

# RETHINKING TEAM BASED SKILLS

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## ABSTRACT

Given transforming forces changing the workforce, developing team-based skills will continue to be vital in the 21st century workplace. The article describes how a service learning project used in a business communication class captured data focusing on team-based skills. From action research, practical data for developing team-based skills are identified. Advice is provided for developing team-based skills that can be used to enhance business communication course content.

**Key Words:** business communication, team-based skills, service learning

## INTRODUCTION

A major challenge faced by business communication professors is developing team-based skills, e.g. problem solving, meeting management, writing reports, and delivering presentations. Complicating this challenge in both the academic and workplace environments are team member differences, e.g. age, cultural, gender, and technological (Colvin. 2006; Vines, 2003; Knudson, 2012.)

To put the challenge into perspective using one of the above cited differences, age diversity, four different generations in the workplace must be included (Beamer & Varner. 2001; Bell & Narz, 2007; Waxer, 2009; Sauderson, 2009). The four generations are: Traditionalists (born before 1946), Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964), Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980), and Generation Y (born after 1980). Each of these generations has its own "generational communication." Subsequently, they will also have different perspectives that can influence their work ethics: Traditionalists (value hard work, sacrifice and a strong sense of right and wrong), Baby Boomers (rights to privacy, due process and freedom of speech), Generation X (independent, self-directed and resourceful), and Generation Y (active, self-preserving mind-set in the workplace focusing development of personal skills). Related literature suggests in order to close the "team-based skill gaps" and gain understanding, inhibitors towards team- building should be examined (Carrell, et al., 2006; Sauderson. 2009).

One available method to examine inhibitors is the use of self-directed teams. In theory, self-directed teams are based on internal motivation being more dominant than external. Accountability to team members is viewed as more effectual than accountability to superiors (Fisher, 2000; Druskat & Wheeler, 2004). The self-directed method promotes building communication and

interpersonal relations. When this successfully occurs, two positive outcomes are acceptance of diverse viewpoints and increased productivity (Landsberg & Pfau, 2005).

A key argument often made by industry is the lack of course content that equips future employees with team-based skills required by the business community (Bailey, et al., 2005; Bell & Narz, 2007). Exploring team member differences noted prior provide opportunities to collect data and develop authentic reality-based course content that can be used to develop team-based skills. With this in mind, the author of this article, a business professor, set out to collect data using a reality-based service-learning project.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The subjects involved in this study were thirty undergraduate business majors enrolled in a business communication course. Traditional lectures inclusive of real world cases from industry focused on team-building exercises that included opportunities to reflect on key team skills, conduct research, and apply knowledge via team-based activities.

Next, in a proactive response given the university's objective to provide high-impact experiences and the college's mission to provide reality-based education, a service-learning project—Communication Audit for a Non-Profit Organization--was selected to provide learners with an opportunity for developing team-based skills.

Holistic pedagogy was applied in terms of Dewey's practical idealism which addresses methods to lessen the gap disparity between development of interpersonal and decision-making skills beyond the traditional lecture. One of Dewey's most significant concepts about instruction was the reflective method. In this method the learner first recognizes a problem and then formulates a hypothesis that offers possible solutions or outcomes. Through reflection and experimentation, the hypothesis is then tested so that the learner can draw a conclusion (Miller, 2000). In this project, learners engaged in the decision-making process by practicing team-based skills, prior to and during a service-learning project that required them to consider multiple perspectives and factors, while gathering relevant information to solve the task under review.

## **TASK BACKGROUND**

### **Academic Setting**

The Business Communication is a core course for business majors, e.g. general business, marketing, management, supply chain, insurance and risk management, accounting, finance, international business, enterprise information systems (formerly computer and information systems). The course also serves multidisciplinary, e.g. criminal justice, urban education, engineering, curriculum requirements. Given the importance of the subject area, this positioning mirrors an interrelated environment of the global marketplace. This is relevant in rethinking development of team-based skills focusing on bridging the gap between theory and practice.

### **Industry Setting**

A nonprofit organization was selected that provides parking assistance to families experiencing extended stays in the Texas Medical center. The assistance primarily involves random acts of kindness e.g., randomly paying for parking. A member of the organization, also enrolled in the business communication course, offered a challenge in terms of experiencing an authentic real world project (service learning) rather than simulated in-class assignments.

Learners enrolled in the Business Communication course accepted the challenge and assumed the role of business consultants (self-directed discipline-based teams), and conducted a Communication Audit for the organization.

Some activities included summarizing critical information, debating causes, and suggesting recommendations (not solutions) analyzing the advantages and disadvantages associated with the organization's random acts of kindness plan. Five discipline-based teams (general business, marketing, supply chain, finance, and enterprise information systems) that reflected workplace diversity -- age, culture, gender, etc. - were formed. Team members were to listen, to practice writing and verbal skills, and to build on business knowledge while developing team skills, e.g. problem solving, meeting management, writing reports, and delivering presentations. This method facilitates development of measureable learner outcomes using Bloom's Taxonomy - (lower level) remembering\* understanding- applying ->analyzing -\*evaluating - creating (higher level). Thereby: allowing learners to - Do + Observe +Think+ Plan (Kolb, 1984).

## RESULTS

The results were consistent with relevant literature that suggests the need for developing team-based skills. Data suggested a high number of participants experienced and or demonstrated a lack of skills required to perform duties and responsibilities expected by the business community. The following are two selected examples given the cited challenge above, age diversity.

### **Bloom's Taxonomy Levels**

*Remembering*-(lower level) Each team was instructed to attend a board meeting held by the nonprofit organization. The objective was to encourage members to improve listening skills. Members were encouraged to take notes, compare and contrast findings after the meeting, and compile information as a team. The goal was to have learners examine their listening skills (recall of key content/problems) using a peer assessment-team based collaboration.

*Findings*- Meeting Management - teams experienced problems with "individual" responsibility. Examples included limited time discussing, clarifying, and assigning team roles to ensure self-directed responsibilities or assigning members to attend meetings who demonstrated poor listening skills. The results were a significant amount of teams did not collect an applicable amount of data for review focusing key content (problems) from meetings.

*Creating* (higher level) Each team was instructed to contribute significant findings to a Wiki. The objective was to have each discipline-based team contribute to a Wiki in terms of using primary research to draft a formal report with findings from the Communication Audit. Each discipline-based team was expected to work on decision skills and contribute –plan, research, outline via posts to the Wiki, before drafting a final document.

## FINDINGS

Writing reports, teams experienced delays given "technological" challenges. Examples included team members sporadically monitoring electronic communications or unable to contribute given limited knowledge of various electronic media-emails, texts messaging, wikis, and other workplace software.

The implications from data collected will allow further research; this study limited the scope in terms of age diversity and team- based skills. Because classroom-setting mirror the

workplace, it is plausible to suggest given the four different generations in the workplace noted earlier, the effect of age diversity is evident. The generations outlined above have different values, expectations, and communication skills related to various experiences and environments. As such, these differences influence team-based behaviors, and at times inhibit performance.

Findings of this nature allow opportunities to collaborate with stakeholders, internal and external about methods that can be used to develop team-based skills. As such, the author believes action research, a disciplined process of inquiry conducted by and for those taking action (teacher inquiry or practitioner research) of this nature is valuable. The data provides insight about how to develop and/or rethink business communication course content focusing team-based skills in a reality-based setting.

### SUMMARY

Relevant literature is used to summarize and suggest implications for developing team-based skill. "Students are faced with the challenge of structuring and prioritizing a very loosely defined problem and expected to carry it forward to completion on a short-time horizon, all carefully choreographed in cooperation with each other, volunteer workers, material donors, technical experts, and the client. Some students enter the course with little knowledge of project management tools, and others may have relatively strong expertise. The mixture proves to be one of great strengths of the course because the experiential teaching vehicle allows each person to learn at his or her level of need. Additionally, cooperation among those with vary levels of knowledge creates a fertile environment for mentoring (Brown, 2000 p. 54).

Because findings revealed gaps with respect to theory and practical team-based skills, these findings are useful in designing course content and applicable teaching methods for development of team-based skills required and expected by the business community. There is need for continuous collaborations and research between academicians and practitioners in order to rethink business communication course content focusing team-based skills.

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Chynette Nealy is an associate professor of business administration at the University of Houston Downtown. In her work, she is directly concerned with teaching and researching skills that can be applied to bridging the gap between theory and practice.