Using Team-based learning for the Career Research Project

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Discussion Paper

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Abstract

The career research paper is the signature assignment for many career development courses. Unfortunately, these projects are traditionally characterized as routine, prosaic and lacking in opportunities for student originality. The reason for the troublesome characterization is simple - much of the information for these research projects comes from the same reliable sources and is offered in the form of statistics and charts rather than in literary fashion, leaving limited ways for students to refashion the data with an original spin in their research reports. Transforming these signature assignments into team-based projects gives students an opportunity to better contextualize the information and adds a level of excitement for students and teacher alike to an otherwise mundane practice. Often such a transformation requires restructuring an established course. This can be a time consuming and labor intensive task. Nonetheless, this instructional strategy provides opportunities for enhanced student learning and information retention, academic and professional skill building and ways of embracing diversity in the classroom that could easily make the case that team-based learning should be the signature pedagogy of career development courses.
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Introduction

“Tell me and I forget. Show me and I remember. Involve me and I understand.” -

- Chinese proverb, Anonymous

Community college career development courses are often designed to help students develop and strengthen their college readiness skills as well as prepare students for the workplace and for transfer to four year colleges. These goals are usually achieved by providing students with an introduction to work integrated learning; an opportunity to develop and strengthen workplace and core competencies; an introduction to a reflective framework for assessing and analyzing a personal inventory of skills, abilities, personality traits, and interests; an introduction to decision making and goal setting; an opportunity for career exploration and confirmation; and an introduction to career research and strategic career planning. (Hansen, R.S.). At LaGuardia Community College (“LaGuardia”) there is one course designed to cover all of this material – ‘Fundamentals of Professional Advancement’ (“FPA”) (LaGuardia Catalog, 2010/2011).

The career research paper is the signature assignment of FPA. Assigning the career research paper engages students in a personal assessment of their strengths, interests, and values. Students can then use this information to explore or confirm career goals, clarify education plans and firmly establish a strategic plan for next steps after LaGuardia. This assignment also helps students to strengthen their workplace and core competencies, including technology skills, information and quantitative literacy, written and oral communication skills, presentation skills and critical thinking, reading and analysis.
One way to further enhance the student learning in this class is through the use of team-based learning, a cooperative learning strategy. Recent findings from exploring the use of team-based learning with the career research assignment over a two year period indicates that this teaching strategy may be the most effective way to provide students with a rich opportunity to strengthen their workplace and core competencies.

What follows is a discussion of the use of team-based learning in teaching a college level career development course.

Cooperative Learning

Team-based learning is one of the most useful teaching strategies to enhance student understanding and retention of information. Team-based learning falls under the umbrella of cooperative learning, a term used to describe a variety of small group teaching strategies (Chickering & Gamson, 1991). For purposes of this article I will confine the discussion to team-based learning. Some fundamental differences between team-based learning and other forms of cooperative learning is the intention in configuring the teams, the time devoted to the task of the teams, the integration of the assignments, and the focus of the assignments. The following example may help to distinguish small group learning from team-based learning as small group learning models may adopt a similar sequence:

- the instructor lectures on a topic
- the class is divided into small groups
- each group is instructed to discuss the topic among themselves
- group discussion results are shared with the class
- a different topic is subsequently chosen to treat in this way
- a different set of groups is formed
• the sequence continues as outlined above

The important elements of this example are that: small groups typically have a short life span (less than a semester), groups are formed only to address independent assignments, and there is no intentional synergy between assignments (Michaelsen, Knight & Fink 2004).

This example differs significantly from the team-based learning approach. In team-based learning both the synergy between assignments and the relatively long life of the group (usually the entire semester) may even require re-structuring an established course and at least sufficient care in group formation to create a number of cohesive social units. In addition, in team-based learning the linked assignments are usually the building blocks of a major project. Finally, effective team based learning accomplishes two purposes simultaneously: deepening student learning and enhancing team development. (Michaelsen, Knight & Fink 2004).

Student Benefits of Team-Based Learning

The literature documents a range of academic and social benefits that accrue to students participating in team-based learning strategies which include but are not limited to the following:

• exposure to the benefits and complexities of team dynamics;
• development and strengthening of cooperation and planning skills;
• opportunities for both individual and shared leadership;
• increased active participation and engagement in the course;
• improved student understanding and retention of information;
• improved class performance;
• opportunities for peer learning, peer mentoring, self-assessment and group assessment;
promoting student autonomy by transferring some of the responsibility for teaching, learning and class management to students.


There are also benefits to instructors who use team-based learning as a teaching strategy.

- opportunities to evaluate and reevaluate course delivery and effectiveness in meeting instructional objectives;
- heightened interest in course material;
- development of team building skills;
- opportunities for strengthening skills in nurturing students in classes with high levels of diversity in ethnicity, work ethic and academic preparedness.

(Michaelsen, Knight & Fink, 2004; Michaelsen & Sweet, 2008).

Team-based Learning and Career Education

As previously mentioned, the career research project is the ‘signature assignment’ of career education classes. These projects are traditionally characterized as routine, prosaic and lacking in opportunities for originality. The reason for the troublesome characterization is simple - much of the information for these research projects comes from the same reliable sources – the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Outlook Handbook, etc. This problem becomes even more pronounced when there are groups of students from the same majors in the same class, making it yet more difficult to nuance the same information. Nonetheless, the career research assignment can be an extremely meaningful way to acquaint students with previously unexplored career opportunities, broaden their horizons and help them to settle their career dilemmas. For this reason I began to consider revising my course by experimenting with team-based learning techniques and transforming the career research paper into a staged career research project. The
plan was also to suggest a more contextual framework for the assignment but to allow the students to design that framework themselves. The objective was to make the project more realistic for students and to allow students to use ‘group think’ to add a level of excitement to what commonly became a standardized assignment. My interest in adopting this strategy served a variety of purposes:

- it allowed students to take ownership of the material;
- it allowed me to see student learning in real time as opposed to waiting for exam and essay results;
- it introduced students to the power of peer learning;
- it allowed students to develop teamwork skills;
- it provided me with an additional level of assessment to evaluate student learning;
- it provided students with an opportunity to assess their own learning by measuring their skill development against that of their peers; and
- it helped to clarify difficulties in information delivery between myself and the student teams as well as within teams.

This strategy also provided an opportunity for students to develop and demonstrate their proficiency in the core competencies that have become key components to all curricula across disciplines at LaGuardia. At LaGuardia we focus on the following set of skills:

- Critical thinking/reading and analysis – Critical and logical thinking involves asking questions about the issues being addressed, the underlying assumptions, and the supporting evidence. Critical thinking and reading both require that students develop the confidence to pose these kinds of questions. Students who
work as team members become adept at sharing their ideas and brainstorming. They also develop greater confidence to question underlying assumptions.

- Oral communication skills - Oral presentations are associated with the development and assessment of oral communication skills. In teams students become accustomed to presenting their ideas to each other on a regular basis and to the class at the end of the semester. This provides students with a strong foundation for formal presentations.

- Written communication skills - The development of written communication skills rates highly among the learning outcomes in higher education and in the outside work world. In particular, priority is given to the ability to present logical, well-structured arguments and to express ideas with precision and clarity. Team-based learning helps students to develop writing skills by providing an opportunity to share feedback. This peer review process introduces students to constructive criticism in ways that are less intimidating than when such criticism comes from the instructor. In this process, the focus is also transferred from the writing to the project and the group grade. This also makes the writing less of a high stakes task.

- Information literacy - Familiarity with the diversity of information sources in a subject area is an important learning outcome for students. Research and analysis of research sources helps students to develop a sense of the role the information plays in decision making, especially career decision making. Students who work in teams have much that they can share with each other in this area when team
discussions turn to where information is found and what thinking guides the search for specific information.

- Technological Literacy – This skill refers to a person’s ability to find and assimilate information online, to successfully accomplish tasks using digital tools, including the creation of new digital documents, and to make judgments about the content found online (Jones-Kavalier & Flannigan, 2006). Team-based learning in today’s educational environments provides ample opportunities for students to develop and strengthen these skills. Students are routinely required to search, access, share and present information digitally. Final products such as power point presentations and ePortfolios are artifacts that attest to this.

- Quantitative Literacy – The ability to read tables and graphs and understand the message they convey is also an important skill for students. Team based learning in this area often results in the translation of summary information into graphs and charts as part of oral presentation packages.

In addition, team-based learning provides an opportunity to introduce students to critical workplace competencies:

- Resource management skills – identifies, organizes, plans and allocates resources like time, money, material land facilities and human resources;

- Systems management skills – understands complex inter-relationships
  - Understands systems
  - Monitors and corrects performance
  - Improves or designs systems

- Interpersonal skills – ability to work with others, including
Teamwork skills
- Serves clients/customers
- Exercises leadership
- Negotiates
- Works with diversity

(Summary of final SCANS Report accessed on 3/1/11 from Academic innovations at www.academicinnovations.com/report.html)

The Assignment

I have now taught FPA for five years. I have spent the last two years transforming the routine career research assignment into a major, staged and team-based career research project. The project begins with a few weeks of introduction and team assignments and ends with videotaped team presentations. Within the last year the project has taken on a life of its own embedded in team-based learning, rubrics, checklists, 12 pages of assignment instructions and examples of stages of the project. How does it work? The first few weeks of class are spent getting to know the syllabus and each other, getting an introduction to internships and creating teams. This is followed by two weeks of extensive self-assessment work guided by ‘Focus’, an online career assessment tool. The Focus work is done in groups. After focus students are required to write essays identifying two career choices from their Focus work (Plan A and Plan B). These essays are reviewed by team members then revised and submitted for instructor review and grading. The focus essays are a nice segue into the next steps of the research projects.

In the next stage of the research project students are required to identify an established company or create a company that can generate an organizational chart that realistically includes the Plan A career choices of each group member. A company profile, complete with mission
statement, is also required. Students then get to research their chosen professions together, share information, critique materials and compile the findings into one group submission. Each team member is required to research two career choices complete with detailed transfer information. The transfer information requires an indication of the number of credits accepted by the host school, cost of the four year degree, time required to complete the degree and how it will be financed.

Finally, all information is summarized in a PowerPoint presentation and presented to the class for feedback.

In the beginning, the project was not staged and students always complained that the instructions were unclear and they were unsure about what they would be graded on. Some of these complaints continued even though I staged the project. Finally, the combination of staging the project, a more detailed syllabus, using rubrics, checklists and team input have finally made the project clear and manageable so that students are not only able to complete the project without unnecessary confusion but they also seem able to enjoy the work. Over time I learned that planning for each stage of the team work was the key to success. This planning required attention to details. Initially, I am responsible for explaining the project in sufficient detail to students at the beginning of the class. This includes explaining the different stages of the project, how they will be graded and what support is available to them. I am also responsible for monitoring student progress in the project, answering questions as they arise and providing support or guidance as needed.

Creating Teams

In configuring the teams I let students make their own choices but I give them ample time to get to know each other so the choices are based on real information. I make the choice when
no choice is made, being careful to make the most equitable choice possible accounting for the academic and interpersonal skills of the student and a best group fit. My goal is to create teams where all members are not strong and all members are not weak. These decisions are made around the third week of class when I have a sense of writing skills, interpersonal skills and work ethic.

Staging the Work – the research project is staged to cover approximately eight weeks of a twelve-week class.

Monitoring Teams – time is allotted in each class for teamwork and teams are monitored for progress and to ensure that each member is contributing.

Evaluating Teams – initially I evaluated teams with only a group grade. Recently I began to allow for a group grade and an individual grade so that students feel valued for their individual contribution and so that where no contribution is made that too is reflected in final grades. (Davis, 1991).

Managing Difficult Students – teams are allowed to remove students from the team for cause, by consensus and following a discussion with the instructor. Students who are removed from one team are not allowed to join another. When a student is removed from a team, completion of the project is then negotiated individually.

Conclusion

Restructuring a course to develop a team-based learning model can be time consuming but the outcomes are well worth the work. If the goal for students is sustained, substantial and positive influence on how they act, feel and think - doing work that ensures these outcomes can be the only reward required for our efforts. In addition, it’s exciting when we know that the work we do not only prepares our students for the next steps in their academic journey but also
gives them solid grounding for their professional lives. Host universities for transferring students and prospective employers can both be expected to continue to demand graduates who are experienced in team work and the variety of additional skills and competencies that students can develop when they are engaged in team-based learning. This places further demands on instructors to ensure that students are exposed to the team experience in their classroom environment. This could suggest that we consider team-based learning as the signature pedagogy for career development courses and may be the optimal teaching strategy for other courses as well (Bain 2004).
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