

Case Study: Student Perceptions of Groups & Teams in Leadership Education

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Abstract

Working in groups and teams is a common practice in today's college classroom, partly in order to meet the growing demand by employers that students entering the workforce have leadership and group experience. This practice has many inherent benefits and challenges. The experiences created must meet the needs of both students and other stakeholders in the world of work. This qualitative case study includes 11 undergraduate student participants (8 female and 3 male) who were enrolled in Leadership in Groups and Teams, a course at a large Midwestern research university. Participant interviews pertaining to their experiences and perceptions of groups and teams in the educational setting emphasized the value of engaging in experiential learning as a complement to traditional scholarship. Beneficial insights are suggested for future changes in the course content and structure.

Introduction

This qualitative study emerged out of a desire to improve the course, Leadership in Groups and Teams, by gaining a better understanding of student perceptions of group and team experiences in classroom settings. In particular, this course centered on learning about group and team processes from a research-based text, hypothetical case studies, and practical application on the part of the students via a semester-long group/team project. The use of interviews as a qualitative methodology allowed the researchers to gain narrative responses from students

regarding these perceptions and experiences. Interviewing students regarding group or team projects within a course can provide valuable insight to structural and contextual information needed for successful integration of group or team projects in that particular course.

The students enrolled in the class were divided into groups of four to six members based on expressed interest in specific areas of service (i.e., environmental issues, education, agriculture, etc.) and finalized by the instructors within the first two weeks of class. In this way, both students and instructors had some input into the creation of the groups. This provided some structure for the students and also allowed them some degree of choice. Students remained in their groups for the duration of the term. Although the central focus was their semester project, they also worked with their groups on class activities, presentations, quizzes, and case studies. In this way, they were fully immersed in the group/team experience. Two textbooks were used to provide a contextual and practical base of knowledge in groups and teams: Daniel Levi's (2007) *Group Dynamics for Teams, 2nd edition*, and Patrick Lencioni's (2002) *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*. Students were challenged to connect course concepts to their group/team project via three individual reflection papers and three group/team project reports, in addition to the final group/team project portfolio and presentation. The data gained from this particular study was intended to help improve the course, and it also has broader implications for utilizing groups and teams within leadership education.

The Learning Environment

The learning environment of a traditional lecture-based class model utilized at universities across the country is not, in and of itself, sufficient to encompass the active learning styles of today's students. Bobbitt, Inks, Kemp, and Mayo (2000) explained, "While it is noted that lectures have a place in the learning environment, it is clear that lectures alone are not the most effective pedagogy for universities" (p. 15). Although most scholars support the efficacy of group and team-based learning in the classroom, the actual practice of the pedagogy is limited at institutions of higher education (Rassuli & Manzer, 2005; Bobbitt et al., 2000). Bobbitt, et al. further noted that, "The structural shift toward teams that is occurring in many businesses should be reflected in today's classroom training" (p. 16). Holter (1994) noted that the opportunity exists for group and team work to be used in a complementary way with lecture-based courses as an effective means of learning and applying higher order thinking skills. Rassuli and Manzer (2005) asserted that team learning modules can take on various forms depending upon the educational discipline, the objective for the instructor's use of groups and teams in a course, and the instructor's creativity. Although challenging, Smith and MacGregor (1992) emphasized the flexibility and adaptability of cooperative learning to any academic discipline. As the educational paradigm shifts to a focus on student development (Rassuli and Manzer, 2005), it is the responsibility of

educators to provide those experiences that will enable students to become leaders in our changing society (Ricketts, Bruce & Ewing, 2008). The responsibility, however, is two-fold. The *educator* must provide the opportunities for students to gain knowledge and experience while the *student* must take the initiative to learn and apply the knowledge gained. Bobbitt, et al. (2000) emphasized, “Too often, students receive instruction on the important concepts and theories in one course, only to move on to the concepts and theories of another course without even considering the integration of material learned previously” (p. 16). Group work is designed to allow students to learn from one another and be actively engaged in one another’s learning process (Rassuli & Manzer, 2005). Ricketts, et al. (2008) discovered that students are not making connections between group work in the classroom and the rising use of teamwork in the “real world” – a necessary connection considering the trend for leadership through collaboration and cooperation. Astin and Astin (2000) noted that “our rapidly changing society desperately needs skilled leaders who are able to address complex issues, build bridges, and heal divisions” (p. 31). Students need to take responsibility for their learning in order to effectively lead our diverse generation of scholars and workers.

Student and Instructor Roles

For effective team-based learning to occur, instructors and students alike must change their teaching and learning methods. According to Barbour (2006), “To educate future leaders in a post-modern era, instructors must attempt nontraditional teaching methods that combine theories and practices of team leadership” (p. 28). Simply, students actively involved in the learning process via sharing and helping others will have a deeper knowledge of that subject matter (Knabb, 2000). Smith and MacGregor (1992) identified collaborative learning as an effective means for instructors and students to create an intellectual synergy while addressing and clarifying challenging issues and topics – achieving higher learning in the process. Higher levels of learning are important considerations from the instructional standpoint, but there are other benefits that come to the student through groups and teams. “A benefit accrued through cooperative learning and not individual assignments is the enhancement of students’ interpersonal skills through learning to work with students of various backgrounds, work ethic, and problem-solving styles” (Bobbitt, et al., 2000, p. 16). Barbour (2006) also mentioned that students are provided the opportunity to take on various group roles in order that they may gain a full perspective on the process of team building.

From the instructional standpoint, Attle and Baker (2007) emphasized the required commitment and detail in developing a fitting cooperative learning experience. For success with groups and teams in the classroom, Barbour (2006) suggested that “an instructor must be able to understand, model, and lead group

processes, which includes the roles all team members will play and the dynamic of team members within those roles” (pp. 32-33). At the same time, students must hold one another accountable and be actively engaged in their learning (Haberyan, 2007). Michaelsen (2004) noted that “students should stay in the same group for the entirety of the semester. Although even a single well-designed group assignment usually produces a variety of positive outcomes, it is only when students work together over time that they become cohesive enough to evolve into self-managed and truly effective learning teams” (p. 30). Barbour (2006) also noted that leader follow-through and active participation from all group members lead to the greatest team success. Michaelsen (2004) stressed that groups must be properly formed and managed, students must be made accountable (for both individual and group work), assignments must promote both learning and team development, and students must receive frequent and immediate feedback on their progress.

Impacts on Student Perception

Outside events that go beyond the confines of a classroom make a strong impact on student teams (Weeks & Kelsey, 2007). Kreie, Headrick, and Steiner (2007) noted this via the end of course evaluation forms. “Many students indicated that they liked working in teams, but – not surprisingly – a few expressed frustration with teammates who did not show up for team activities or did not actively participate” (p. 55). Pauli, Mohiyeddini, Bray, Michie, and Street (2008) discussed several issues that may be faced in group and team settings, including motivation, logistics, and other personal or process issues. “Insofar as students are concerned, attitudes in the classroom are an important consideration in shaping the perceptions of the effectiveness of the team-learning method” (Rassuili & Manzer, 2005, p. 26). Group time and commitment are also issues potentially impacting student perceptions (Tan, Ivy, Sharan, & Lee, 2007). Su’s (2007) work explored the preferences students have for team learning in the classroom based upon individual abilities. A significant difference was found between the three identified levels of ability in the expressed preference for team-based learning. Lower ability correlated with the highest preference, medium ability noted a lower preference, and high ability expressed the lowest preference for team-based learning. These influences on student perception hold valuable information to understanding the student perspective on group and team work in the classroom, and to improving this pedagogy used in leadership education.

Continued Evaluation

Many researchers call for more qualitative, longitudinal studies to explore the impact of leadership education (DiPaolo, 2008). Lamont and Friedman (1997) asserted the need for regular curriculum review to ensure the needs of students are being met and faculty talents and interests are being utilized. Student feedback is

a natural and necessary tool for improving the effectiveness of curriculum (Duke & Reese, 1995). Given the present American colleges and universities, Blackwell, Cummins, Townsend, and Cummings (2007) emphasized that qualitative research is needed in order to effectively utilize the “opportunity to coalesce theory and experience in a learning environment” (p. 40). Such research would enrich the understanding of student perceptions and ultimately strengthen leadership education programs and the use of groups and teams in the educational setting. After concluding that individual ability impacted student perception of team-based learning, Su (2007) emphasized the need for deeper study of student perceptions of team-based learning using both quantitative and qualitative methods to better understand impacting factors and create a better educational experience for students.

Objectives

In an effort to enhance the understanding of student perceptions among educators that are currently using or considering the use of groups and teams as a classroom component, the researchers embarked on a qualitative case study. The objectives of this study are as follows: (a) to determine what kinds of perceptions exist among students regarding the use of groups and teams in the classroom setting and (b) to determine if participation in the particular course, Leadership in Groups and Teams, has an impact on students’ perceptions of groups and teams in an educational setting.

Methods and Data Collection

Participants in this case study were undergraduate students enrolled in Leadership in Groups and Teams for the spring 2008 semester. The course had 20 students enrolled, 15 female and 5 male; of those enrolled, 10 females and 4 males volunteered to participate in the study. Participants were aware that they could opt out of the study at any point throughout the semester without negative consequence to their success in the course. Participants each signed an informed consent and were also given the option to provide written reflection pieces as part of data collection for the research. Although some written reflections were collected, inconsistency in submissions resulted in the decision not to use them as formal data in the study.

A series of three interviews was conducted and audio recorded throughout the semester with each participant. The first round of interviews was conducted early in the semester, followed by the second shortly after spring break, and the final interview occurred at the conclusion of the semester. The timing of the interviews allowed researchers to examine whether participation in the course was impacting the participants’ perceptions of working in groups and teams as the course and

group projects evolved. Round 1 interviews provided the researchers with foundational data from each participant with regard to perceptions based on previous experiences with groups and teams in the educational setting, as each answered the following questions:

- Tell me about your experiences with groups and teams in the classroom setting.
- Have you had group/team experiences that are positive/negative? (Based on the response from question one above.)
- When you enter a new class and discover that group or team work is a part of the course expectations, what is your reaction? Why?
- When was the first time you recall working in a group/team for a class?
- How often have you had to work in a group or team for a class?
- What is the number of college courses you have taken that utilized group/team work for class?
- Do you like working in a group or team for class? Why or why not?
- What role do you typically take when working in a group or team? Why?
- What do you expect of others in a group or team?
- Why did you enroll in this course, Leadership in Groups and Teams?
- What do you hope to learn or gain in this course?

The second round of interviews served as a check point slightly after mid-semester to determine whether previous perceptions and tendencies were present or had changed, as well as how and whether the participants demonstrated retention and application of course content. The following questions were posed during the second round of interviews:

- What information learned from the course readings is most helpful to you in groups and teams?
- What stage do you think your group is currently in?
- What leadership styles/strategies do you observe in your group?
- What perspective do you view your group in (group or project based)?
- What concerns do you have with the groups and teams project for this course?
- How/Do you plan to address these issues?
- Is social loafing present in your group or team? Why or why not?
- Who are the other high contributors in your group?
- What role are you taking in the group project? Is this consistent with your typical role?
- How cohesive is your group? Why?
- Who has the most power or influence in your group? Why?

The third round of interviews offered a final opportunity for the participants to reflect on their classroom and group experience with regard to the course.

Questions for round three interviews included the following:

- Reflect on your experience with your group/team in this course. In what ways was it similar to experiences you have had with other class related groups/team?
- In what ways was it different?
- What are the most important things you have learned from your group/team experience in this course?
- How might what you have learned be useful to you in future group/team experiences?
- Do you think that reading the texts for the course had an impact on the way you engaged with your group/team (as opposed to the manner in which you have engaged with other class-related groups and teams)?
- If so, how?
- If not, why not?
- Consider your group/team at the end of the semester. In what stage of group and or project development do you think your group ended the course?
- Why do you think so?
- Is this a logical progression, in light of what you know about group and or project development from your course readings?
- Why or why not?
- What material from the texts was most useful to you in your group/team?
- What material from the texts was most useful to you in other groups and team experiences (now and or in the future)?
- What did you like most about the way this course was structured?
- What would you change about the way this course was structured?
- Do you think that participating in this course has changed your perceptions of working in groups or teams?
- If so, how has it changed your perceptions?
- Has participating in this course reinforced any of your previously held perceptions of working in groups or teams?
- If so, what perceptions has it reinforced?
- Why? How?
- Do you have any additional thoughts or comments you would like to share?

The questions posed in each interview provided a framework for students to express their thoughts about current and past group or team experiences. Participants were not limited on time for any response, which allowed for as little or as much information to be disclosed by the participant. If needed, participants

could ask for clarification of any question. Following the interviews, the researchers reviewed the recordings to compile data based on the responses, coded responses, and transcribed components of the interviews for analysis.

Findings

Round 1 Interviews

From the original 14 participants that began this study, 11 completed the series of three interviews. Participants in the Round 1 interviews provided insight regarding a positive or negative perception held, like or dislike of working in groups/teams, and made reference to themselves as a hard worker and concerns of social loafing among others. Seven participants involved in the Round 1 interviews indicated a positive perception of groups and teams, where four perceived them as negative. Also, one participant qualified both a positive and negative perception and one participant listed positive perceptions, but said groups and teams “can be difficult.” It is also noteworthy that one participant mentioned never having had a negative groups and teams experience.

When recalling the first time participating in a group or team, four participants identified kindergarten or elementary school as the time when that occurred; three identified middle school or junior high; one identified high school; and four experienced their first class-related group/team in college. One individual that identified college, also recalled high school experiences in groups/teams, but could not provide an example of a specific experience.

Participants then estimated the number of college courses taken where groups and teams were utilized. The responses ranged from two to 15 courses with an average of seven. One participant did not provide an estimated number of courses, but answered that “most courses” the student had taken in college required group/team work.

Participants also discussed whether they liked working in groups and teams for class. Nine participants said they liked working in groups and teams, while two said they did not. Within the nine positive responses, three participants conditioned their responses to be dependent upon the task assigned (group paper versus activity) or the academic level of the course (general curriculum versus major concentration area).

The researchers noted that the participants who disliked groups and teams in the educational setting also discussed having had mostly negative experiences or rationalized their dislike of groups and teams.

Participants also identified self-perceived roles within groups and teams. Three participants identified themselves as a “leader”; three as “organizers” or “facilitators”; one as “in charge”; and, four as other roles (such as “scribe” or “pleaser”).

Although a question was not directly posed to the participants relating to self-perception as a hard worker or issues dealing with social loafing (an individual putting forth less effort in the group setting than if the task were only to be completed individually), the researchers observed the emergence of these issues throughout the interviews (Barr, Dixon, & Gassenheimer, 2005). During five interviews social loafing was implicitly mentioned as a main concern in groups and teams. Also, in four instances, responses to the questions in this round of interviews lent themselves to support self perception as a strong contributor in groups and teams (i.e., mention of personal high standards or high expectations). To avoid issues of social loafing or one individual carrying a significant portion of the work, emphasis should be placed on all group participants doing their part, regardless of assigned or attributive role within the group (Payne, Monk-Turner, Smith, & Sumter, 2006).

In looking at reasons for course enrollment, the participants tended to merge the final two questions of the interview (reason for enrollment and what participant hopes to gain from the course); therefore, the emergent themes were taken from the combined final two questions. Students enrolled in Leadership in Groups and Teams for four main reasons: (a) general interest in the topic (6), (b) self-awareness (7), (c) skill development (8), and (d) a positive impression of the course or instructor (based on word of mouth and/or prior experience in a course taught by the same instructor) (7).

Round 2 Interviews

Participants were interviewed a second time approximately one-half way through the semester so that researchers could gain insight on group developmental progress and the impact of course content. Students identified their personal roles taken on in the course project. Four recognized themselves as a facilitator or organizer and seven identified with other roles which were primarily task related, such as writing reports or securing event locations. However, no participants identified themselves as the group leader and no participants claimed to be in charge. These role identifications differed from the previous interviews presumably as a result of the projects being underway and group dynamics at work. These factors would potentially result in a difference between what an individual expressed in the first round of interviews when compared the actions now being taken, especially when consideration is given to other team member roles. At this interview time, only three participants (two having previously expressed this concern in the first interview) mentioned social loafing as an issue

or continued concern. This may mean that some of the student's previously held concerns in this regard did not continue in this team project.

Other concerns regarding the group project were also expressed, including the main concerns mentioned by nine of the participants were task-related, such as securing a location or ensuring promotional materials were completed and dispersed. Further concerns identified were accountability/trust, commitment, and communication. Some of these other concerns may arise from the variable group dynamics and level of cohesion among the members. Six participants said group cohesion was moderate and four participants experienced high group cohesion. However, increased instructor facilitation and structure of a group project could minimize communication and task-related issues within a group (Barbour, 2006; Payne, et al., 2006).

Participants were also asked whether their groups were more demonstrative of group development models (such as Tuckman and Jensen) or project development models (such as McGrath or Ancona and Caldwell) as discussed within the course content. Participants were also asked, depending on the model they selected, to note the stage in which their group was currently functioning. Five students identified with the group development model and utilized the respective stages of development in their stage description. However, the remaining seven students identified their groups with the project development model and then subsequently utilized the group development model for describing the current stage of development (forming, performing, creation, resolution). To the researchers, this demonstrated that participants may not have retained course content focused on project development models.

Even though some course content such as that pertaining to group and task development models may not have been fully retained (Kemp & Seagraves, 1995), participants did identify course content topics that were helpful to them in the class and with groups outside of the class. Participants noted helpful aspects including (a) three participants mentioned that information about group conflict was helpful, (b) three found content on group communication most valuable, (c) one participant identified cooperation and competition content as useful, (d) three found most benefit to be sections of the course focused on decision making and problem solving, and (e) three identified team building or group development content as helpful to their work in groups and teams.

One participant expressed realization of the impact of the course content, stating "I think learning about the stages of development and seeing that anything else can be applied to that for the most part, like conflict and working as a team as a whole, you can understand what stage you're in and when you're adjusting ... and understanding that it's okay to have conflict in a group and that it can promote creativity in a team."

Another participant emphasized the importance of understanding the role of conflict: “I think the material that’s been most salient or important has to do with group conflict. Initially, that was a topic that really didn’t concern me, but having six members and six different types of personalities and different ways of thinking certainly creates conflict. Because we’re so diverse, (learning about conflict and how to deal with it) has really helped us out.”

It was evident that the particular topics covered in this course, such as conflict, communication, cooperation and competition, decision making or problem solving, and team building or group development, heightened the students’ awareness of what is expected in a group or team setting.

Round 3 Interviews

The final round of interviews was conducted at the end of the semester, with all group projects completed. Participants were asked to compare and contrast their course project with previous class-related groups and teams experiences. Students primarily noted the differences of their Leadership in Groups and Teams course project: four mentioned the length of the project assignment, noting the semester-long project as different than past experiences of shorter time frames to work on a group project; seven emphasized the social aspect of this project that built trust in the group; and three mentioned the real-life application of the information gained and experience of carrying out a project from inception to implementation.

One of the participants responded, saying, “This was a little different in that we had a specific set goal. There are always going to be—maybe slackers isn’t the right word-- but people who aren’t as committed and dedicated as the rest of the team members. That definitely stood out the entire semester ... It was different to be studying leadership and trying to apply or pick out things as we went through the process as we were studying it and then applying it (in our group). It helped us change along the way. Change for the better.”

Over the course of this semester project the participants identified with the various stages of group or team development. In the concluding interview, students noted the ending stage of their group or team. Six participants said their group or team reached the final stage of the group development process identified by Tuckman and Jensen (1977) (i.e., adjourning) while three students said their group or team was in the performing stage. One participant believed the group to be in the norming stage and another participant identified the forming stage of development due to various issues within that particular group including members withdrawing from the course approximately one-half way through the project. At the conclusion of the course students related strongly to the Tuckman and Jensen (1977) model of group development.

In the final interview as participants reflected on the group or team experience for the course, they noted (a) a need for improved socialization within their group(s) (5), (b) social loafing as a problem (4), (c) a need for improved communication (3), (d) role confusion (4), and (e) schedule coordination (7).

In the final interview all 11 participants expressed that one or both of the course texts had an impact on the manner in which they interacted within the groups or teams. Also, 10 participants noted that the course experience changed their perception of groups and teams in the classroom setting and this change was expressed as a positive one.

One student expressed a changed perception for the better, noting that this experience proved that there can be effective groups or teams in class. This participant noted that “I know that there can be really effective teams now. I think before that I was always really frustrated with class teams. Not only can there be effective teams, but it’s built. It doesn’t just happen. It’s a process. I guess I thought before that you get a group of people together that work really well together and everything goes well. But now I know that that’s not necessarily true. Effective teams have steps to become that, and sometimes things fall into place; but a lot of times it’s working toward it. I think that’s going to be my biggest take-away, because I know that whatever group I get in to isn’t static and can change. It can be shaped to be more effective, and I can probably help in that process.”

“Time to go through a group process” and an “acceptance of conflict as a normal part of that process” were expressed by the participants as helpful components of this change in perception. Another student also noted the improved perception that came from an understanding of what a team or group should look like and go through based on the knowledge gained from the course material. One participant expressed the impact in this way: “The class was not only about reading and class discussion. We actually went out there and tried to apply. It happens so often that theoretical tools are given to you and you’re told that you can apply them in this and that way, but this was one of the rare occasions where you actually get the tools and the books and discussion and then go out there and see (for yourself).” Another stated, “My idea of leadership has changed. The leader is not the person who tells others what to do. In some cases, yes, but my idea of what a leader has to do has changed. My previous idea that you can just work on a task without knowing others has changed too. So much of what goes on in someone’s personal life will affect the way they function. Their background, culture, everything.” Yet, another indicated that “This course has been different, because I’m not walking away with memorized facts and concepts. I’m walking away with the overall team experience, and that’s definitely something I can apply in grad school or future employment, in the community or at church. Wherever teams are involved.”

The researchers greatly benefitted from this insight gained for the course, as well as in general, regarding the perception students held of groups and teams in the classroom.

Conclusions

As a result of this project, the researchers were able to develop some conclusions connected to their original objectives, which are discussed here. Additionally, the researchers came away with some valuable feedback which could be used to modify their course and could also be helpful when devising instructional strategies for other leadership classes.

Objective 1

In exploring the existing student perceptions of group or team work in an educational setting, the researchers discovered a generally positive perception of group work prior to the course. However, the existing perception was dependent upon each student's prior experiences with group or team work in the classroom. Frequency of group or team experiences in the past, or concurrently during the semester, may also be connected to an individual's perception. Some students experience burnout or overload of group work that can detract from the value of such an experience with peers in the educational setting. This burnout could mean that group or team work is currently being overused in the educational setting, a stark contrast to research that highlights the limited use of groups and teams or collaborative learning in the classroom (Bobbitt, et al., 2000; Rassuli & Manzer, 2005).

These findings could also imply that the use of groups and teams in the classroom lacks a foundational basis of the group development process needed for students to fully understand and appreciate the benefits of group or team work. Barbour (2006) identified the need for groups and teams in the classroom to be combined with knowledge of the group development process. Further research is needed to establish the relationship between student perceptions and the frequency of group or team work experiences by students in the classroom setting. Additional research is also necessary to determine the degree to which introducing students to the process of group or team project development impacts student perception of group or team work use in the educational setting.

Objective 2

It was evident to the researchers through this case study that an increased awareness of the group or team development processes had a positive impact on

the individual's perception of group or team work. All four participants that perceived group or team work in the classroom negatively at the beginning of the semester indicated a change in perception to a positive outlook by the end of the semester. Additionally, other participants who indicated a positive perception at the beginning of the semester attributed the course material to a better understanding of past group experiences, a better appreciation of their fellow group members, and an understanding of the importance of the social or relational aspect of group work. Thus, participation in the course *Leadership in Groups and Teams* was an effective method of impacting students' attitudes or perceptions of group or team work in the educational setting. In this case, student participants were able to reflect on having a personal experience through the semester project complemented with the knowledge of how a team should work in the educational setting.

Instructional Strategy

In addition to the findings for each of the objectives, the researchers were also able to make some cursory observations about instructional strategies that helped to make the course useful and successful. The course, *Leadership in Groups and Teams*, was one that fully immersed students in a group or team experience while they were learning about group and team issues and processes. It was also a course that facilitated the social side of group and team development, in addition to providing a task. The students had some ownership in determining their task and choosing a project that was meaningful to them. Since the class was reading from relevant literature, they were also very conscious of how what they were learning from their textbooks would play out in their actual experience.

The researchers also noticed the contrast between group performance, in that one group embraced "team" learning and implemented a strong, cohesive project whereas another group took the "divide and conquer" approach resulting in several small tasks for the project implemented by the individuals of the group, but not as a whole.

Further research is needed in courses that do not have a direct focus on groups and teams within the curriculum, as well as in specific leadership courses focused on groups and teams, to determine the level of immersion needed for students to fully grasp the process and application of group and team development.

Limitations

This case study was relatively small. It focused on one class during the course of one semester. Continuing to explore student perceptions in this and other similar classes throughout future semesters would likely yield even more useful findings. Furthermore, because the researchers were also instructors in the course, it is

possible that some participants censored their responses even though they knew their participation was not connected to their grade in the course. If this study were to be continued or replicated in the future, it would be helpful to have interviewers who were not connected to the course and make the information available to instructors only after grades have been posted for the term.

Implications

Although focused on only one course, these findings provide further support for the continuous evaluation of curriculum and use of student feedback to make instructional improvements (Lamont & Friedman, 1997; Duke & Reese, 1995). Educators utilizing groups and teams in the classroom should continue using qualitative research methods to explore the impact of course content on student perceptions as well as gaining feedback from students regarding the importance of project structure in a successful group/team experience. Consequently, instructors would have a better understanding of student needs and could incorporate information on the group development process into the classroom prior to utilizing group work. Also, leadership educators and other educators utilizing group and team work in the classroom should be intentional about ensuring students connect leadership content to real life applications. Inclusion of group and team development processes should also be incorporated into instruction (Barr, et al., 2005). Astin and Astin (2000) noted that leadership education is an emerging component of undergraduate education. Programs and degree pathways focused on leadership continue to expand at a rapid pace today. Leadership education, both formal and informal, plays an important role in developing the necessary leadership skills desired by employers and needed by our society today (Payne, et al., 2006; Blackwell, et al., 2007). Groups and teams are an integral part of our society; students and instructors alike must realize and take on the responsibilities and experiences needed for preparation and practice of leadership today and into the future.

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