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# Promoting Cross-functional Team Interactions within General Business Classes

Christopher McKenna, Stephen F. Austin State University

## Abstract

If we as educators aim to prepare our students operating within teams after graduation, then one of the elements of teamwork only infrequently integrated into classrooms involves managing cross-team dependencies. Students tend to lack practical exposure to the interactions needed to produce shared deliverables within a project whose scope exceeds what can be produced by a single functional (or “unitary”) team.

Recent scholarship on academic-based team projects suggests a potential gap in promoting such skills within general business courses. For instance, contemporary case studies on the role of virtual teams within online engineering projects (Brewer et al., 2015) and the impact of cultural factors on team effectiveness (Levitt, 2015; Grubel, 2016; Gonzalez-Perez et al., 2014) have examined the ability of individual teams and their members to bridge cultural, linguistic, and communication-technology divides, rather than the multi-team production of a meta-scaled deliverable.

Moreover, whether promoted during undergraduate—or more commonly, graduate—courses, research-based initiatives sometimes encourage group collaborations when producing co-authored articles for publication (as in Copenheaver et al., 2015). In these efforts, however, students often select their roles during the article-creation process, perhaps as field researchers, drafters, serial revisers, and so on. Yet these projects tend not to place students in pre-defined functional roles (as might be true within a business setting), nor do they explicitly require formal process steps and handoffs to pass “published” units of work from one functional team—as would be needed within a disciplined experiential learning process producing a solution designed for client signoff. Though certainly some research case studies have interrogated methods for promoting cross-functional teamwork within organizations (as in Ehrhardt et al., 2014), it’s not clear that classroom pedagogy tends to implement either rigorous cross-functional training or feedback. So even if, at times, peer evaluations and instructorial comments are leveraged to influence the development of individual team-project deliverables (as in Canboy et al., 2016), how can business educators structure and manage classrooms requiring students to engage in the iterative artifact creation, revision, and approval processes common within change-management efforts? And perhaps more importantly, how and where can students experience debating and/or redefining critical scoping issues or resolving open items across multiple teams seeking to produce outcome beyond what’s possible within a given work-team’s purview?

Though efforts involving interdisciplinary teams developing capstone projects show some experiential promise, they often face significant challenges to identify appropriate projects, to administer such courses, and to secure project mentors (Jiji et al., 2015). However, these typically “interdisciplinary” teams often derive from member sub-populations possessing distinct disciplinary (and often specialist or technical) skills. Thus, such teams represent a collection of subject matter experts (SMEs) who essentially require collaborative and organizational support to succeed. Yet in the case of cross-functional teams in general business classrooms, most team members possess largely the same set of skills and content knowledge. As such, these teams may lack the confidence to accomplish the aggressive project objectives whose elements may be more familiar to interdisciplinary SMEs.

So even as some strong work continues to explore, for instance, the nature of cross-team collaboration among students in remote locations projects involving a combination of business and engineering students (as in Adya et al., 2015 and 2008), the author faces the challenge of implementing macro-level cross-functional projects within an undergraduate population possessing limited technology skills within a more generic business-education classroom. Moreover, given the face-to-face nature of student interactions, participants tend to encounter instantaneous cross-team communication and productivity challenges unmitigated by any significant extent by distance or language or cultural difference.

In short, the author sought to introduce students to the problems of working through an iterative systems-development process in which the unitary functional teams needed to act in concert to produce a project deliverable larger than a single team could produce on its own. In so doing, the author sought to mimic the mutually reinforcing and synergistic development processes common within divisional or enterprise-scoped change initiatives. The preliminary results of this classroom experiment form the basis of the presentation thus being proposed.

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