Facilitating Team Learning Means More Than Just Assigning Team Projects

Nearly all the courses Muhammad Betz teaches for the University of Phoenix feature team learning, an element he hopes to include in the online courses he teaches at his home institution, Southeastern Oklahoma State University. To do that successfully, he will have to do more than simply modify his assignments.

Betz, who has taught or mentored more than 100 graduate-level courses for the University of Phoenix, admires the UOP's approach to online team learning. Curriculum specialists design the courses, and there are other groups that specialize in the logistics of running the courses. "When the instructor gets the course, it's prepackaged and structured to accommodate the UOP requirement of having online learning teams," Betz says.

Students begin their courses prepared for online teams as well. At the start of the master's education program, students take a course called "Professional Communication," in which they learn, among other things, how to work in teams in the online learning environment.

This foundation course and the UOP's practice of serving adult professionals "makes the courses more reflective of professional life," which is well suited for team learning, Betz says.

Teams in the UOP courses generally consist of three to five students who collaborate on team assignments throughout each course, which normally runs between three and eight weeks.

Team collaboration "takes the instructor out of the mix," Betz says. "It's just the students inter-acting by themselves. The only thing that the instructor has say in is the evaluation of the products the teams submit. It's a different type of interaction. I can see a stark difference between the one university that requires small online teams of students versus the traditional university where we're offering online courses. My students at

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[Southeastern Oklahoma State University] have interaction, but it's 19 people interacting en masse, which doesn't promote the type of collegiality and camaraderie found in my UOP courses."

In addition to the team-learning preparation students receive, Betz uses a team charter and weekly team evaluations in his UOP courses to promote productive team learning.

Team Charter

The team charter is an online document Betz requires each team to fill out during the first week of his UOP courses. It includes

- **Course and contact information**
- **Team member skill inventory** — the skills, special aptitudes, or knowledge each team member brings to the team
- **Learning team goals** — the team's goals for the course in terms of completing the assignments, quality of work, and team meetings and potential barriers to meeting those goals
- **Ground rules** — protocols for meeting times, roles, responsibilities, and methods of contact
- **Conflict management** — the team's list of potential sources of conflict and how to manage and prevent affective (unproductive) conflict while making the most of cognitive (productive) conflict.

Betz gives students the freedom to decide how they will operate in their teams, but he does review the team charters and offers suggestions based on the information included in them.

The charter removes the element of surprise as to how the team operates, and if there is a conflict, the team already has a plan on how to handle it. "Frequently, they'll schedule appointments to get together using instant messaging or conference telephone calls," Betz says. "That's their own doing."

Betz has found that instant messaging is the most popular form of communication for conflict resolution in his UOP courses.

Of course, not all conflict can be resolved among the team members without outside help. It's the instructor's job to "patch up differ-

ences, translate communication to facilitate understanding, and suggest solutions if conflict does occur," Betz says.

Team evaluation

Because up to 35 percent of the assignments in Betz's UOP courses are team assignments, Betz needs to include a means for holding individuals accountable for their contributions to the assignments without constantly monitoring each team's interactions.

In a course called "E-Education in the Global Environment," teams put together a best practices manual for online learning. Each week they cover a list of six to 10 points which they subdivide for individual team member to complete. Early in the week each team member submits his or her work to a designated team member who puts the various parts of the group's assignments together for submission. (Team members take turns putting weekly assignments together.)

Betz grades each team assignment as a whole because other than the relatively infrequent interaction he has with teams (to help resolve conflicts, for example), he has little firsthand knowledge of the work of individual team members. This is intentional to provide students with a forum that allows students to interact without the instructor's interference.

Betz requires each student to fill out a weekly team evaluation form. On the form, each team member ranks everybody on his or her team on a scale of 1 to 4 with 4 being full contribution, and each team member's grade is based in part on the team's evaluation of his or her contribution.

This type of evaluation increases the likelihood that each team member will do his or her fair share of the work.

Benefits of online team learning

The evaluation form and the team charter greatly reduce the amount of affective conflict in the course while providing the benefits of the team-learning experience, Betz says.

What are those benefits?

"You not only get the learning that you would get from your own individual effort, but there are points that accrue from the other perspectives when you get the team involved. Sometimes it's significant. Sometimes it's not significant. I'm not trying to sugarcoat this. Not every assignment succeeds in increasing the total amount of learning that takes place.

"Even though we take a lot of precautionary measures, some students will have the comply-to-get-by attitude — the students do what they have to do and move on. But they're going to have to be talking to each other. They're going to have to be collaborating. And if they have a discussion about the content, they're bound to pick up more points if there's more than one perspective," Betz says.

Although modifying team projects for the online environment "narrows the scope of the assignment" somewhat — instead of a giving an in-class presentation, the group may post a PowerPoint presentation — collaborating online offers several advantages over face-to-face collaboration.

The key is the asynchronous nature of most of this collaboration. When students are interacting asynchronously, they don't have to worry about the distractions that are quite common in face-to-face collaboration — cell phones, small talk, team members getting up to get coffee or go to the restroom. "It's asynchronous communication so when you're in that team newsgroup or communication board, you're focused solely on the content. And I think that the virtual teaming in that respect, because it's more disciplined, increases the learning."

Contact Muhammad Betz at mbetz@ sosu.edu. @

librarians who are content experts in different areas, and in some cases they enroll in online courses where they can interact directly with the students inside the content management system. "I think that's a tremendous leverage of their expertise, and it really helps with the workload as well," Scheuermann says.

Librarians also can be a resource for students who need help with library issues. At Drexel, some online instructors have created a special forum for library and research issues called "Ask a Librarian." @