

Enhance Teamwork Outcomes Through Guanxi

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ABSTRACT

According to a recent article in the Chronicle of Higher Education (April 2011), team assignments are increasingly prevalent in business schools. Not only are they ubiquitous, they are critically important, as our university's strategic plan states, "collaboration and teamwork are the keys to creating successful leaders."¹ Despite this prominence, teamwork assignments are often flawed, particularly by students who free-ride on the efforts of others and neither contribute nor learn from the projects. We suggest faculty seek insight from the Asian concept, guanxi, to improve the quality of team dynamics and project outcomes.

Keywords: Pedagogy; Group Dynamics; Asian Culture

INTRODUCTION

Business schools are encountering major challenges ranging from the proliferation of for-profit corporate universities to new industry-academic partnerships.² While the pace of change can be dizzying, we can translate challenges into opportunities by rethinking not only what we teach but how we teach it.

Further, our increasingly globalized world abounds in new inspirations. The Asian concept of "guanxi" suggests a new approach to team assignments, a key pedagogy in business education. If done well, collaborative assignments and well-functioning teams give traditional business programs an advantage and provide network externalities that enhance student success in the future.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Team assignments are prevalent in business schools as described by a recent article in the Chronicle of Higher Education: "small cells of 20-year-olds are analyzing why a company has succeeded or failed (Drexel University); team-writing 15-page digital marketing plans (James Madison University); or preparing 45-minute PowerPoint presentations on one of the three primary functions of management (Tulane University)."³ At Philadelphia University, the primacy of teamwork is clearly stated in the university's strategic plan "to promulgate an academic learning community... where ongoing collaboration and teamwork are the keys to creating successful leaders."⁴

"The pedagogical theory is that managers need to function in groups, and so a management education without such experiences would be like medical training without a residency"⁵. However, National surveys of student progress show that business students are less engaged and do not demonstrate the same progress as other

¹ <http://www.philau.edu/strategicinitiatives/dec.htm>

² The business school in transition: New opportunities in management development, knowledge transfer and knowledge creation, D Harrington, A. Kearney *Journal of European Industrial Training*, v. 35, no. 2, 2011, p.116

³ Business Educators Struggle to Put Students to Work - Faculty - *The Chronicle of Higher ...* Page 3 <http://chronicle.com/article/Business-Education-Not-Always/127108/> 4/14/2011

⁴ <http://www.philau.edu/strategicinitiatives/dec.htm>

⁵ Ob cit. p.3

majors in writing and critical thinking skills. There may be selection bias in how students select their majors (practical v. curious) and other explanations for the learning gap identified by the surveys, but the Chronicle suggests that team assignments may be less efficacious, or such assignments teach skills not measured by national learning assessments.

Certainly some group projects are more effective than others; however, many professors would concede that group projects can be difficult to manage and may allow weaker students to persist when individual assignments would result in failure. "I understand that teamwork is important, but in my opinion, they need to do more to deal with the problem of slackers," says Justin Triplett, a 2010 Radford graduate who is completing his first year in the university's M.B.A. program.⁶

Managing team assignments becomes even more problematic when the team members come from diverse disciplines and field experiences. While diversity adds complexity, it is recognized as very valuable. Hart Research Associates recently released a survey on employers' perspectives on college education. 71% of the employers value "teamwork skills and the ability to collaborate with others in diverse group settings"⁷, confirming the importance of the diversity or multidisciplinary collaboration. The value of multidisciplinary work is further explained: "students learn to be proficient in their discipline, conversant across the contributing disciplines, and cognizant of the potential for their disciplinary knowledge to be transferrable to other, perhaps emerging, disciplines. This approach not only prepares students for future directions in their professions, but also provides a platform for innovative thinking."⁸

To be successful leaders tomorrow, students today will need to learn to uncover new solutions, strategies and frameworks. This is "essential to address the complex problems of the day where prior solutions may not exist and context references may be insufficient."⁹ Such skills are nurtured in the communications and challenges inherent in multidisciplinary teams where a common language doesn't exist and the connections are yet unidentified.

GROUP DYNAMICS AND GUANXI

Education is the exchange of ideas; imagine if this exchange takes place in an environment such as Kevin Kelly and Steven Johnson describe in an interview on entrepreneurship: "Innovation comes from creating environments where ideas connect.... We should think of ideas as connections, in our brains and among people. Ideas are not self-contained things; they're more like ecologies and networks. They travel in clusters."¹⁰

Ideas as networks, clusters... innovation and imagination run amok, undergraduates exercising their most energetic contributions! And yet, our teaching experience may be more consistent with the observations of Donald R. Bacon, a business professor at the University of Denver. From his study of group projects, he found a perverse dynamic: "Many of the groups that functioned most smoothly were those in which the least learning occurred. That's because students divided up the tasks in ways they felt comfortable with. The math whiz would do the statistical work; the English minor drafted the analysis."¹¹ Such a group may be diverse but they don't collaborate or share ideas across disciplines, nor learn the others' languages and thought processes to come up with a new innovative approach; they simply dissect the task and deliver their piece, missing "ideas as connections" that lead to innovative thinking.

"Then there's the most common complaint about groups: Some shoulder all the work, the rest do nothing."¹² Anyone who has assigned team projects is familiar with the free-rider problem. This can be solved with

⁶ Ibid p.3

⁷ Raising the Bar: Employers' Views on College Learning in the Wake of the Economic Downturn, Hart Research Associates, Washington DC, January 2010 p.2.

⁸ The College of Design, Engineering and Commerce, discussion paper, Gwynne Keathley, Heather McGowan, Randy Swearer, and D.R. Widder, Fall 2010, p.5

⁹ ibid p. 19

¹⁰ *Wired Magazine*, October 2010, p. 122.

¹¹ Business Educators Struggle to Put Students to Work - Faculty - *The Chronicle of Higher ...* Page 4 <http://chronicle.com/article/Business-Education-Not-Always/127108/> 4/14/2011 p.4

¹² Ibid. p 4.

frequent reporting by groups and within groups, ranking effort of each team member. Unless the reporting is then elevated by high level mentoring by the professor along each step, it is more of a record keeping function reminiscent of junior high, and less likely to result in the intellectual exchange of ideas desired. Treating students as though they are in junior high can have the adverse effect of their meeting one's lowest expectations.

Faculty can learn an intercultural lesson from Asia. We can use the Asian concept of Guanxi to escape mundane team dysfunctions and aspire to create environments where ideas connect and innovation and true collaboration reign, as described by Kelly and Johnson.

Guanxi is a central idea in Chinese society. At its most basic, *guanxi* describes a personal connection between two people in which one is able to prevail upon another to perform a favor or service, or be prevailed upon. *Guanxi* can also be used to describe a network of contacts, which an individual can call upon when something needs to be done, and through which he or she can exert influence on behalf of another. In addition, *guanxi* can describe a state of general understanding between two people: "he/she is aware of my wants/needs and will take them into account when deciding her/his course of future actions which concern or could concern me without any specific discussion or request".¹³

Embracing *guanxi* can improve team learning as described in the following example. During study abroad in Hong Kong, my American students were assigned a team project and showed up ready to parse the assignment according to their strengths, as Prof. Baker describes. However, the Chinese students decided it would be a good time to share a meal. At the next team meeting, they still did not "get down to business" but rather shared another meal. This happened several times and as the assignment due date approached my students started to panic. Their fears were not realized. When they finally discussed the assignment, they were able to collaborate effectively and each member contributed. The free-riding was eliminated as no one would have wanted to disappoint the group.

The Chinese students took the time to establish relationships before embarking on the assignment; only then did they fulfill their assignment. This differs from what typically happens in my classes. The students divvy up the assignment and then some students do not follow through while some follow through poorly (free-riders on the efforts of the more ambitious students). How much better would it be if each felt responsible to the group because of the established relationship? A second example might be if an acquaintance called with car trouble 100 miles away and needed a ride, I'd look for transportation solutions. Alternatively, if a close friend makes the same call, I'm in the car without delay.

ACHIEVING GUANXI

In order to establish *guanxi*, assignments must be part of a continuing collaborative approach to learning. Students should work together during class time and perhaps establish study groups for homework throughout the semester. Then a project requiring teamwork is much less likely to encounter free-riders.

If class is generally conducted with students sitting at desks, taking notes, taking individual tests and doing homework on their own, they are not likely to be equipped with the communication skills to reveal uncertainties, willingness to explore for answers and confidence to contribute strengths with clarity and humility. They will be the rugged individualists, not the collaborative innovators. We need to purposefully introduce and foster group dynamics throughout the semester. If we succeed, team assignments will help build a network of thinkers sharing ideas, not individuals each contributing some distinct element, but rather a nexus of creativity.

¹³ Cohen, Jerome (December 11, 2007), "A just legal system", *International Herald Tribune*, <http://www.iht.com/articles/2007/12/11/opinion/edcohen.php>; Ansfield, Jonathan (December 17, 2007), "Where Guanxi Rules", *Newsweek*

ASSESSMENT

After an intensive short course on product development and innovation, the students were surveyed to capture their assessment of the multidisciplinary team experience. Their comments (edited down) follow.

Question: In what way did working in multidisciplinary teams enhance the learning experience, and in what way was this format challenging?

*Working with multidisciplinary teams helps gain knowledge about other majors and also their "language" that they speak in their major. **Learning their "language" is one of the challenges that comes across in groups.***

*By working in multidisciplinary teams, we learned a lot about each other's majors and how we work and learn. It was challenging because at first it was different because **I've only ever worked in groups with the same major as me.***

The smaller teams helped us get to know each other better and discuss the project in more depth.

*People from **different disciplines think differently, making an interesting interaction** in the team. Understanding the way that these different people think and communicating design to them is a challenging aspect.*

*It **can be difficult** to work with people of a different major because they are taught very different ways of working and presenting, but it is good to know how to make it work.*

*Being in multidisciplinary teams allowed me to see both the Design and Business side of what goes on. Working with Business students is always a learning experience, mainly in terms of knowing **how to communicate** with them and how to best explain my ideas.*

*By working in multidisciplinary teams, it gives you a wider range of thinking. As a design student, I think in a much different way than someone that is a business student and by putting us together and working together on the same project, **it makes us learn from each other and teach each other our different ways of thinking.** This helps us become more well rounded in our different areas of studies because it makes us look outside of what we are used to and out of our comfort zones to find ways of doing what we do. Some of the challenges are always scheduling between group members having us all be from different disciplines makes us have different priorities outside of this project, so juggling time management is one of the hardest things to do.*

*It's helpful, especially because industrial designers **aren't as good with the numbers** and we do our work differently. It's challenging to not have class time to focus.*

The multidisciplinary team approach worked well with the students and provided a good understanding of the various disciplines represented for all of the participants.

*Working in the teams allowed us to be able to **bounce ideas off each other.** We had to come up with 100 observations and it was great to have people on your teams notice something about the project that you might not have picked up on.*

Multidisciplinary teams allows for many different opinions and viewpoints, which is helpful in the learning experience.

*The multi-disciplinary faculty team has proven to be a benchmarking experience for me. I measure other teams against this one. I have worked in many teams before featuring 1 or 2 disciplines. This experience was better in some ways because of the **mutual shared discoveries presented by the location, project content,** and the personalities of the participants. A challenging aspect was in finding adequate time to focus energies on the project when the team returned home. This was a surprise; we were more able to focus and collaborate, working in a foreign location (from a professor).*

CONCLUSION

The author chose to focus on the positive aspects of guanxi relationships but every coin has two sides. The negative connotations of guanxi include nepotism and discrimination. At what point is fostering relationships favoritism? When a parent cooks dinner for the family, is he/she the provider or servant? When an Orthodox Jew in the diamond district trusts his deliveries only to another Orthodox Jew, is that nepotism, discrimination, or a relationship of trust that exceeds contractual law? One can discuss guanxi in the context of cultural perceptions and different social norms; one can contrast guanxi to blat in Russia or cronyism in the USA.

The recommendation of this paper is to learn from guanxi, create positive outcomes for team assignments by developing networks and deepening those connections. We can improve the way we teach by creating a learning environment to create real teamwork synergies, teams built on investing time to get to know one another; this is particularly important with diverse, multidisciplinary teams. Professionally, the author has built up relationships with Asian colleagues and has found that when calling on these partners for collaboration on a project, the contribution is forthcoming and engaging, just as one would respond to their initiatives.

Because team assignments are so prominent in the college business pedagogy, we need to examine how we deliver the collaborative, teamwork skills that will serve our students well beyond the final project accomplishment. It is not just what we teach but how we teach it that matters. Introducing guanxi into the classroom learning environment will discourage free-riders by their own volition and will more fully engage multidisciplinary members to learn from one another. This will create a network of ideas, from diverse team members, contributing and exploring new ways of thinking; this is the basis for the innovative culture of team building that will be foundational for the success of future leaders.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Susan Christoffersen, Ph.D. associate professor of economics, School of Business Administration, at Philadelphia University, earned her Ph.D. in Economics, with Distinction in Microeconomics from NYU, 1990. Her earliest theoretical works focus on international issues: innovation races; impact of research/development subsidies; published in: *Applied Business Research* and the *Journal of Global Competitiveness*. Textile/apparel industries provide an area in which this theoretical work is applied, publications in *Empirical Economics*, *Journal of Business and Economic Studies*, etc. Her pedagogical work appears in: *American Economist*, *Journal of Financial Education*, *Journal of Business*, and the *Journal of Educational Leadership*. Elected: board of Eastern Economics Association, Am. Assoc. of Economic and Financial Experts, and serves as referee for various journals. First member of the School of Business to garner prestigious Nat'l Textile Center multiyear grant as well as Project Director of US Dept of Education Business International Education grant. Her presentation at the HK Federation won one of six global Outstanding Initiative Awards for business-university outreach training/dissemination, and currently she is the Director of the East Asia Business Center at Philadelphia University. E-mail: Christoffersens@philau.edu

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