Managing Conflict in Online Multicultural Student Teams

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Abstract: The use of teams by organizations of all sizes and orientation has grown significantly. Almost 70 percent of online students have reported working in teams in some form, in the last 12 months. Additionally, as globalization compresses time and space, the use of virtual cross cultural teams continues to rise. Learning to be an effective member of a team, especially a virtual team, has become a necessary career competency in many organizations. The sources of conflicts in student teams mirror those of face-to-face teams. Most conflict can be traced to differences in expected outcomes (grades), roles, style, values and resources (time), or basic personality conflicts. Because communication is often asynchronous and virtual, there are more opportunities for miscommunication. Online instructors often do not have the luxury of "seeing" the conflict holistically. This paper discusses the causes of conflict in student teams, the various behaviors that contribute to the conflict and the instructor strategies and practices that will reduce the impact of conflicts on the learning experience. In practice, the processes offered in this paper have reduced evident conflicts by 70%.

Introduction

I have had the privilege and at times, the agony of overseeing more than 250 graded online team assignments. After enduring many instances of conflicts in student teams and making mistakes in handling them, I realized that I needed to do something to either reduce or manage the conflicts. Through research, discussion with peers and experimentation, I have learned how to mitigate much of the inevitable conflict that arises. What follows below are a set of practices for handling these conflicts. These practices can help ensure that learning objectives are met and that students have a positive experience. Implementation of these guidelines has reduced the evident instances of conflict by 70% in the subsequent student assignments that I have overseen.

I conducted an informal poll from (2005 – 2007) of more than 300 students at the four universities where I have taught online courses asking about their overall experience with group assignments. I offered three response choices (positive, mixed or negative experiences) and results indicate that 63 percent (see Table 1) either had a mixed or negative experience ("disliked"). The primary reasons students offer are difficulty in getting everyone on the "same page," unclear instructions and expectations, and the fact that their grade depends on others.

Table 1: Student’s attitudes towards online team assignments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students</th>
<th>% who have participated in an online team assignment</th>
<th>Enjoyed the experience and thought it was a positive learning experience</th>
<th>Thought it was a mixed experience, overall worthwhile but some aspects detracted from the experience</th>
<th>Disliked the experience and thought it detracted from the learning experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>303</td>
<td>252 (83%)</td>
<td>93 (37%)</td>
<td>51 (20%)</td>
<td>108 (43%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Given the potential conflicts in team assignments and the general disdain by students, why do professors persist in using team assignments? In discussions with many of my peers, the answers range from a belief in the value of learning how to be a positive team member to reducing their grading load.
Discussion

The Use of Teams - An Essential Skill

Almost 70 percent of my online students have reported working in teams in some form in the last 12 months. Additionally, as globalization compresses time and space, the use of virtual teams continues to rise. A recent study by the Gartner Group stated that by 2008, 41 million corporate employees will operate in a virtual workplace at least one day per week. Learning to be an effective member of a team, especially a virtual team, has become a necessary career competency.

A study by Ceridian Employer Services found that the ability to work in virtual teams plays a significant role in recruitment and retention. 50% of surveyed companies considered the ability to work in virtual teams a very attractive recruiting tool and 66% of the surveyed employees found the ability to use the Internet and work in virtual teams an “excellent” reason to stay with a company (Smith, 2008, p. 3).

On the other hand, the use of virtual teams brings challenges as well. These include issues related to trust, communication, the dependence on technology, time management, and team cohesiveness (Smith, 2008). It is more difficult to build trust virtually due to the lack of many of the clues that characterize face to face collaboration (non-verbals, proximity, consistency, observation). It is also more difficult to detect individual expectations in virtual teams compared to face to face teams. Expectations are individually-bound and often implicit. It is easier to detect mismatches face to face (Bosch-Sijtsema, 2007). Because they are distant, team members have more difficulty creating a “shared context” which helps shape expectations and build trust (Hinds & Baily, 2003).

Communication and language differences, time zone differences, differences in personal schedules, other time commitments, inconsistent time management capabilities and even cultural views on time can all create sources of conflict in student teams.

All of these can undermine team cohesiveness and serve as a foundation for conflicts in student teams. Virtual team members are more likely to experience task, role or responsibility ambiguity due to these factors (Shin, 2005).

Specific Sources of Conflict in Student Teams

The sources of conflicts in student teams mirror those of face-to-face teams. Most conflicts can be traced to differences in expected outcomes (grades), deliverables, roles, style, values and resources (time), or basic personality conflicts. Because communication is often asynchronous and virtual, there seem to be more opportunities for miscommunication, much like those we find in the workplace today with e-mail and instant messaging.

As I stated earlier, I have overseen more than 250 online student team assignments. I have been tracking instances of evident conflict in my online classes for the last three years. It that time I oversaw 127 online student assignments without the benefit of the array of conflict mitigation practices listed below. 78 or 61% had evident instances of conflict. “Evident” is defined as a clear instance of conflict that is visible to the instructor either in the form of a student complaint or can be observed in a group forum.

In that time, team members "going silent" was the number one source of conflict (42%) in the student team projects. The number two conflict involved "quality" - students unhappy about the quality of some of the input from their peers for the team assignment (31%). Number three, unfortunately, has been accusations of plagiarism about a teammate (12%) (See Table 2).
Table 2: Sources of Conflict in Online Student Assignments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sources of Conflicts</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Differences in Expected Outcomes and Commitment (&quot;Going silent&quot;):</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differences in &quot;Quality&quot; (Deliverables):</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differences in &quot;Values&quot; (Plagiarism):</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personality Conflicts:</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (including miscommunication):</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mitigating Conflict in Student Teams

Evidence suggests that team-building exercises (Kaiser et al., 2000), the establishing of shared norms (Sarker et al., 2001; Suchan & Hayzak, 2001), and the specification of a clear team structure (Kaiser et al., 2000) contribute to virtual team success. I have used these as the basis for the creation of the conflict mitigation guidelines listed below.

Setting the Stage

I believe the foundation for mitigating team conflict is laid before the team even starts. It all starts with the instructor. The instructor needs to create a “collaborative learning atmosphere” where team members can share experiences and are encouraged to pool resources (Smith, 2008).

The Role of the Instructor

It begins with the instructor's attitude towards team assignments. I have learned that students will often perform to expectations if they are properly and consistently reminded of them.

The instructor must be a facilitator, boundary setter, traffic officer and motivator. The main role of facilitation is well understood by online instructors. If the instructor is only minimally engaged, discussion often loses energy or structure, team assignments can go awry and the antecedents to conflict missed.

The roles of traffic officer and motivator are two sides of the same coin. The instructor must regulate traffic flow, team expectations and team activity. If the team is slow to start, he must remind the students of the need to engage with the team. If the quantity, quality or visible interaction is drifting, the instructor needs to energize them. If individual students are not doing their part, he must “ticket” them and get them on track. The other side, cheerleading, is just as important. Creating a positive environment is critical to managing conflict. Praising in the team in public and critiquing any individual students in private, acknowledging focus and commitment, or thanking the team for productive work are examples of how the instructor can motivate student teams.

There are several preventative actions an instructor can take before the teams are set in motion. The syllabus needs to use “explicit structuring” of the teaming expectations to ensure greater content and context understanding of the team expectations. This will help to facilitate knowledge exchange between members and mutual understanding of the requirements (Hron, Hesse, Cress and Giovis, 2000).

The grade for the assignment should be significant enough to warrant proper attention—I recommend somewhere between 15 and 30 percent of the final grade. Additionally, the grading portion should clearly state that there is only one grade for the team assignments, and
each member will share that grade.

I also make use of a "Team Charter," to which I attach a portion of the team assignment's grade (5 percent). It is developed by the team based on a template I provide, which includes role assignment, a skills inventory, contact and meeting information, and the process to manage conflict within the team. At a minimum, the Team Charter focused the team members on the team requirements so there is the added benefit of subconscious "pledging" when the team commits to a Team Charter.

Additionally, I expect a "Team Log" to be turned in with each team deliverable. The Log essentially documents the team's activities and describes who did what.

The last section in setting the stage is the actual team formulation. Instructors form teams several ways. They sometimes let the students decide amongst themselves. If teams existed in the past, they may re-use them. Finally the instructor will assign the teams themselves. I have tried many different methods and have learned that when I assign them, there seems to be less conflict. I usually put together students from the same time zone, if possible, but certainly not more than 1 hour different. This has the effect of greatly reducing the complaints about access and scheduling. After logistics are considered, I look at talent level (attitude, writing skills, work ethic and quality of content). I spread out the talent a bit ensuring each team had both strong and weaker students. There is no full-proof method to team formation and because it is early in the semester typically, your selections are based on limited data.

Managing the Teaming Process

Once the teams are set, the instructor's role shifts to monitoring and encouraging. Because many team conflicts are often presented to instructors as "he said/he said" situations, it becomes challenging to manage interventions in an appropriate manner. I expect teams to perform "in the open." I create "team rooms" of some sort, to which I have access, so I can "witness" the team in action. Obviously, this does not always happen but I let students know that unless I have "evidence" of the conflict, I will assume the entire team is at fault for the dysfunction and grade accordingly. This seems to keep most of their activities out in the open. Finally, I monitor the team rooms from time to time (1-2 times per week), usually posting a message asking if they need anything or are having any issues. This lets them know I am hovering in the background.

Instructor Interventions

Despite this active preventative approach, conflicts do happen from time to time. I usually use a matrix of two types of intervention: soft and hard.

Soft interventions are gentle reminders that the team needs to solve its own problems. When I see an issue developing or receive a call or e-mail from a team member who is "worried" about the team, I will post or send a reminder about positive teaming behaviors, the need to adopt a team-first attitude, and their grade interdependence. I am not solving their problem but I am nudging them in the right direction.

If that does not work, I take a more direct approach. Hard interventions may include an array of instructor actions such as speaking to a specific student, speaking to the team itself, or changing the team parameters. In "hard" approaches, my focus tends to shift to specific recommendations to help them overcome the conflict.

I wish I could say that these interventions work 100 percent of the time, but sadly I have had situations where the team dysfunction was so bad it could not be resolved and the team experience was poor and the team deliverables below expectations. These, fortunately, have been rare.

The Aftermath

The biggest challenge for the instructor is to assign grades fairly for a team assignment.
Many instructors use a "one grade fits all" approach, not allowing for any distinction between team members. Other instructors create a means to adjust the grades within the team based on individual contribution. We use a "Team Evaluation" method that asks each student to assess their own and their teammates' contributions to the team assignments. The ability to administer grades individually has helped in specific situations, and just the potential for a grade adjustment within the team seems to lessen some of the students' angst about team assignments and grade interdependence.

Conclusion - Worth the Trouble

Because of the early painful lessons I learned in trying to deal with conflict in student online teams, I developed the process outlined above. Yes, it adds to an instructor's workload and can be tedious at times, but it does work. After deploying the full array of conflict mitigation steps listed above, evident conflicts in student teams have dropped almost 70 percent in my courses.

Table 3: Reduction in Conflicts after Conflict Mitigation Conflicts were Deployed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Online Team Assignments (Tracked)</th>
<th>Evident Conflicts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>127</td>
<td>78 (61%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Before conflict mitigation steps)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>98</td>
<td>19 (19.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(After conflict mitigation steps)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I continue to use team assignments because I strongly believe this is a necessary career competency and I hope that the students will learn how to be positive team members.

References


