TEAM LEARNING: BACK ON TRACK

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ABSTRACT

The value of team efforts has been amply demonstrated for many years. Following the Japanese lead, team applications have been widely adopted by US firms in a variety of industries. The literature is rich with publications dealing with team-based work systems in marketing, especially in the areas of product development, field sales, and account management in advertising.

TEAM LEARNING

The education literature indicates in excess of 600 experimental studies of learning teams over the past 60 years in diverse educational environments. However, the literature as well as anecdotal reportage suggests that faculty attitudes toward groups are not uniformly enthusiastic.

Authorities in this area make clear the important distinction between groups and team learning (aka collaborative learning). These authors identify three types of learning environments: 1) individualistic situations in which student learning objectives are independent of their colleagues (as with an established grade scale); 2) competitive grading based on a curve (some win, others lose); 3) team (collaborative) learning which employs small student groups working together to maximize their own and each other's learning.

The team approach implies a clear, realistic set of learning objectives as well as the will to achieve them. Also required is a commitment to the success of each member of the learning team. It implies that students actively assist each other's learning because the fate of the team requires it. Successful teams hold each member personally liable for their share of the work.

PROCEDURE

In each of the previous three semesters, a single section of marketing communications was randomly selected for organization in team learning format. Teams of 3-5 students were assigned weekly goals based on successful completion of a series of forty study guides that were normally prepared for each class at the beginning of the semester. A more complete description of the course transformation, policy and administration is available from the author.

Classes met twice weekly for two 75-minute periods. The first meeting was lecture format, however, the second was set aside for team discussions and exchange of information. The instructor acted as a consultant visiting each team. Completed study guides were collected weekly from a randomly chosen member of each team. They were graded, returned and critiqued the following week. Team members shared corrected study guides. The team component accounted for 35% of the total grade.

An incentive program provided a five point bonus to an entire team when all members achieved a "B" grade or higher on an examination. In addition, students with an earned "B" average were excused from the comprehensive final examination. Teams were permitted to fire recalcitrants, due process observed.

RESULTS

The team format was assessed by comparing the results of two essay midterms administered to all sections each semester. In the first semester, a comparison of the team v. lecture section scores indicated a clear superiority for the teams as measured by differences in midterm medians. Student preferences for the team format were high as were the instructor ratings. Surprisingly, the second semester median differences on the first midterm were slightly lower for the team section though the second midterm results indicated a modest superiority. The third semester midterm results again showed a clear advantage for the teams.

Overall, this three semester trial has demonstrated a nearly consistent advantage for the team format. These experiences, data from informal class debriefings at the end of each semester as well as narrative comments on the formal course evaluation questionnaires led to the following guidelines for team teaching:

1. Staffing resources must match class size.
2. Teams should have adequate small group facilities.
3. Teams must develop and enforce clear performance standards.
4. Team-based incentives enhance the results.
5. Team assignments should minimize student work avoidance strategies.
6. Teams do not administer themselves. They require supervision, encouragement, cheerleading.
7. Instructor complacency is deadly.

For references and further information, please contact the author at the above address.