Working Effectively in Teams: A Necessary Skill in Educational and Professional Realms of Life

Philip Ray Jones[1], Ph.D.

Abstract

This paper presented is a critical analysis of Daniel Levi's book entitled *Group Dynamics for Teams*, and Steven A. Beebe's book entitled *Communicating in Small Groups: Principles and Practices*. These innovative pedagogical texts highlight critical ideas regarding the importance of building successful teams in the classroom. Moreover, this paper highlights the clear definitions of successful teamwork that these authors present and the specific traits that a successful team must exhibit. The analysis presented herein also exhibits how successful teamwork is a skill that encompasses all realms of life including educational, as well as professional, and is only accomplished when a given team is inclusively engaged and focused on the goal of completion. In addition, this paper also features an interactive classroom activity entitled "Building the Highest Tower" that educators on all levels can use to introduce students to the art of teamwork. This activity illustrates how the teamwork utilized to complete the building of the tower ultimately connects to critical concepts presented in the literature of Levi and Beebe.

Keywords: Teamwork; Diversity; Qualitative; Group; Dynamics; Tower

1. Introduction

The ability to work successfully in teams is a necessary skill that all students and professionals must accomplish. Regardless of the professional field that one embarks upon, teamwork will be incorporated into the field on some level, and in many instances, it will be a mandatory skill. As a result of the diverse backgrounds that many people bring into educational programs, as well as the professional workforce, they often approach teamwork with a feeling of fear, confusion, or even anger as a result of their inexperience working with teams or lack of understanding of the word. Collectively framing and reframing ideas, experimenting, crossing boundaries, and integrating perspectives into various tasks strongly characterize teamwork, as well as effective team-learning (Brooks, 1994). Here, Brooks illuminates how evaluating ideas from diverse angles, as well as embracing unfamiliar ideas can dramatically maximize teamwork and team learning on a high level: "In collaborative learning the instructor values and builds upon the knowledge, personal experiences, language, strategies, and cultures that the learners bring to learning. The instructor models the collaborative learning process by allowing the learner's knowledge to both challenge and reshape their own thinking" (Smith, 2010, p. 149). Smith highlights how an instructor taking a qualitative approach to facilitating a collaborative environment in terms of acknowledging the multiple traits, talents, experiences, and backgrounds that adults bring to a particular environment allows them to heighten their learning experience through critical thinking on multiple, diverse levels. Moreover, Polkinghorne (2005) states, "Human experience is multilayered and complex [. . .] Unlike the objects of nature, the layers of experience are not rigidly ordered, nor are its moving contents related according to mathematical patterns" (p. 138). Polkinghorne highlights here how human experience is very much qualitative in nature and moves far beyond a one-dimensional level of analysis.

Teamwork establishes a unique qualitative, multi-dimensional flow of knowledge and experiences among all involved parties. Knowledge and experiences in this light becomes interchangeable, insightful, and is attained across a

---

[1] Assistant Professor of English, Texas Southern University – Department of English, Address: 3100 Cleburne Street, Houston, TX 77004. E-mail: Philip.Jones@tsu.edu. Phone: 713-584-0504

broad spectrum. In Daniel Levi's book entitled *Group Dynamics for Teams*, he presents a very enlightening argument in chapter two which defines what team success entails. He opens this chapter by asserting how a truly successful team must exhibit cooperation, respect for other team member's ability, and the task must be appropriate for team completion. Levi (2011) asserts "successful teams have clear goals, good leadership, organizational support, appropriate task characteristics, and mutual accountability with rewards" (p. 18). This statement relates strongly to the interactive classroom activity entitled "Building the Highest Tower."

2. Activity Procedure

The procedure for this activity entails the class being organized into groups. Each group is then challenged to work as a team to effectively brainstorm on how to use varied shaped blocks to build a tower. The team that ultimately builds the highest tower in the allotted amount of time is the winner. This activity can be very enjoyable and enlightening to students in the sense that it aligns with Levi's views on successful teamwork extremely well. During this class activity, each team is challenged to practice critical thinking, strategic planning, acceptance of diverse choices, and cooperation in an effort to become the winning team with the highest tower. Each group is challenged to respond quickly, yet accurately and effectively while building the tower, which illustrates a unique level of coordination and organization. Levi (2011) states, "A group brings more resources to a problem than are available to one person [. . .] Their interaction leads to new ideas that no single member would have developed" (p. 148). Levi is illuminating here how diverse dynamics of group thinking and brainstorming result in a much higher quality of team performance in regard to acquiring maximum success with completing a given task.

3. Social Interaction and Active Engagement

A particularly interesting section of Levi's chapter two is his discussion on maintaining positive social relations while organizing and participation in teams. The ability to exhibit a high level of maturity, unrestricted acceptance of ideas, and the ability to bring "unselfishness" to the forefront of the team not only creates positive relationships within one's current team project, but ultimately establishes a strong foundation for future team-oriented projects: "A successful team performs its task and then is better able to perform the next assigned task [. . .] An important value of teamwork is building the skills and capacities of the team and organization. For this to happen, the team must have good internal social relations. Performing in the team should encourage participants to want to continue working as a team in the future" (Levi, 2011, p. 20). This passage from Levi's text describes the actions of several teams within my English composition classroom that participated in the "Building the Highest Tower" activity very well. Each team worked collaboratively and cordially with each other to build the tower and exhibited a very warm, friendly attitude as they constructed the tower. Moreover, they embraced each other's diverse thoughts and strategies and were welcoming of disagreements. Four research studies found that Classroom activities which involve peer interaction have a significant impact on student writing and student attitudes toward writing (Callahan, 1999; Berlin, 1982; Hansman & Wilson, 1993; Lueders, 2003). Three additional research studies in this area found that students who are exposed to a multitude of perspectives from other peers tend to ignite new effective ways to brainstorm rhetorical ideas that they had not encountered within the conventional, teacher centered classroom setting (Berlin, 1982; Matsuda, 1999; Rose, 1988). Ultimately, each team engaged in the "Building the Highest Tower" activity established a strong social foundation and desire to work as a team on future class projects.

4. Team Member Diversity

Students within each group brought a diverse range of backgrounds and intellectual skill to the task of building the tower, which allowed them to contribute diverse levels of creativity and critical thinking skill to the task: "Part of creating and effective group is making sure it has the necessary diversity of knowledge and skills. Interdisciplinary research teams are more productive than teams whose members have similar backgrounds. Groups whose members have differences of opinion are more creative than like-minded groups" (Levi, 2011, p. 23). As differences in opinions and perspectives frequently immerge when working in teams, students embracing the unique value and power of collaboration can ultimately reconcile differences.

This reconciliation of differences enables team members to cohesively, and successfully complete their given task. Kayser (1994) states, "Collaborating addresses differences directly, confronting them with synergistic problem solving. The affected parties join forces to work through their differences; they channel their energies to defeat the differences, rather than defeat each other" (p. 140). It was exciting as an instructor to view and experience the vast range of diverse knowledge and thinking processes flowing together harmoniously within each group in an effort to successfully complete their task. Ultimately, each students' intellect united as one for a significant purpose.

Having a focused, unified purpose for a given task is an important aspect of teamwork as Steven A. Beebe discusses in chapter one his text entitled *Introducing Group and Team Principles and Practices*: "A goal keeps a committee or discussion group together until that goal is realized. Many groups fail to remain together because they never identify their common purpose. While participants in small groups may have somewhat different motives for their membership, a common purpose cements the group together" (Beebe, 2009, p. 5). Unification of a common purpose was very visible in all groups and attention was directed solely on accomplishing the goal. All group members appeared to be very engaged and exhibited a true sense of belonging as Beebe also discusses in his text. Moreover, Beebe makes very strong points regarding the topics of belonging, having clearly defined rules for the functioning of a team, and collaborative methods for accomplishing the given task. Beebe's text relates extremely well to Levi's views on effective teamwork, as well as key characteristics of effective team members.

5. Application of Teamwork Strategies to Professional Settings

This topic of understanding teams and defining team success applies well to my experience as a Ph.D. student during my role as a Doctoral Instructional Assistant within the College of Education at Texas State University-San Marcos. During my tenure as a D.I.A., I worked with a senior member of the doctoral faculty on various projects such as professional conference preparation, editing professional articles for peer-reviewed publication, and assisting with various other research-related and scholarly tasks. These tasks required me to exhibit strong collaborative skills, a high level of professionalism, and critical thinking with this faculty member, as well as other graduate student assistants within the College of Education in an effort to successfully complete the given tasks placed before me.

I also used effective teamwork strategies in my position as an Adjunct English Professor within the Lone Star College System prior to my entrance into the doctoral program. I would collaborate with other adjunct and full-time faculty in designing lesson plans, classroom management strategies, and various professional development activities within the Department of English, and other academic departments across the curriculum. This was a very positive experience because we exhibited as a "team" many of the concepts discussed in both Levi and Beebe's texts such as creating a sense of belonging, maintaining a positive attitude, and acceptance of diverse views and backgrounds. We created a positive team environment, ultimately mastering our goals.

6. Conclusion

Ultimately, these professional experiences utilizing teamwork strategies were excellent preparation for my current professional position as an Assistant Professor of English at Texas Southern University. Moreover, these experiences were excellent preparation for my future aspirations to acquire a professional leadership role within the higher education setting where effective teamwork will be essential. The critical views and innovative pedagogical classroom strategies discussed in the scholarship of Beebe and Levi, as well as the other scholarly authors and pieces of literature presented herein are very enlightening. This literature has challenged me as a professional English instructor to reflect on the transformative impact of successful teamwork in the classroom, as well as how instructors across the disciplines can enhance their teaching approach by integrating collaborative learning into today's modern classroom.

References

Beebe, S.A., & Masterson, J.T. (2009). Communicating in Small Groups: Principles and   Practices. Boston: Allyn & Bacon

Berlin, J. A. (1982). Contemporary composition: The major pedagogical theories. College English, 44(8), 765-777.

Brooks, A. (1994). Power and the production of knowledge: Collective team learning in work organizations. Human Resource Development Quarterly, 3(4), 323-336.

Callahan, C. A. (1999). Nontraditional students in first-year composition classes: Group activities as tools of integration (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (Order No. DA9927837).

Hansman, C. A., & Wilson, A. L. (1998). Teaching writing in community colleges: A situated view of how adults learn to write in computer-based writing classrooms. Community College Review, 26(1), 21-42. doi: 10.1177/009155219802600102

Kayser, T.A. (1994). Building team power: How to unleash the collaborative genius of work teams. New York, NY: Irwin Professional Publishing.

Levi, D. (2011). Group Dynamics for Teams. London: Sage Publications, Inc.

Lueders, E. (2003). The writing instructor: A new identity. College English, 20(1), 280-285.

Matsuda, P. K. (1999). Composition studies and ESL writing: A disciplinary division of labor. College Composition and Communication, 50(4), 699-721.

Polkinghorne, D. E. (2005). Language and meaning: Data collection in qualitative research. Journal of Counseling Psychology, 52(2), 137-145. doi: 10.1037/0022-0167.52.2.137

Rose, M. (1988). Narrowing the mind and page: Remedial writers and cognitive reductionism. College Composition and Communication, 39(3), 267-298.

Smith, R. O. (2010). Facilitation and design of learning. In C. E. Kasworm, A. D. Rose, & J. M. Ross-Gordon (Eds.). Handbook of adult and continuing education (pp. 147-155). Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, Inc.