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## **Evaluation of students' experience of team-based experiential learning through the collaborative Student as Partners (SAP) Project**

### **Abstract**

Collaborative learning and teaching pedagogies, such as team-based learning, problem-based learning, and practical projects, are generally held to provide student-centred approaches that promote higher levels of engagement, enhance students' experience develop employability skills and ultimately obtain deeper levels of learning within Higher Education. Yet, the researchers' practical experience suggests that students are reluctant to engage in team-based learning.

Understanding this value-action gap presents an opportunity to improve experiential learning within the generally instructive business school environment, enhance the students' experience and foster a range of transferable, softer business skills all of which may in turn generate better learning outcomes.

This paper presents the initial research findings from an exploration of the students' experience of team-based learning undertaken through a University of Worcester Student as Academic Partners Project which engages students as researchers within a staff-student collaborative research project.

**Keywords:** team-based learning, students' experience, collaborative project

Literature suggests effective learning and teaching (L&T) pedagogies are those enabling students to develop transferable skills, such as negotiation, collaboration and negotiation, in 'real-life' scenarios (UNESCO, 2015). These should be student-centred, active, experiential and collaborative; collaborative learning (Johnson et al., 1991), problem-based learning (Savery and Duffy, 1995), team working (Michaelsen et al.2009) and practical projects (Harvey et al, 2006) seem to be effective and enhance students' learning and assessment experiences. Employers are increasingly expecting students to possess such practical skills (APM, 2014). Kolb (1984) proposes that these employment skills can be achieved along with personal development and education through experiential learning.

Research also shows students prefer student-centred, active learning to instructivist lectures (McKeachie, 2002; Oblinger and Oblinger, 2005) which encourages learning for insight rather than learning for technique (Beech and MacIntosh, 2012). Drayson (2015) considers this approach is likely to enhance learning outcomes including retention and improved employment prospects. Moreover, literature suggests active learning can increase student engagement (Cooper et al., 2010), can improve grades (Bleske et al., 2014), can generate softer, transferable business skills such as negotiation, collaboration and influencing (Christenson, Reschly and Wylie, 2012) and may also deliver benefits to students, lecturers and universities (Harvey et al., 2006).

However, the researchers have observed that whilst students favour active learning such as problem solving tasks, case studies and games, they are not fully engaged in team-based learning. Informal evaluation across a number of modules suggests students are reluctant to engage in teamwork for fear of underperforming in front of peers and/or working on unknown projects with unfamiliar colleagues which appear to present barriers to effective team-based learning.

This project therefore aims to formally explore student perceptions of teamwork in order to understand the value-action gap between the theoretical benefits available and willingness of students to engage in team-based activities. This may in turn, inform improvements in teaching practices and provide more guided and coached approaches to support students in their learning and assessment.

Overcoming this gap between theory and students' perceptions of working in teams also presents an opportunity to involve students in evaluating this innovative team-based learning. This research is undertaken through the University of Worcester Students as Academic Partners (SAP) project scheme which employs students as active partners within a collaborative staff-student learning and teaching research project.

This paper presents the initial research findings from the SAP project to explore students' experience of team-based learning. In particular, it seeks to explore team-based learning approaches from a student perspective, identify key success factors for enhancing student experience of teamwork and share opportunities to improve professional teaching practices with other academics.

The SAP project focuses on students' perceptions of team-based learning within three innovative, practical undergraduate Business School modules taught at Levels 4, 5 and 6 and a postgraduate module taught at Level 7. All modules are designed by the researchers to engage students in active, student-centered activities and experiential learning through teamwork on live projects and cases which Krause and Coates (2008) suggest provides an opportunity to use a constructivist approach to learning. This research utilises reflection-on-action (Schön, 1987) to generate insights into students' intellectual and emotional engagement with team-based learning; students mentally revisit their personal feelings toward events and experiences they are exposed to within the team-based in class environments and assessments. Collecting feedback from this wide range of student cohorts presents a more rounded perspective to the research and offers the opportunity to identify potential changes in students' perceptions across their university careers.

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