Collaborative Learning among South African MBA Students

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore how learning amongst South African MBA students could be enhanced through collaborative learning. Collaborative learning groups are established in MBA programmes to build team-working skills, which will enhance the employability of MBA graduates and foster good performance in workplace settings. However, it had been observed that not all students agreed that this outcome materialized, although schools advised that the syndicate groups created by the school were the ideal vehicle for learning, where interaction and debate could flourish. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were used to gather qualitative data from a purposively selected sample of 13 current MBA students from accredited business schools in the Gauteng province of South Africa. Data were analyzed through coding, classifying and mapping of transcripts. The key insight was that "learning" (i.e. "conent") did not emerge as an objective, either overtly or covertly. Students were adamant that their goal was to submit an assignment and learn something about teams in the process. Business schools should re-evaluate their assumptions about effective group learning, and modify the assessments to maximize both team effectiveness and learning. Students need to embrace opportunities to facilitate their own group processes (including diversity management and dealing effectively with conflict) to achieve their goals.

Keywords: Study groups; collaborative learning; group learning; MBA; teams.

Introduction

The purpose of this research was to determine how learning amongst South African MBA students could be enhanced through collaborative learning. The study was undertaken because it had been observed that group work on MBA programs (in the form of syndicates), had many shortfalls, and was

seen by many students to be not particularly effective. It has been widely acknowledged that working in teams is a critical workplace skill (Johnson & Johnson 1989; Bacon, Stewart & Silver 1999; Chapman *et al.* 2006; Beals 2010), and the use of syndicate groups in MBA courses is intended to teach students to work effectively in teams. On this basis it has been assumed that the study group phenomenon with post-experience MBA students proxies the functioning of work groups or teams in the business setting, so that conclusions may possibly be transferable to the work setting.

Assessment on MBA programs is generally through similar mechanisms, eg two formative assessment assignments (one individual and one in groups, comprising six to eight students in syndicates with school imposed membership) and a summative assessment in the form of an examination or a research proposal. The two assignments contribute 25% each to the final mark and the final assessment 50%. It transpired that a large number of students found syndicate work ineffective and frustrating; consequently they formed parallel study groups with self-selected controlled access to membership. This report explores perceptions of both syndicate and study group learning experiences and to suggest ways in which learning effectiveness in the MBA program could be optimized through collaborative learning. The study examines, amongst other things, cooperative learning principles, team development and adult learning theory.

Problem Statement

The problem was to explore ways in which collaborative learning approaches can be applied in South African MBA classrooms, to enhance both content learning and team working skills. The team working skills are anticipated to boost effectiveness and productivity back in the workplace, to the benefit of both graduates and the organizations.

Literature Review

Learning Theories

Behlol and Dad (2010), in their literature review on concepts of learning, described how early definitions of learning were characterized by 'stimulus-response' mechanisms, where learning was perceived largely as memorizing and rote learning, leading to a quantitative increase in knowledge. In 1979, Säljö (1979) had added to these definitions of learning, by positioning it as

an intellectual process, wherein learning went beyond memorizing and included concepts such as sense-making, abstracting meaning from information, interpreting and understanding realities in different ways and reorganizing facts into new configurations.

More recent research into the realm of learning (Merriam 2001; Marquardt & Waddill 2004; Kolb & Kolb 2005; Bergsteiner, Avery & Neumann 2010) support these views in the move towards one of mental processing and internal sense-making. One of the better known learning theories is that of Kolb and Kolb (2005), where they posit a cognitivist theory of learning, which is built on six propositions:

a) Learning is a process, not an outcome. To improve learning in higher education, the primary focus should be on engaging students in a process that best enhances their learning, a process that includes feedback on the effectiveness of their learning efforts.
b) All learning is relearning and can be built on the students' beliefs and ideas about a topic so that they can be re-examined, re-tested, and re-integrated.
c) Learning requires the resolution of conflicts between opposing modes of adaptation to the world. Learning is fuelled by conflict, differences and disagreement, which the individual must move between using reflection, action, feeling and thinking.
d) Learning is a holistic process and does not solely entail cognition. It requires the integrated functioning of the person, i.e. thinking, feeling, perceiving and behaving.
e) Learning results from active engagement between the person and the environment whereby new experiences are interpreted in relation to existing concepts and experiences.
f) Learning is the process of creating knowledge whereby social knowledge is created and recreated in the personal knowledge of the learner. Learning is thus unlike the transmission models where pre-existing fixed ideas are transmitted to the learner.

Kolb's model sees the learner going through the phases of experiencing something unfamiliar or new, reflecting on that experience before applying cognitive processing (thinking about it - particularly with reference to known

facts, eg published material), constructing their own interpretation of how it should be done, then actually attempting the new task.

Andragogy

Adult learning has made a significant shift away from early learning theory, with the popularization of andragogy (Knowles 1975) representing the shift away from viewing adult learners in the same light as child learners (Daloisio & Firestone 1983; Mitchell & Courtney 2005; De Dea Roglio & Light 2009). Soney (2003:17) refers to adult learners as, "*They're not just big kids"*, referring to the incorrect and common application of the term "pedagogy" to adult learning.

Knowles' (1975) principles of andragogy is reinforced by Mitchell and Courtney (2005). Knowles (1975:85-87) defines adult learning in its broadest sense as "self-directed learning", which refers to the process in which individuals take initiative for their own learning, i.e. they diagnose their needs, formulate learning goals, identify appropriate resources, implement appropriate learning strategies and evaluate learning outcomes. More importantly, the definition extends to state that self-directed learning usually occurs in association with "helpers, such as teachers, tutors, masters and peers". He identified the conditions that must be met when seeking to educate adults successfully. These conditions are:

a) Learners must feel a need to learn, usually on the basis of an identified knowledge or skill gap;
b) The learning intervention objectives must align with their identified need;
c) Mutual trust, respect and helpfulness, freedom of expression, and acceptance of differences should characterize the learning environment;
d) The learners must accept responsibility for their own learning (the facilitator being responsible for teaching);
e) Active commitment to and participation in the learning process by the learners is fundamental;
f) The learning process must be cognizant of the learner's existing knowledge and experience; and

g) The learners should welcome and embrace feedback and use it to progress towards their desired outcome.

Gom (2009) and Illeris (2009) reiterate the points above; adults will always go through some form of internal self-dialogue, during which they question the reasons behind the purpose of the knowledge transfer, the usability of the knowledge, and how the knowledge fits into the individual's life perspectives (Illeris 2009). Therefore, outside influences, irrespective of the forms in which they transpire, (eg conversation, guidance, persuasion, pressure or compulsion), are always received in the light of the adult's own experience and perspectives.

Other adult learning theories have been presented by Kiely, Sandmann and Truluck (2004) and Trotter (2006). Kiely *et al.* (2004) have developed a theoretical model, which underpins adult learning which they refer to as the four lens model. They contend that the four lenses combined provide a holistic perspective of how adults learn and what must be done contextually to facilitate such learning. If used on its own, each individual lens will provide insight into the specific component of the adult learning process. The four lenses are:

1. Learner: This lens focuses on participation and motivation patterns, the characteristics of adult learners, learning styles, self-direction, the role of experience and andragogy amongst others. This positions the learner as an active participant, which must be engaged with to facilitate learning.
2. Process: Refers to the 'how' of adult learning. Is it instructional versus interactive, what is the role of dialogue, why is reflection important and how can experiential learning drive adult learning?
3. Educator: The role of the educator is highlighted here with educator orientation, beliefs and style cited as a key determinant in the success of the knowledge acquisition by the adult learner. The educator is positioned as an enabler and facilitator.
4. Context: The authors argue that learning is not an individual process but rather a social process, based on interaction, socialisation and dialogue. The physical context is also an important factor as it influences how the individual responds to a changing environment.

Cooperative / Collaborative Learning

A working definition of cooperative learning is offered by Johnson and Johnson (1999:2) who describe it as "the instructional use of small groups enabling students to work together towards the maximization of their own and others' learning". They suggest that the benefit of the cooperative learning model is that it develops and reinforces active learning, such as learning how to learn, interpersonal communication and teamwork. These skills are in demand in many professional sectors. They proposed a model of cooperative learning that encompasses five basic elements, *viz*. positive interdependence, individual accountability, face-to-face promotive action, social skills and group processing. They argue these must be present for an activity to be considered cooperative. In various publications, they (Johnson & Johnson 1993, 1999; Johnson *et al.* 1990) describe that students not only achieve higher grades in cooperative learning but they also acquire social skills and values, which benefit them throughout their lives. Cooperative learning also encouraged higher-order critical thinking and problem solving skills (Koppenhaver & Shrader 2003). Similarly, Beals (2010:2) shared that, at MIT, "most students learn fundamental concepts more successfully, and are better able to apply them, through interactive, collaborative, student-centered learning.…" and Shihab (2011) found that students within successful cooperative learning environments exhibit greater intrinsic motivation to learn and consequently, achieve higher grades.

Johnson and Johnson (1999) emphasize that instructors / lecturers at schools have a responsibility to create an environment conducive to collaborative learning, which should include developing the required social skills needed to enable group functioning. Shimazoe and Aldrich (2010) concur with this skills development sentiment and suggested tangible actions which could be taken to ensure the successful implementation of cooperative learning. These include the establishment of group goals and rewards, communication of the cooperative process to students, the development of students' social skills before classroom groups start engaging and monitoring group performance through peer evaluation and other techniques.

However, cooperative learning is not without its pitfalls. The effects of cooperative learning do not merely arise through the formation of work groups (Johnson *et al.* 1990). These authors had pointed out that students may be unsure of course goals, which can be remedied by the instructor

carefully structuring the assignment to facilitate understanding. It is up to the lecturer to create this environment and not to abdicate their responsibility (Bacon, Stewart & Silver 1999), which could result in students becoming unproductive and disillusioned. Other factors affecting group learning are; the length of time the team exists, with longer times resulting in greater learning, how the members were selected, with moderated self-selection seemingly the most effective and the proportion of the final mark allocated to teamwork.

Fellers (1993) highlights a fundamental flaw in the cooperative learning process, that is, the widely held belief that anyone who has expertise in a given field can teach. This belief, he argues, must be based on the incorrect assumption that content (what is taught) is more important than process (how it is taught). This error, according to the same author, explains the non-realization of syndicate goals, which can only be corrected by ensuring the correct mix of skills and knowledge is combined into such cooperative learning groups. Koppenhaver and Shrader (2003) point out that cooperative groups require additional time to meet, which provides an increased opportunity for group conflict. They further argue that such groups may create a sense of frustration amongst high achievement individuals who may believe that they are doing the job of the instructor, while seemingly not gaining much benefit from the group. Furthermore, research conducted by Krause and Stark (2010) found that cooperative learning did not necessarily facilitate learning when comparing students who worked individually and students working in groups.

Intragroup diversity was found by Shaw (2004) to benefit creative thinking and innovative solutions in learning groups. However, if the heterogeneity was too great, learning suffered (Chin-Min 2011). This author observed that groups with extremely diverse characteristics, particularly regarding learning ethic, abilities and learning styles, are forced to work together, difficulties and conflict may arise leading to dysfunctional behavior in the group, resulting in the loss of benefits associated with cooperative learning.

Thus, to summarize, pitfalls of this type of learning include a) a low level of involvement by the course facilitator b) not teaching the learners both content and process, including social skills and emotional intelligence c) not allowing enough time for meetings and collaboration, d) diversity can

lead to conflict instead of synergy and e) the group needs to be allowed to go through the normal cycles of team development.

The next section in this review of the literature examines some of the popular theories on team functioning

Team Theory

Learning to work together in a group may be one of the most important interpersonal skills a person can develop since this will influence one's employability, productivity, and career success (Johnson & Johnson 1989:32).

In the context of this study, team development is an important aspect, which contributes to the understanding of the functioning of the cooperative work group. Team development, team processes and team / individual assessments are included in this discussion.

Models

The concept of team theory and team effectiveness is widely reported in academic literature. For the purposes of this paper, two team development frameworks are utilized, *viz*. the Tuckman and Jensen (1977) team development model, and the "Big Five" model developed by Salas, Sims, and Burke (2005), which was based on their earlier TEAM model (Morgan Jr, Salas & Glickman 1993). The first model was selected due to its widespread popularity and ease of application to the team context. Its current value has been described by Betts (2010) and confirmed in a comprehensive review (Bonebright 2010:119) of the development of the model in which the concluding remark is "HRD scholars and practitioners can learn something from a model that has proved valuable for almost 45 years. The utility of providing a simple, accessible starting point for conversations about key issues of group dynamics has not diminished".

The five phases of team development (Betts 2010; Tuckman & Jensen 1977) are: forming, storming, norming, performing and adjourning. This model emphasizes the stages involved in-group development, with high levels of energy and productivity visible in the early stages of team formation. The team then goes through a phase of intense questioning, disagreement with jostling for power and position, which impacts negatively on team performance. As this stage passes, energy and productivity levels

settle with the team progressing towards high performance. The fifth stage of adjourning was added later, as it takes into account the end of a particular cycle of activity or project.

The TEAM model (Morgan Jr, Salas & Glickman 1993) splits the Tuckman and Jensen (1977) model into task work and team work and incorporates its phases. They describe how team-building efforts often show no correlation to increased team performance unless combined with task work – equally and in parallel. The more recent work, lead by Salas (Salas, Sims & Burke 2005:555) built on the this model, and suggested that the "Big-Five" of team work are, "team leadership, mutual performance monitoring, backup behavior, adaptability, and team orientation", and that team development is driven by supporting coordinating mechanisms: viz. "shared mental modes, closed-loop communication, and mutual trust". In a subsequent systematic review of the literature (Wildman *et al.* 2012), it was reported that there are still numerous research gaps relating to teams, including, amongst other things, the acknowledgement that there is a need for more unified theories, suggesting that the ideal model is yet to be found.

Other Team Characteristics

These include team synergy in which it has been highlighted (Cohen & Bailey 1997) that effective team performance is not the natural outcome of bringing together a team to accomplish interdependent tasks. The authors argue that it is not sufficient that each individual optimally performs his/her own tasks, but it is fundamental that each individual adjusts to complement the other. This is much like any team sport, in which an individual's performance can make the whole team either win or lose.

Team stability is another factor; teams characterized by low levels of turnover and comprising people who have played together extensively in the past, achieve on average better performances than teams that implement major changes in their rosters every year (Montanari, Silvestri & Gallo 2008).

It has also been acknowledged (Kearney, Gebert & Voelpel 2009) that the diverse assortment of knowledge, skills and perspectives in the group should in enhance team performance, even though a large body of literature has indicated that people prefer to work with similar rather than dissimilar

individuals. It is the dissimilarities among team members, which are argued to give rise to conflict.

Relationships between team members; Shu-Cheng, Chiung-Yi and Artemis (2010) distinguish between relational and task conflict where relational conflict is defined as members' experiences of negative emotions due to their differences in beliefs and values. Task conflict refers to disagreements about procedures, policies, or resource allocations. These authors found that relational conflict had a detrimental effect on team performance.

Research Methodology

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were used to gather qualitative data from a purposively selected sample of 13 current MBA students from accredited business schools in the Gauteng province of South Africa. Data were analyzed through coding, classifying and mapping of transcripts (Jansen 2010). Although the findings may not be generalized beyond South African MBA students, it is hoped that they will provide useful andragogical (as opposed to pedagogical) input to programs in similar contexts.

Results and Discussion

Learning Theory Analysis

A notable observation from the majority of the respondents (eight) was something not stated specifically, but implied. This was that "learning" did not seem to be primary objective of the syndicate exercises, but rather the aim was to "get the assignment submitted". This emerged during discussions on the phases of team development (Morgan Jr, Salas & Glickman 1993; Tuckman & Jensen 1977), when students were defining the "performing" stage. This highlights one of the key cautions about collaborative learning regarding the role of the lecturer (Bacon, Stewart & Silver 1999) in making the objectives clear and teaching that both team and task objectives existed. This deficiency is somewhat alarming in a university context, and may link to Fellers' (1993) observation about academics not necessarily having acquired teaching (and by implication, assessment) skills.

A summarized view of cooperative learning (Johnson & Johnson 1999; Shimazoe & Aldrich 2010) is the perception that we are linked to others in

such a manner that we cannot succeed unless we help them to succeed; our actions benefit them and their actions benefit us, a respondent said, "there's not much synergy, it's all about compromise". A perspective emerged relating to the need for a critical mass or coalition in the group, if effecting positive change in behavior was to be achieved. One respondent summarized this sentiment, "Unfortunately we were in the minority and another quick learning was that unless you have a critical mass of people willing to work, there is no way the syndicate will achieve what intends to achieve".

There are two elements to the definition of individual accountability (Shimazoe & Aldrich 2010; Johnson & Johnson 1999; Bulut 2010). The first relates to group members being held individually accountable to perform their work and the second to sharing of performance and feedback with all group members. Syndicate group members seldom held team members accountable for non-performance as, "it was often easier just to redo the work or get it done myself", and "I don't want to create unpleasantness" Laszlo, Laszlo and Johnsen (2009) queried the value of cooperative work groups to high-ability individuals, particularly in instances when the groups also comprised individuals with medium and low abilities, "he just doesn't get it! We've got a deadline to meet, and I'm already going through the night on other work". The overall view was that "no-one really wins. Sure, the assignment goes in, but it's the work of a few of us usually, so we're overloaded while the rest don't do anything and don't get any better for the next one". Laszlo *et al.* (2009) sought to validate the effect that cooperative work group settings have on the self-esteem and performance of high-ability individuals. The results of their study showed that individuals achieved more in a cooperative group setting (as opposed to a group in conflict) than the individualistic learning setting, as the cooperation and challenge within the group promoted a higher level of reasoning.

Three respondents working in parallel, self-assigned study groups were much more content with their learning experiences based on group cohesion and respect between members – although they could not be said to be guilty of "groupthink", "I think that I got so much value from the group that I realized I may not feel comfortable actually fighting in the group. I knew that I was getting something out from the group, in fact probably getting more than I was giving. It was worth not rocking the boat". A certain competitiveness amongst members appeared to be positive, "In my study

group, we were in it for the team. If I wasn't on the Dean's List, then I wanted one of my study group to be there. Knowing that I helped you get there was a sense of pride". Such statements are also indicative of face-to-face promotive action, ie promoting others' success by helping, supporting encouraging and praising individual efforts, taking time to explain and discuss problems and issues

Team members must be socially competent, and must have the requisite leadership, decision-making, trust building, communication and conflict management skills if they are to contribute to the success of the group (Johnson & Johnson 1989). Using this definition as the basis for assessment, it was clear that the syndicate groups presented with a mixed bag of social skills.

Decision-making skills appeared to negatively impacted by the nature of group dynamics, where initially, respondents indicated, ""So we often ended up having two hours of discussion, with no decision in sight, filled with high levels of tension. In the end, the general sense of "do what you want" prevailed". This sentiment prevailed in all syndicate groups, especially related to the early part of the MBA. Decisions were thus arrived at because of time pressures or because group members were frustrated at the duration of syndicate group meetings. The level of relationship building skills amongst team members also seemed to vary between groups and specifically, amongst certain individuals. Most respondents found at least one person in the group with whom they "gelled', and often this relationship formed the basis of "a coalition within the group to achieve some positive outcome". In other instances, the relationships between group members were strained due to a lack of basic interpersonal skills.

Group processing refers to the ability of the team to reach a point where there is open discussion about goal achievement and team relationships, which ultimately enables the team to drive the type of behavior it desires. Closely linked to open dialogue about relationships is the management of conflict within the group, which many respondents indicated, was managed poorly within the group. Syndicate groups preferred to ignore non-performance and other issues and focus on getting the job done, "We actively chose not to argue when people did not come prepared as often, the argument would take longer than just putting our heads down and getting the work done."

The groups' propensity to avoid risk seems to rest on the importance some respondents placed on using the MBA to develop a network, and they feared that providing feedback would result in conflict which could impact on the value of the individual in one's network. A specific example was provided by a respondent who was a member of one of the study groups regarding the performance of two colleagues, "What was particularly interesting for me in this group was that we had two people who probably contributed less to the group, yet we carried them. In essence, they didn't really contribute to the study group such that they probably got more benefit from it then we got from them. Yet we tolerated that". This respondent was questioned regarding the group's unwillingness to deal with the issue and could not explain the inaction. At best, he suggested that their behavior had not caused harm to the group, which made their membership of the group more palatable. This lack of action contradicts research by Laszlo *et al.* (2009) which found that team members who shirk their responsibilities result in dissonance being created in the team, which is closely followed by remedial action.

Team Theory Analysis

In relation to the Tuckman and Jensen (1977) model: "forming" was excluded from the discussion by ten of the 13 respondents as they felt that the syndicate groups were not self-forming, as indicated by one, "In our first syndicate, we were put into a group and that was essentially the formation of the group". To these group members, the first phase of the model experienced was that of storming. In the three instances where group forming was induced, respondents indicated that members made a conscious effort to get to know each other, "The main one that you would see is 'forming' because everyone is meeting each other. Syndicate groups were interesting as it forced you to get to know people whom you have never met". Both these perspectives are interesting as in the former, 'there was no forming', where it appears that syndicate group members may not have realized that forming was still a necessary part of the team development process. It is also likely that their understanding of forming may have been limited solely to the coming together of the group, and the need to explore, to find common ground, to agree that objectives or similar were missed. In the second perspective, it appears that the groups actively engaged in

forming behavior. This level of tolerance and politeness as referred to by Staggers, Garcia and Nagelhout (2008) decreased substantially as members progressed to their second syndicate group.

The storming phase (Tuckman & Jensen 1977) relates to the period after the joy and harmony of meeting new team members. The team begins to deal with the reasons for its existence and the individual personalities and aspirations begin to manifest in terms of how the team operate. Staggers, Garcia and Nagelhout (2008) refer to this stage as the 'why we are here' phase. Of all the stages, this one elicited the highest levels of emotive responses. The majority of descriptors relating to disagreements were regarding approaches to tasks and the interpretation and application of theories and concepts. These disagreements were also driven by power plays within the group as some members of the group jostled for leadership.

The norming phase relates to the group beginning to find itself i.e. the sense that the group is beginning to function as it should. The groups are positive and 'play-up' the benefit of group work. Whilst this was successful in some cases, some groups didn't really move beyond "storming". Assignment submissions were sometimes made despite the challenging nature of the group rather than because it was functioning effectively.

The definition of performing was inconsistent across respondents, and hence syndicates. Some defined syndicate group performance as the successful delivery of an assignment on its due date. Several respondents were dissatisfied with mere submission, "Yes, we got them in, but I know they pulled my marks down" and "It's SO frustrating that some people just can't write properly". Others defined performing as the submission of an assignment of a particularly high standard on the due date. The final definition that emerged was that performance of a syndicate extended beyond the submission of an assignment and included the extent to which a syndicate group had effectively learnt. One student shared, "the problem is that people in charge of a particular assignment are the ones who are good at that topic. Like finance – I'm hopeless and I'm never going to learn anything when the accountants do those ones". She said that she believed syndicate groups never reached the performing stage based on her definition of the syndicate group as a vehicle for learning.

All respondents referred to adjourning as the end of the semester, and the group disbanded. The six-month syndicate group cycle had become

normal to respondents, with no formal adjourning process to signify the end of the syndicate group reported by respondents.

Many respondents indicated that six months was not a sufficient time span for all of the stages to materialize, and that the continuous changing of the groups only increased the levels of stress which they had to manage, "there's no time to do teamwork. We are just getting to know each other when we all have to change again". This aligns with previous research (Montanari, Silvestri & Gallo 2008; Cohen & Bailey 1997) relating to the negative impact of high turnover in groups.

In relation to the TEAM model (Morgan Jr, Salas & Glickman 1993): the perception of teamwork and task work was clearly described by respondents. Syndicate group work was perceived by all 13 respondents to be task work orientated, which linked to their definition of performing. Conflict in the first syndicate group experience was common across the sample, and typically related to disagreements on the understanding of the scope of an assignment, or differing perspectives on the application of key concepts, "I didn't understand it that way. I'm sure what he meant was . . .". This is another indicator of lack of clarity in assignment instruction (Fellers 1993). The likelihood of conflict in the first semester was high, particularly as most respondents felt that this was the period when many class members were trying to establish themselves, or as respondents put it, "make their voices heard". People wanted to make an impression and often this meant not backing down from a point of view.

The levels of conflict identified by respondents could be grouped into 1) personality clashes or disagreements about interpretation or the application of concepts or models, 2) task-linked tensions where forced control over syndicate group assignments around timeliness and quality emerged. This resulted in some marginalization of team members and the consequent formation of subgroups, 3) perceived aggression, verbal or otherwise, related to stress and repeated episodes of emotional outbursts / crying, which lead to breakdowns in communication, and 4) slander or defamation of character, or behavior perceived as such. Disciplinary processes were invoked and there was a breakdown in group structure and functioning. This could be interpreted as an extreme form of storming (Morgan Jr, Salas & Glickman 1993; Tuckman & Jensen 1977), and use of

social skills (Shu-Cheng, Chiung-Yi & Artemis 2010; Edwards *et al.* 2006) would be stretched.

Smith, Johnson and Johnson (1984) found that controversy at a level of disagreement on ideas, information, conclusions or theories, contributes to team performance as the process the team must engage in to find solutions stimulates thought and reflection. This sentiment is also aligned with the task work definition of controversy proposed by Shu-Cheng, Chiung-Yi and Artemis (2010). A respondent in the latter group used the words "... diplomacy fatigue" to describe the onset of conflict on her part in a syndicate group. In another, an individual had instituted legal action against a fellow group member if a public apology was not provided for comments passed about the other's perceived lack of contribution to the group assignment. These incidents are similar to those previously reported (Shu-Cheng, Chiung-Yi & Artemis 2010), where it was identified that relational controversy in which disagreements occur due to different beliefs and values are detrimental to the team.

In line with the research findings from Kearney, Gebert and Voelpel (2009), respondents in general agreed that demographic diversity contributed to the effectiveness of syndicate groups, and different perspectives added value both to tasks at hand and to personal growth. Responses to cognitive diversity, however, indicated concerns regarding the spread of skills, resources and experiences in the make-up of syndicate groups, "we're just different, that's all".

It appears that the perceived time wastage as the group tip-toed in the early ("forming") (Betts 2010) stages, identifying different levels of work ethic, different aspirations and unexpected levels of individual competence. The one issue mentioned by all respondents related to the presence of individuals who were keen to contribute as little as possible to the syndicate group, who often refused to attend syndicate group meetings and, when they did attend, found reason to leave early, "those two are just excess baggage, free-loaders. Can't we chuck them out? We can't let them just get away with it!". The impact of having these individuals was significant as it meant that the remaining syndicate group members had to carry an extra burden, as summarised by this respondent, "Syndicate work was probably the worst experience in my life, I have never in my life spent so much time working such late hours, doing other people's work, and reviewing other people's

"drivel"". This response adds support to findings by Sonnentag and Volmer (2010), which highlighted the negative impact of the lack of a common goal amongst team members, which is very much aligned to the experiences mentioned here. Learning or the lack thereof, was a key factor in the group dynamics, which occurred. However, a narrow definition of learning may have robbed many of an ideal opportunity for self-growth and development. Learning as a positive outcome from the first syndicate group seemed to occur only for those who were able to realize that there was something to be learnt, and that they should have differentiated between content and process learning much sooner in the MBA program. Where this differentiation was not made, the learning opportunity was lost.

Additional Findings

Voluntary formation of parallel study groups; "Stated simply, it (the group) formed by excluding the people who were not willing to contribute and we continued with people all were contributing and who added value to the learning experience. That's the basics behind the formation of the study group. It was born out of people looking for common ground, common values, similar expectations, and found those characteristics in other individuals. It was born out of necessity". The formation of study groups represents a key development in the syndicate group process. These groups were self-forming, self-regulating, entry-controlled groups (Chapman *et al.* 2006) consisting of individuals who shared similar aspirations of the program. Nine respondents were in some form of study group whilst two respondents had never participated in a study group and preferred to study alone. The remaining two participated in study groups on an ad hoc basis, usually driven by the complexity of course subject matter. There was a common sentiment expressed by respondents who were members of study groups, regarding the relevance of these stages. Notably that as study groups were naturally formed, the initial 'getting to know you' of the forming stage enhanced the foundation of the group (Bonebright 2010). Consequently, the storming phase in study groups was less about wanting to impress others with one's cognitive prowess or about personality issues, and more about the core objective of the group. By the time the study groups started storming, it appears there were strong working relationships established, with sufficient levels of mutual trust and respect (Wildman *et al.* 2012) to overcome some

of the issues that may have arisen. This foundational strength of relationship amongst study group members was described by Edwards *et al.* (2006). It is also likely the self-forming nature of the study groups contributed to team performance as the TEAM model (Bonebright 2010) posits that the forming phase is one where individuals are testing each other in terms of trust and dependability, without which the storming phase will be characterized by emotional responses to task demands and intragroup conflict.

What is clear is that in instances where a group made the distinction between the two streams of teamwork and task work, and adapted these as required, these groups claim to have benefitted and achieved more from the group. Both demographic and cognitive diversity (Kozlowski & Ilgen 2006) were reported to have a positive influence on the group. This was especially marked where the group had selected individuals with specific skills – they were able to do well across most MBA disciplines.

By far, the biggest drawback of participating in a study group is the need to invest additional time and effort into an already challenging schedule. Respondents indicated that whilst their families or partners may have understood their need for the study group, it was an added source of pressure (Carmichael & Sutherland 2005).

Conclusions

This study found that MBA students find the formalized syndicate study groups with purely imposed membership a hindrance to learning rather than a facilitating mechanism. The other major factor contributing to low levels of learning was found to be inadequate understanding regarding expectations of team assignments, which should be beyond mere assignment delivery, and encompass specific content learning as well as teamwork skills. The students do value opportunities to study in groups but feel that both team and learning processes can be improved to increase the value to themselves and to the business school.

Recommendations

Based on respondent experiences of syndicate groups, it seemed appropriate to use the end of the interview to get their specific thoughts and insights on how they felt syndicate group functioning could be enhanced, irrespective of cooperative learning principles.

Recommendations to improve the effectiveness of syndicate groups:

- Universities should require their lecturing staff to obtain some form of qualification or instruction into the principles and practices of teaching
- Syndicate assessments should include an evaluation of the team working and learning processes experienced in the production of the hand-in assignment
- Syndicate groups should be given the rights to 'select' and 'evict' group members, thereby enabling self-regulation of the group. If the business school wants to retain ownership over allocation to syndicate groups, then they should allow the syndicate group to evict non-performing members.
- Find a way to assess emotional maturity, and then ensure it becomes part of the selection criteria.
- "Why so many engineers? Syndicate groups struggle when there isn't a fair spread of skills in the group. The business school should consider accepting a wider spread of professions into the program".
- The business school should consider placing students in groups for the first semester, after which students are allowed to form their own groups. This will encourage people who really want to achieve, achieving at extraordinary levels, and those who have not formed into groups could be allocated to syndicate groups in the manner the university has always applied.
- Enhance the content and duration of the orientation program so that it benefits students. "Allow senior students to deliver the program, set up mini-tasks in "Apprentice" style, so that we can learn quickly about other people".
- Include aspects of the Organization Design and Development module such as Team theory, in the orientation program.
- "Lecturers should alternate the tasks given to the syndicate groups. The same story of individual assignment, syndicate assignment and presentation is boring and drives "beat the system' behavior. The variety will stimulate student interest and remove the repetition of the same requirements".

Alternatives to syndicate groups:

- Only one respondent suggested alternatives to syndicate group work. The remainder of respondents indicated that they believed the groups were necessary and would prefer to have the problems addressed.

The two suggestions as alternatives to syndicate group work were:

- "The Business School should consider the use of business simulations instead of typical syndicate group task work. This will not only stimulate working in a group but will contribute to the overall enjoyment and richness of the MBA program".
- "Students could be asked to take on social projects aligned to course content. In that way, there is some give-back to society from both students and the school, and society is a beneficiary".

Given the volume of recommendations, many respondents have been actively considering ways to overcome the challenges and problems they have experienced in their syndicate groups. It is additionally encouraging that an overwhelming majority indicated they would not dispense with the group process, as there is value in working with others. However, many of these recommendations are very transactional in nature and may address the explicit issues syndicate groups are facing. Unfortunately, there are only a few of these recommendations which allude to creating an environment which is conducive to cooperative learning leaving it to the business school to reflect on how cooperative learning could be operationalized.

The two alternatives to syndicate groups as presented must be given due consideration as in many ways, these are not really replacements. Rather, they are a format change to how people can learn and interact, and depending on the format, will include built-in monitoring and feedback mechanisms whereby individual performance in the group can be monitored. These suggestions resemble precisely what many of the respondents have been asking for.

Recommendations for future research:

- A qualitative analysis that builds on this one, and possibly includes students and lecturers from other universities will assist to make this research topic more generalizable.

- A quantitative approach towards determining the critical success factors of MBA student behavior in syndicate or study groups, the output of which could assist business schools and students to aspire towards the development of the ideal characteristics.
- An assessment to determine the effectiveness, validity and reliability of assessor ratings of syndicate group tasks.
- An in-depth analysis of the impact of syndicate group work on individual and group learning.
- A comparison across a number of business schools which assesses how syndicate groups function in different contexts. This could include a quantitative assessment on the extent to which the grades achieved across schools are actually different or not.

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