Improving Teamwork and Communication Skills Through an Action Research Project

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Abstract: - Studying in Greek Higher Education Institutions is a lonely endeavor for students. Working in groups is largely neglected and not assigned the proper attention. Of course there are exceptions to this rule, but how successful are they? This paper presents an action research project targeting to improve teamwork and communication skills for the students attending an undergraduate course of Business Communication in the Business Administration department of TEI Athens. The teacher applying proper strategies attempted to improve teamwork satisfaction for students and at the same time to enhance their presentation and communication skills.

Key-Words: action research, generic skills, business communication, teamwork, teacher-researcher

1 Introduction
Generic skills, including teamwork and communication skills have been identified as very important traits that employees should possess in a demanding business environment if they want to be successful at their profession (Ackerman et al., 2003; Bamber et al., 1996; Bigelow, 2004; Oakley et al., 2004; Bennett, 2002). Also it has been recognized that these are “transferable” skills, can and should be taught in a higher education context in parallel to “hard” knowledge skills (Watson, 2002; Tuchman, 1965). Generic skills development has been associated with the improvement of emotional intelligence with obvious benefits for professional, personal and societal growth (Harrington-Lueker, 1997; Jaeger, 2003; Bay and McKeage, 2006, Campbell Clark et al., 2003) However, in Greece we have overemphasized the “hard” or technical part of knowledge and have neglected “softer” knowledge such as personal and interpersonal skills. This is evident from our teaching and assessment methods which remain the lecturing and the written assignments at the end of the semester, despite the call from Hellenic Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education for alternative teaching and assessing practices (HQAA, 2009). New teaching methods such as the use of case studies, teamwork, storytelling, research assignments could play vital role in advancing management graduates’ personal and interpersonal skills (Ramsden, 1992).

The aim of this paper is to present an attempt to facilitate teamwork and to develop presentation and communication skills within an undergraduate Business Communication course. Using action research methodology we examine how students in the specific undergraduate course have reacted and accepted new teaching practices which intended to raise their satisfaction from teamwork and advance their presentation skills. A number of teaching strategies were applied which will be presented in the following sections.

The paper is structured as follows: after this introduction, we present and justify our choice for an action research approach. Next section presents the specific context within which the research took place. The following section analyses the project in detail and the results from our research data analysis. Finally we reflect on the project itself, the difficulties and the benefits for the students and the teacher as well as future steps forward.

2 Problem Formulation

2.1 Action research
Kurt Lewin is considered the originator of “action research” (Adelman, 1993; Kaplan, 1998). Lewin, as a scientific pragmatist was concerned with actions and consequences therefore, as early as 1934 established his first ideas on what he called “action research”.

McNiff (1988) defines action research as “an approach to improve education through change, by encouraging teachers to be aware of their own practice, to be critical of that practice and to be prepared to change it”. She refers to her own experience as a need “to live one’s values in practice, rather than only speaking about them” (2011, p. 280).

Teachers should energetically participate, discuss on the class problems and action should be undertaken. Many educationalists and teachers-researchers have contributed significantly to the theoretical expansion (Kemmis, 2010; Hadfield, 2012; Leitch and Day, 2000; Brown and McCartney, 1998) and practical change through action research projects at all levels of education. (Avgitidou, 2009; Hand, 1998; Kuntz et al., 2013; Somekh and Zeichner, 2009; Swet et al., 2009). Reflective practice and action research are considered critical dimensions in the professional development of teachers (Dewey, 1933; Stenhouse, 1975; Carr, 1994; Schon, 1987; Jove, 2011).

2.2. Teamwork and communication skills
A substantial body of literature has been developed the last decades to investigate the use of group work and the necessity of improving communication skills for graduates of management and other disciplines (James, 2005; Mahenthiran and Rouse, 2000; Kriflik and Mullan, 2007; Riebe et al., 2010; Scott-Ladd and Chan, 2008). Most authors agree that group work and cooperative learning have a number of positive pedagogical benefits like encouraging students to undertake deep learning, to improve their communication skills and learn how to handle conflicting situations and advance their negotiation skills (Scott-Ladd and Chan, 2008).

Communication skills include: defending points of view orally and in writing, active listening, critical reading, and oral presentations using visual aids. Interpersonal skills include teamwork, assuming a leadership position, ability to organise and delegate tasks (Hassall et al., 2001).

In the following sections I present my personal efforts to advance my teaching practice and at the same time to enrich my students’ learning experience. I have followed the five stages in applying action research as described by Bassey (1998).

3 Problem Solution

3.1 Stage One Define the enquiry / identify the problem
The last four years I have taught in four different departments of TEI Athens. In all these departments and courses that I have taught, I used to have informal discussions with students about their learning experiences. One of the common complaints I have been listening to was their objection to the teamwork projects. This has intrigued my interest and found out that students have negative emotions when they are assigned teamwork because of: a) the “free riders” phenomenon b) the conflicts that arise among team members and c) the unfair grading of teachers in their view. Last years in my courses I have been trying to promote teamwork to students and the use of projectors for their presentations. However, only recently I realized that we, as teachers, have been asking from students to act and perform tasks for which we have not provided any support and this is not only a local attribute. In our school there are no courses that explicitly teach presentation and communication skills and we have not educated them how to organize a teamwork project, how to face conflict, how to negotiate, how to communicate effectively. Students’ working teams lack integration, coherence and the sense of working towards a common goal.

The research question I formulated is the following: Can I reverse the negative view of students about teamwork and raise their satisfaction from it and at the same time improve their presentation and communication skills?

3.2 Stage Two Describe the educational situation
Most usual teaching method in our institution and generally in Greek Higher Institutions, are lectures, while assessment is written examinations at the end of the semester. The apparent problems associated with this pedagogical method is that students work hard mostly during exams at the end of the semester. They are not trained to work in groups and we as teachers do not provide any support for developing non-technical skills. In case of team assignments we concentrate on the team outcome but not on the team processes.

Business Communication is a semester five course, is taught 3 hours/week and the attendance is optional. There are no tutorials or laboratory hours for this course. Previous teacher used lectures as the
teaching method and attendance was on average 5 students per session. Students were taught what business communication is but not how to communicate effectively.

3.3 Stage Three Tackle contradiction by introducing change

When I started to teach the course I decided that I would try to teach the “knowhow” of communication and teamwork. To accomplish this task I organized the course around six teaching strategies (Riebe et al., 2010):

➢ **Strategy 1: Limit lecturing as much as possible**
Students were encouraged to read for themselves and then discuss within class on theoretical issues

➢ **Strategy 2: Teach preliminary explicit generic skills**
I explicitly referred to what constitutes a good presentation and how to accomplish it by providing specific examples. I gave detailed instructions and showed through live presentation how to do it.

**Strategy 3: Establish a critical pedagogy by:**
1. Assessing both teamwork product and processes
2. incorporating self reflections in individual weblogs and team reflections through surveys

➢ **Strategy 4: Describe and track team processes**
1. Develop mission statements and team norms to guide expectations about team processes: students in each team should define themselves the rules on which they will base their work by answering specific questions, for example: What will happen in case a member of the team does not adhere to the teams commitments (ie deadlines?)
2. Set up team wikis to measure participation in project development through textual tracking of their online activity (we started but due to technical problems did not go through the end)
3. Teams submitted minutes of meetings (progress reports): team facilitator would have to deliver to the teacher a report signed by all team members during coursework which would include their project work organization, delegation of tasks, time management and accountability of members.

➢ **Strategy 5: Critical evaluation of presentations**

The rest of the class would engage in critical assessment of the team presenting who would have to defend their work.

➢ **Strategy 6: Evaluate students learning outcomes**
1. Students completed an anonymous survey at the end of the course
2. Students evaluated themselves, their peers and their team’s overall performance based on pre-assigned criteria provided by the teacher. Basic criteria were: preparation of proper material to contribute to the overall team project, participation and good communication ability among team members, supporting and promoting team’s excellence, cooperative attitude towards and among team members

Other assignments during semester included: students interviewing each other and then present shortly to the rest of the class as icebreaker, writing tasks (business letters, memos, etc), commenting and criticizing newspapers articles, learning how to conduct interviews and how to conduct focus groups for the needs of marketing a new product etc. All instructions were available through e-class, the online educational tool of our institution.

The assignments were optional but teamwork was obligatory and presentations should include the use of projector. Students were given extra marks for their projects.

3.4 Stage Four Monitor the change / analyse evaluative data about the change /

In this stage I am presenting some overall thoughts of this endeavor I undertook with students. I should say that the course attendance was on average 15-20 students per session. The semester run for 13 weeks and was characterized by lots of anomalies on the timetable due to continuous strikes of administrative personnel, teachers, public transportation etc. Obviously there were time limitations and lessons had to be transferred to afternoon hours usually after 6 o’clock. However, 22 students completed at least 3 assignments with oral presentations and 13 students completed 5 assignments with oral presentations using projector. This means that every two weeks they had to prepare at least an oral presentation. Students had the freedom to choose their subject from a list of relevant material either from a source in Greek or English language. Translation of English material was not considered a very big problem by students. The atmosphere in class was positive and the anxiety of the minutes before the presentation was followed by relief and pride of accomplishing such a difficult project. Most
students showed a significant progress in their presentation skills. Moreover the critical assessment duty by students for their colleagues although it started unwillingly it became their strong point towards the end of the semester.

### 3.4.1 Change evaluation
I distributed a written questionnaire and I conducted one interview and a focus group with the participation of students who undertook all assignments. Qualitative investigative methods are more proper to evaluate change in these occasions. 7 students participated in the focus group and the discussion was tape recorded. Analysis of focus group and informal discussions gave positive feedback for this endeavor and suggested ways for further improvement. Following are abstracts from qualitative data:

**Abstract 1:** Reflecting on their teams
“Using progress reports and team rules we started to look at our team more seriously, … and we said this is not a project that we do it just to say we do it … we entered into a different climate…!
“… and we said either we do something serious, and have fun, or should not do it at all because here there is lots of work to be done…”

**Abstract 2:** About conflict, team rules and interrelationships
“When I do not know the other team members, in order to avoid conflict, I may not speak at all. But if there are rules established for the team we all follow them as a team.

**Abstract 3:** About team management
“The progress report helped us to organize ourselves and helped us regarding time management”

**Abstract 4:** About self-assessment
If you know that your team members will assess you, then you try harder on your weakest points…

**Abstract 5:** About critical evaluation by peers
“… in the beginning… you cannot say to the others what you think… project after project, it becomes easier to express your opinion… at this point you did this mistake, … you are not afraid the other will not talk to you again…”

“… you learn to accept critics, you do not take it personally…”

**Abstract 6:** About the strikes and the outside problems
“I wanted to have audience to present, strikes was major problem to gather altogether…”

**Abstract 7:** Suggestions for the future
“We should video record the process. You should do it next time…”

**Abstract 8:** Team formation
“It is easier to work with people you already know, but when you are at the job, you will meet unknown people, it helps to learn how to cooperate with strangers”.

“It is better to have mixed teams, with some people you know and some you do not know…”

“In the case you are in a team and you do not know some persons, then you are embarrassed to talk and you are obliged to accept “free riders”.

“In case your friend tries to avoid his part of work then you can react and make him understand that he has to work equally. It is easier with people you know”.

“Sometimes with your friends you are embarrassed to tell them at their face that something upsets you, that he has to contribute more and finally you end up doing his part as well”.

“You (the teacher) should decide on the team’s formation. For us is difficult to react in case we are friends and there are “loafers” among us”.

**Abstract 9:** The learning outcome
“… from the material that you have presented to us I am not sure what I remember but I have not forgotten anything and I will not forget what I did with my team, … neither I will forget how to make a team work, or how to make a presentation, or how to create a power point. Something good remained from this process. The process is a standard for me now…”

### 3.5 Stage Five Review the change and decide what to do next
In this stage I reflect on the change and I use my personal diary, my observations from the class and all informal discussions with the students. My feeling is that the teaching strategies have enriched the learning experience of the students and offered them an inner satisfaction from the course and from their accomplishments. However, there are a number of limitations and difficulties that should be considered for further improvement.

Continuous strikes, transportation problems, overall climate of uncertainty and discussions on recession created an atmosphere which disempowered the studying process. Most students are not used in active participation in the classroom. They prefer to be “passive learners”. If they find out that the teacher requires homework and hard work they just stop attending class. Other students are not accustomed to hard work during the whole semester. They study hard only during final written examinations. Not all students could dissociate from their previous bad impressions on teamwork and the “free riding” effect. They insisted up to the end to
undertake personal projects. I believe that I have “received” implicitly two feelings from the part of students. One was a feeling of “surprise” on how a teacher would go so deep to intervene and support their teamwork. The other feeling was an appreciation for the overall project and the attention I provided on their personal development.

4 Conclusion

The abstracts from focus group reveal some very important issues to my opinion. The first abstract is very rich in meaningful data. Student reveals how the applying teaching strategies and the documents that they had to complete made the team reflect on their work. Reflection is the base for learning process for students or practitioners (Schon, 1987; Randsden, 1992). Also she talks how her team turned from surface to deep learning when she says that this work “was not just to say that you do it, it was more serious”. The process directed them to take a critical decision: “either we do it seriously or we do not do it at all”. Finally she refers how their team work was enjoyed by the members and had no stress. Abstract 2 reveals how much the team rules can facilitate inter team conflicts. Team members who keep low voices or are unable to defend their work, they may be found in a silence. Team rules can put things in order and give them voice within team meetings. This could keep stress and conflict out of the teams at least for things that have been discussed and agreed upon earlier. In addition team rules can help members who are more overt and dominating to lower their “aggressiveness” and learn how to obey to team rules. I find abstract 5 very important because this describes how students learnt that critics can be constructive and supportive in improving and developing their learning. It is very important that we leave space and time during class hours to students to work with their assignments. There are techniques and teaching strategies as shown in this study that we as teachers can locate and take action about social loafers. Self-evaluation directs students to a reflective process which is very important. Finally in abstract 9 the student describes with honesty his impressions. But even more I believe he tries to describe his feelings from the overall project and this is of utmost importance. His feelings are obvious not so much from his words but mostly from the intonation of his voice as he speaks. If we as teachers manage apart from knowledge to support and create the environment for the development of feelings and relationships during the educational process then we can facilitate the “personal, professional and ultimately the system change” (Leitch and Day, 2000, p. 179; Bay and McKeage, 2006)

References:


