas: preference for teams, as shown in Table 1. Adult students in online degree programs were less likely to prefer teamwork and less likely to believe their teams helped them learn than were students in on-campus programs.
Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, t-scores, and Effect Sizes for Delivery Modality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Team Variable</th>
<th>Online M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>On-Campus M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>d</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attraction to Team</td>
<td>4.19</td>
<td>.79</td>
<td>4.29</td>
<td>.75</td>
<td>1.38</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance Expectation Alignment</td>
<td>3.96</td>
<td>.78</td>
<td>4.02</td>
<td>.75</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workload Sharing</td>
<td>3.69</td>
<td>1.18</td>
<td>3.77</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Team Conflict</td>
<td>4.11</td>
<td>.64</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>.70</td>
<td>.33</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preference for Teamwork</td>
<td>3.19</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>.99</td>
<td>3.90**</td>
<td>.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact on Learning</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>.90</td>
<td>4.27**</td>
<td>.48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. **p < .001

Discussion

Adult educators must recognize that adult students bring prior experiences and attitudes about teams and team projects with them when they enter the classroom. Due to the interrelated nature of factors that impact group dynamics, negative experiences or attitudes in one area, affect other areas. For example, when performance expectations within a team are not aligned and some students strive for an “A” while others are content with a “B,” someone in the team usually picks up the slack to ensure an “A” on the project, resulting in unequal work load distribution. Doing more work than others may lead to overt conflict or hidden resentment, either of which intensify future opposition to team projects. Over time, these negative experiences with teams and team projects may influence retention, persistence, and program completion for busy adult students. Anecdotal evidence from student services personnel and faculty in this study suggested that some adult students withdrew from academic programs due to continual problems with teams.

Perhaps the most important finding in this study was that while adult students may like their teammates as people, most working adult students preferred to work alone and did not believe working in teams enhanced their learning. A preference for individual work and belief that teams did not enhance learning were even more distinct among adult students pursuing online business degrees. This may suggest that online adult students do not expect any team work or team projects, as Smith and colleagues (2011) proposed. Differences between online and on-campus student perceptions could also be the result of communication challenges. In on-campus courses, students see each other weekly and can communicate more easily and quickly to plan the project, assign responsibilities, and verify individual progress. However, communication may be delayed in online courses, as teammates await responses from other busy adults who are juggling a variety of responsibilities and are often in different time zones. In accelerated online courses lasting 5-8 weeks, communication delays can be catastrophic to team projects.

Instructors who utilize teams and graded team projects in accelerated courses for the many benefits they can provide must be cognizant of the fact that most adults enter their classrooms with pre-determined attitudes about team projects. With this in mind, instructors must become astute at “selling” the value of team learning and team projects to adult learners and provide valid and meaningful reasons for using team projects to enhance learning and professional preparation. Additionally, instructors must develop team projects and specific strategies to help ensure accountability and timely communication within teams, especially in online courses where communication problems can block effective team performance. Last but
not least, assessment procedures should discourage free riding and include process-related feedback from each team member at the conclusion of the project. Implementation of these strategies may be even more important in accelerated online courses.

Although this study was limited to one institution with a unique academic team structure, results provide insights about how adult learners might be experiencing teams and team projects, an area that has seldom been explored in the literature. These insights can help practitioners design more effective team experiences that minimize frustration and maximize learning for adult students.

References


