

A Convergence of Perspectives: Enhancing Students' Employability by Becoming Members of the Same Team

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Abstract

Universities are challenged to equip graduates with transferable key generic skills for use in varied contexts within 'real' workplace environments; that is, to ensure the development of diversified graduates who are 'work ready' for the twenty-first century. Therefore, it is critical for students to be able to identify and articulate their ownership of generic skills and recognise their implementation potential in the workplace. The existence of diverse work teams, consisting of individuals with culturally distinct attitudes, behaviours, expectations and demands, is synonymous with 21st century workplaces. Thus, business employers recently have placed stronger emphasis on teamwork skills as being essential for entry-level employees, due largely to the economic imperatives of employment and accelerating workplace changes. The use of teamwork, along with other strategies, can substantially improve an organisation's competitive edge, performance and profitability; however, for workplace teams to realise their potential it is vital that teamwork skills are well-developed. Descriptions of how teamwork is conceptualised from the perspectives of graduating business students in a Western Australian university, and Australian business employers are presented as the basis needed to establish greater alignment between academic and employers' perspectives for developing 'work-ready' graduates. A mixed methodology was utilized to capture research participants' perspectives and experiences of teamwork in the workplace and within the context of university.

Key words: *student teams, work-based teams, teamwork, employability skills*

Introduction

A growing body of research and opinion suggests that business and industry require multi-skilled and adaptable graduates in order to remain competitive into the next century. Yet, despite increased levels of attention focused on skills development for students throughout universities worldwide (de la Harpe, Radloff and Wyber, 2000; Drummond, Nixon and Wiltshire, 1998; Leggett, Kinnear, Boyce and Bennett, 2004), criticisms continue to be leveled at business schools and of its graduates. Graduates' inadequacies have been identified as under-developed leadership abilities, little understanding of what business is about and poor teamwork skills (de la Harpe et al., 2000; Caspersz, Skene and Wu, 2005; Hart, 1999; Leggett et al., 2004). However, understanding what is meant by teamwork skills and defining an appropriate standard of skill performance can vary considerably depending on stakeholders' perspectives, namely, those of employers, students and academics.

Findings presented in this paper are the initial results of a research study that investigated the conceptualisation of teamwork from the perspectives of tertiary business students in a Western Australian university, and Australian business employers. Student research participants were actively completing their final undergraduate business unit, known as 'Capstone'; a culmination study designed to provide students with an authentic problem-based learning experience within a blended learning environment. Descriptions of how teamwork is conceptualised from the perspectives of graduating business students in a Western Australian university, and Australian business employers are presented as the basis needed to establish greater alignment between academic and employers' perspectives for developing 'work-ready' graduates.

Background Literature

National and Organizational Priorities for Skills Development

Over the past decade, there has been a stream of initiatives designed to improve the quality of teaching and learning within higher education (HE); in particular, increased focus on the skills development of students. Partly, these initiatives have been driven by national and organisational priorities (Australian Association of Graduate Employers [AAGE], 2007; Dearing, 1997; Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs [DIMA], 2000; Higher Education Council [HEC], 1992); as well as external pressures linked to rapid and changing trends in economic and trade relations, including advances in technological goods and services.

At the national level, the creation of a 'learning society' and the development of world-class university graduates are regarded as critical to the nation's economy and to the sustainability of Australia's higher education (Goldsworthy, 2002). Further, the Minister for *Immigration and Multicultural Affairs* (DIMA, 2000, p. 3) reinforced the globalisation of markets and the diffusion of multicultural aspects in Australian society by stating that "an increase in international trade and investment, and the creation of new and growing markets has shown the need to attract people with skills and qualities that businesses require to advance Australia's growing economy". Consequently, one of the significant challenges for universities is to equip graduates with transferable key generic skills for use in varied contexts within 'real' workplace environments; that is, to ensure the development of diversified graduates who are 'work-ready' for the twenty-first century. Thus, in the context of a global and knowledge-based economy, the quality of higher education which Australian universities provide is a relevant and substantial part of the nation's growth and development.

At organisational level, increased issues of accountability and demands for universities to increase the quality of students' learning have become major foci of university strategic plans and an integral part of all programs of study. As well, the creation of teaching fellowship schemes and of teaching centres, aimed both to reward excellence and to encourage innovation for excellence in learning and teaching, represent increasing recognition of the importance of university teaching at all levels (Hartley, Woods and Pill, 2005). Moreover, Australian universities that actively promote and foster a diversified teaching and learning environment are better positioned to receive the rewards and incentives offered by the Commonwealth's Learning and Teaching Performance Fund; a fund of \$83.8 million in 2007, scheduled to increase to \$113 million in 2008 (Department of Education, Science and Training [DEST], 2003). These trends now characterise higher education in many countries, albeit to varying degrees and combinations, and suggest that a focus on method rather than content is needed (Hartley, Woods and Pill, 2005; Huntington, 2005).

Collaboration in the Business and Industry Work Context

A strong indication of what business and industry expects from higher education can be drawn from an analysis of criteria that employers use when recruiting graduates. Generally speaking, there are two required domains: subject-specific knowledge and skills, and transferable skills, attitudes and behaviours. In order for graduates to succeed in the corporate world (Dimitrijevic and Engel, 2004; Nowak, Miller and Washburn, 1996), transferable skills such as teamwork, communication, leadership and critical/creative thinking skills, together with attitudes/behaviours such as learning efficiency, flexibility and respecting others' point of views and ideas have been identified as essential.

Recently, business employers have placed a stronger emphasis on teamwork skills as being essential for entry-level employees, due largely to changing workplace environments and the economic imperatives of employment. In organisations advocating and embracing the use of cross-functional, project and/or self-directed work teams, the use of teamwork and its related strategies, can improve substantially an organisation's competitive edge, performance and profitability (Caspersz et al., 2005;

Huselid, 1995). Furthermore, work teams are recognised as having the potential to enhance member motivation, production and satisfaction (Nowak et al., 1996). Baskin, Barker and Woods (2005, p. 20) contend that “the rationale for ‘cooperative interaction’ is simple: as organisations continue to decentralise decision-making and to deal with today’s complex and changing environment, there is a greater reliance on workplace teams to carry the load”. However, for workplace teams to realise their potential it is vital that teambuilding and teamwork skills are well-developed. Davis and Miller (1996, p. 69) insisted that “the ability to function effectively within them [work-based teams] will be critical to the success of new graduates”.

However, investigation of the relationship between higher education and the labour market has indicated an apparent disparity between what employers want and what higher education appears to be providing. The evidence for this critical statement is extensive (de la Harpe et al., 2000; Hart, 1999; Harvey, 2000; Leggett et al., 2004). Leggett and associates (2004) revealed that, although there was no dispute regarding the necessity of skills in both business and higher education contexts, varied emphases have been placed on different aspects of the skills. For example, in business and industry work environments, oral communication is regarded as the key communication skill, whereas in the university context, written communication receives much more attention (Leveson, 2000). Moreover, a lack of shared meaning or perspective of the skills and their basic elements; particularly for teamwork as needed in the workplace, as compared to the university context has contributed to the nebulousness of how to best teach and promote skills development in higher education that will best prepare business graduates for success in the corporate world.

Collaboration for Effective Learning in the University Context

Collaborative learning is often proposed as an effective learning and teaching approach (Delucchi, 2006; Lizzio and Wilson, 2006; Hancock, 2004; Summers, Beretvas, Svinicki and Gorin, 2005); and teamwork skills are promoted as enhancing employability and contributing to lifelong learning. Major (2005) indicated that any form of collaborative learning implies that there are two principal forms of learning occurring simultaneously; that is, learning about the topic/subject under consideration, and learning about others who are engaged in learning with you which, inevitably leads to relevant self-learning. Therefore, it seems reasonable that explicit recognition and understanding of the advantages and limitations of this pedagogical method are needed in order to enhance the learning of students, and that of oneself, as an educator.

Students involved in collaborative learning are considered active participants in the learning process; they not only gain control over their subject, but are responsible for their own learning. “Students’ responsibilities include an individual and collective self-discipline to learn, an ability to negotiate and coordinate their own program of learning, and ability to evaluate the extent and significance of their own learning” stated Clouston (2005, p. 50). Accordingly, the educator must adopt a facilitating role, form a learning partnership with students and trust them sufficiently to achieve the learning outcomes (Johnson and Tinning, 2001; Rogers, 1983). Jacques (2000) and Huntington (2005) highlighted that managing the ‘self’ when in contact with ‘others’ is interesting, rewarding and challenging work; however, educators who are responsible for facilitating student groups need to be technically competent to ensure that interactive experiences are respectful, life affirming encounters whereby student teams successfully can accomplish the learning tasks. Furthermore, educators need to be especially cognisant that the extent to which any individual student, or group of students, positively responds to particular learning experiences and opportunities will vary; students who are used to more didactic methods of teaching and learning may not understand why they are being asked to participate in, and contribute to, activities that are foreign to them (Huntington, 2005). As a result, collaborative learning activities may impede learning rather than enhancing it.

A number of research studies that have compared active learning with competitive and individualistic efforts, has shown that active learning methods generally result in: higher achievement, greater long-term retention of what is learned, more frequent use of higher-order reasoning and thinking skills,

more creative problem-solving, more willingness to take on, and persist with difficult tasks, more positive attitudes, increased willingness to share ideas and opinions with others, more intrinsic motivation for future learning, and transfer of learning from one situation to another (Johnson and Johnson, 1989; Synder, 2003). Johnson, Johnson and Smith (2007) suggested that with outcomes such as these, active learning approaches have multiple and far reaching implications on students' university experiences.

Nevertheless, Hartley (2005) suggested that the nature of student teams can be quite different from commercial/organisational teams that usually are cited in the research literature on group dynamics. He further noted that while all groups are similar in that they all have to find ways of solving problems and getting along with one another, the differences may be of more importance when attempting to understand teamwork as it occurs in student groups. Successful integration of teamwork into the curriculum in preparation for post-university employment is challenging; however adopting an inquiry-led approach into the conceptualisation of teamwork from all stakeholders' perspectives can lead to greater understanding of what is needed and how to go about it. Therefore, it is the shared responsibility of educators and employers to provide the information and opportunities for students' skills development that will better prepare them for future careers. Wlodkowski (1998) elaborated the view that, in order to help motivate students to engage in active learning, academics must clarify to students the relevance of the skills that are desired by employers. In addition to developing teaching strategies and resources aimed at integrating skills development into undergraduate curriculum, Wallace (1999, p. 6) concluded that today's learners "must view their learning path as the critical life determinant which it is and pursue it with purpose and determination".

Research Design and Methodology

Institutional Context

The study was conducted at a Western Australian (WA) university in its school of business. The institution is one of the largest in WA (40 000 students: 17 000+ international students), and has one of the leading business schools in Australia (15 000 enrolled students). Degrees obtained from the institution are mobile and internationally recognised. The university has close links with industry, business, government and the community by which it endeavors to maintain contact by offering courses that meet the standards of relevant accreditation bodies and memberships to professional associations.

Participants

Student Sample and Course Description

Student research participants were in their graduating year of study in a Bachelor of Commerce program and actively completing the business '*Capstone*' unit. '*Capstone*' is the culmination unit for the students' undergraduate degree and is a computer-mediated and network-enhanced unit designed to provide students with authentic problem-based learning experiences. Students are provided with opportunities to apply their business knowledge and experience to the management of a virtual company, and demonstrate the generic skills that employers expect from competent business graduates (Forde and Bowyer, 2006). The blended/hybrid learning environment combines face-to-face and online interaction, and involves the instructional use of cross-disciplinary teams in which students are able to work together to maximise their own, and each other's, learning.

Employer Sample

The employer sample consisted of Australian business and industry employers; representatives were from both the private and public sector and, predominantly from large organisations. A review of the literature on employability skills and graduate recruitment was also undertaken.

Data Collection

Student sample

Data from the student sample (n=319) was collected using a mixed-methods approach that involved two distinct processes. **Firstly**, a face-to-face, self-completion questionnaire was administered to the 'Capstone' students. Participants were asked to respond by indicating their position on a 5-point Likert style scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The first section of the questionnaire was designed to elicit students' responses to a number of questions measuring several scales. So as to effectively determine students' experiences and perspectives, there were a series of sub-questions within each of the overarching scales. Also, the questionnaire contained a section for participants to provide open-ended comments on their learning and teaching experiences within the study unit.

Secondly, 'Capstone' students were invited to participate in a semi-structured, face-to-face interview with the researcher. Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted to seek in-depth explanations and understanding of their teamwork experiences in, and perspectives from, the unit.

Employer sample

Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted with business and industry representatives to seek in-depth explanations and understandings of their conceptualisation of effective teamwork in the workplace. Interviewing was chosen because of its flexibility in allowing the researcher to ask complex questions, probe for more detail and seek reflective responses (Kvale, 1996). Also, socio-demographic data was collected.

Before collection of data from the wider employer sample, a pilot study was conducted to ensure that the research instrument was suitable for use (Chadwick, 1984).

Analysis

Analysis of the quantitative survey looked at the unique effect of students actively engaged in an authentic problem-based learning activity within a blended environment on the perceived importance ascribed to key generic skills development. Data from the questionnaires and interviews were analysed using SPSS version 14 and SPSS Text Analysis version 2. The quantitative survey utilised to obtain data from the student sample facilitated comparison and provided succinct statistical aggregation of the data from the wider student population (Patton, 1990). The strength of an integrated investigation added rigor to the study because of the ability to triangulate findings (Huberman and Miles, 1998; Rank, 2004).

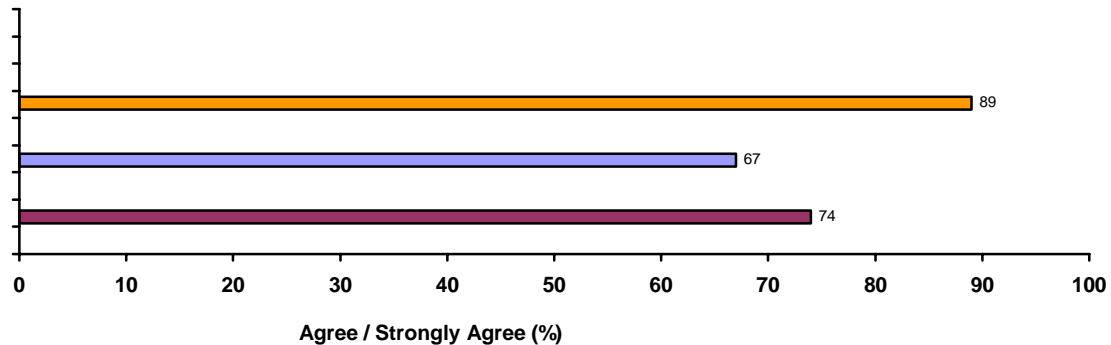
Results and Discussion

Quantitative Results

Demographically, of the students surveyed, 47% were male and 53% female. Data gathered on whether students mainly spoke English at home reported that 53% were ESL students (English as a second language), in comparison to 47% of students whose main spoken language was English. This would indicate a multicultural student population with slightly over half of the student sample comprised of international students. The majority of students (82%) were between twenty and twenty-four years of age.

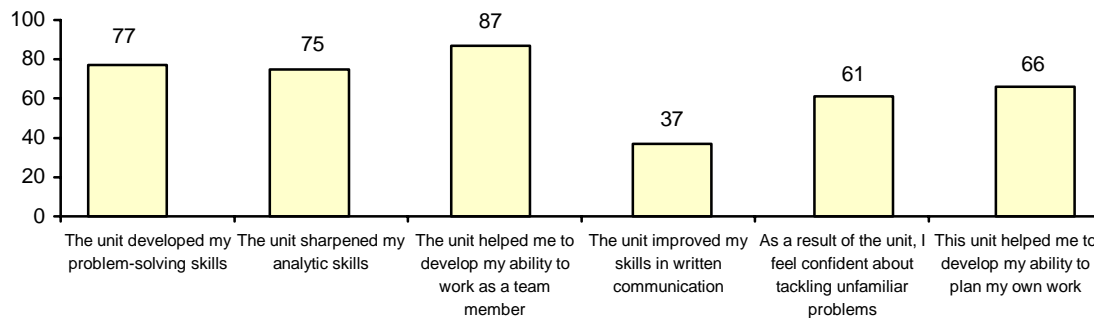
In terms of the unit as providing an authentic problem-based learning experience, 74% of students reported a high level of satisfaction with the quality of the unit as illustrated in Figure 1. Students' evaluation of the effectiveness of the unit in relation to skills development showed that 67% of students reported an overall increase in their skills development as a result of participation in the 'Capstone' unit (Figure 1). Moreover, 89% of students perceived an increase in their ability to apply these key generic skills to future professional work settings (see also Figure 1).

Figure 1: Business Students' Perspectives of the Capstone Experience



A closer analysis of the sub-questions within the generic skills development scale (Figure 2) revealed that of the actual key skills developed in the study unit, 87% of students perceived an increase in the development of teamwork skills, followed by problem-solving skills (77%), analytical skills (75%) and time management/organisational skills (66%). Only 37% perceived an increase in the development of written communication skills. This could be contributed to the nature of the learning activity; i.e., management of a virtual company which did not necessitate continuing written forms of assessment.

Figure 2 : Business Students' Perspectives of Generic Skills Development



Students' qualitative evaluations of the specific elements and skills that constitute teamwork and, required for effective team activities, were varied and conflicting. Perceived team effectiveness, however, was strongly associated with 'wanting the same final/end result' and the development of communication skills; the 'ability to get along with one another'.

The majority of students indicated that the one of the main purposes for forming teams at university was as a means to accomplish tasks that would be impossible for one student to complete.

Usually at uni, the only reason that you're in a group is to do an assignment.

Though in agreement with the above statement, a small amount of students further elaborated that the formation of teams at university provided an opportunity for them to experience what it will be like to function and interact with peers in 'real' work-based teams. For these particular students, learning together and appreciating one another were very important aspects of the student team

experience because this is how a person will be expected to conduct him/herself in formal workplace environments.

It [student teams] entirely exposes us to what we can expect when we go to the workplace because we'll be working with different people, we'll probably have to work in groups or one would be expected to assist a colleague, probably help someone with his or her part ... group work brings us closer together and to learn how to appreciate each other, the environments, and other group members – their weak and strong points.

This is consistent with literature into the factors that influence both the productivity and satisfaction of student learning groups. Hart (1999) indicated that students must be able to make meaningful links between theory and practice in order to appreciate the relevance of their university studies within the context of the workplace.

In order to complete assigned tasks, students felt that a clear understanding of goals and standards were needed; however, they reported that there was often uncertainty surrounding the nature of the task and 'how to go about solving it'.

Everybody just sits there at first with no clue as to what is required or expected of us. Nobody wants to make the first move but eventually you know that you have to, otherwise you'd be just sitting there for the whole time doing nothing. But then you only end up going round and round because no one can decide exactly what needs to be done.

Comments that dominated students' previous team experiences were that of 'slack members with no real consequences'. In these situations, students remarked that it was often them who would 'pick up the slack' in order to finish the task and/or assignment.

There's usually a lot of people who just sit there and go with the flow and usually you find in the end they're the ones who don't contribute as much ... those people are there for the ride, they're just going to try and get as many marks as they can ... they don't really care about the work that they've done. I'm usually the kind of person who wants to do the assignment and so I put in the effort to make sure it gets done.

Students indicated that there were no real consequences for those group members who didn't participate or contribute fairly other than 'just receiving low grades'. In comparison, students perceived that the situation would be very different in formal work-based teams; consequences for shirking one's responsibility to the task would be very real and possibly severe i.e. 'being fired from the job'.

Within the 'Capstone' teams, students acknowledged that issues such as 'social loafing' and 'hitchhiking' were also present. However, notably, students described their 'Capstone' team experience as a valuable learning process and were motivated to continue with the tasks even with lesser contributing members present in the team. Perhaps to some extent, their continued engagement with the group activity can be best understood in terms of self-esteem. Judge, Locke, Durham and Kluger (1998) defined self-esteem as composed of two core components: self-worth and self-efficacy; such that these components have significant implications for how a person will approach and carry out their job responsibilities. Self-efficacy, or task specific self confidence, is a central component of Bandura's social cognitive theory (1986) and its influence on individuals' goals, efforts, and task learning, direction and persistence is well documented (Bandura, 1997; Baumeister, 1997; Locke and Latham, 1990). Essentially, persons who are high in self-esteem not only have a favourable opinion of themselves, they also view themselves as competent individuals and focus on working hard to succeed; conversely, those who are low in self-esteem doubt their ability to succeed and focus on avoiding failure instead (Baumeister, 1997). Another plausible rationale for continued engagement may be understood in terms of their approaches to learning. Students who adopt a deep approach to their learning have an intrinsic interest in the task and an expectation of enjoyment in carrying it out (Prosser and Trigwell, 1999). Literature has contended these types of students have

higher quality learning outcomes i.e. demonstrable greater understanding of material, as they are able to perceive relations between elements of their understanding in a subject and are aware of the applications of that understanding and relations in new and abstract contexts (Prosser and Trigwell, 1999; Trigwell and Sleet, 1990). Furthermore, research has also reported that students who adopt a deep approach to learning exhibit greater skills development (Lizzio, Wilson and Simons, 2002).

In terms of team member roles, one student remarked that prior to his 'Capstone' team experience he was often the group member who attempted to control and influence others within the team, rather than adopting a leadership role. However, he realised that this type of dominant behaviour was not conducive to team performance:

I found that before I had more of an authoritarian outlook where I would say this is what I think we should do and unless you have something that really changes my mind, then this is the way we're going to do it ... but since coming here and doing a lot of the teamwork activities and assignments I've found that you have to listen to each other and get along a lot better. I know that if the rest of the group doesn't like you and if they don't agree with your tactics then you're not (i.e. the group) going to go anywhere.

Driskell, Salsa, Goodwin and O'Shea (2006) highlighted that although the assertiveness/dominance component of extraversion may be related to leadership i.e. leaders need to exert power and control; the tendency to be authoritative, controlling, and unreceptive to other team members' opinions can be damaging to team interaction. These researchers further attempted to define trait terms that constitute good team members as often good team players terms are described as dependable, flexible or cooperative. This is consistent with findings gathered in this study; particularly, from employers' conceptualisation of teamwork. The majority of employers interviewed stressed that graduates who are effective team players demonstrate 'a good attitude', 'an enthusiasm to learn from senior management' and 'a willingness to accept constructive criticism'. This may be prove to be interesting fodder for graduates seeking to enhance their employability as behavioural based interviews were the most popular recruitment and selection techniques used (87%) for assessing graduates' suitability for employment in Australia's current business and industry workplace environments (AAGE, 2007). Nevertheless, identifying the skills associated with and, contributing to some of these positive traits, was varied and conflicting.

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