Are You an Online Team Player?
A Pilot Study

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this pilot case study was to answer the following research questions: How do previous experiences affect students’ attitudes toward online teamwork? When do students’ attitudes toward online teamwork first develop and why? Using a social constructivist framework, a qualitative case study design was utilized to conduct an online open-ended survey and online focus group in one online Organizational Leadership 300-level course. Findings revealed that students’ attitudes toward online teamwork are in part predicated upon previous online team experiences. Students identified a number of challenges with online teamwork, many of which related to personality issues, slackers or members who do not contribute his or her share of the work, and poor communication. Generally, students’ attitudes and perceptions toward online teamwork began in college after their first online team experience. In order for online teamwork to be effective, instructors may consider designing team projects that include methods to ensure both team and individual accountability, promote team cohesiveness, and foster frequent communication among team members.

Keywords: Collaborative Technologies, Online Teamwork, Postsecondary Education, Student Attitudes Toward Teamwork, Student Perceptions Toward Teamwork, Virtual Teamwork

INTRODUCTION

Traditional forms of teamwork have taken place with groups communicating synchronously in a face-to-face setting to achieve a common goal. With computer and telecommunication technology, teamwork now includes anywhere, anytime, on-demand asynchronous collaboration in learning (Chutnik & Grzesik, 2009; Ocker & Yaverbaum, 2001). The terms online teams and virtual teams are often used interchangeably to describe the use of computer technology to collaborate across the boundaries of time and distance to achieve a mutually supporting goal (Martins, Gilson, & Maynard, 2004). Online teams in distance education are comprised of groups of people working together to reach objectives that require a high level of interdependence (Williams, Duray, & Venkateshwar, 2006). Team members willing and able to work together in a cooperative approach are more likely to achieve a common goal, (Lick, 2000).

Online Teamwork and Postsecondary Education

According to a Graduate Employability Survey by the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education (CIHE) (Archer & Davison, 2008), 85% of employers rank team-working skills as second only to communication as the most important skill sought among new graduates. Employers recommended to students that they build team-working skills through college.

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experiences and be able to demonstrate those skills on their resumes and in job interviews (Archer & Davison, 2008). Employers expect new employees to have at least fundamental knowledge of the importance of teamwork skills to their organization (Ulloa & Adams, 2004). The skills needed to interact with others can be learned through teamwork (Pfaff & Huddleston, 2003). Student knowledge and success is improved through group work; it is a very valuable experience (Hassanien, 2007). Members of a team bring diversity in perspectives, ideas, and experiences to team projects that an individual working alone may not possess.

In response to employment demands and rising enrollments in online education, the use of online teamwork in postsecondary education is also increasing (Rawlings, 2012). Dool (2010) reported, “More than 2.7 million students are pursuing education transnationally, with the United States leading the way, with more than 570,000 foreign students” (p. 161). Since online students are often geographically dispersed and face-to-face teamwork is not possible, instructors may consider designing courses that allow students to learn and practice online teamwork skills. It may be advantageous for students in online courses to be given opportunities for gaining online team experience in preparation for employment.

While there have been many research studies conducted about the importance of teamwork, there has been less research about students’ attitudes toward teamwork, and even less about their attitudes toward online teamwork. This study attempted to contribute to existing knowledge by exploring phenomenon that may affect students’ attitudes toward online teamwork. Identifying possible themes between certain factors that may affect students’ attitudes toward online teamwork can be beneficial for instructional design.

The theoretical foundation for this study was based on a social constructivist (Vygotsky, 1978; Roschelle, 1992) approach in which students’ understanding is developed on the foundation of collaboration as a method that can steadily move forward to unity of understanding. Social constructivism stresses group communication as a foundation for structuring information (Doolittle, 1999). At the heart of constructivism, students develop understanding and meaning based on their experiences rather than through a teacher-directed channel (Fosnot, 1996; Stacey, 2002; Steffe & Gale, 1995). Vygotsky (1978) believed learning takes place in a social context as people increase their knowledge through communication with others. According to Doolittle (1999), the theory of constructivism has origins in both philosophy and psychology that go back as far as Dewey (1938), who wrote that each experience affects on some level similar situations in the future. Constructivist philosophy and model of constructivist epistemology seems to have critical inferences for teaching methodologies in distance learning (Tenebaum, Naidu, Olugbemiro, & Austin, 2001). “Applying a constructivist framework to the development of educational courses requires learners to come together to discuss, learn, and distribute knowledge throughout the entire community of practice” (Gabriel, 2004, p. 55). Students learn from each other and instructors through online communities that may include discussion boards, online chats, instant messaging (IM), and short message service (SMS).

There are five characteristics that differentiate online communication from face-to-face communication: communication through a group forum such as discussion boards, email, chat, or other form of technology; access to the course from any geographic location; access to the course at any time of day; text-based communication that may include multi-media; and communication that takes place via Internet connection (Harasim, 2000). The last four of these characteristics can be accomplished via email; however, only online learning can provide for many-to-many communication (Harasim, 2000). In online teamwork, these attributes form the stage for collaboration and learning. Within the constructivist framework, I utilized these guiding characteristics to structure my case study that explored students’ feelings toward online teamwork based on past online team experiences and knowledge constructs. The purpose of this study was to answer the
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