Chapter VI

Virtual Study Groups: A Challenging Centerpiece for “Working Adult” Management Education

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Abstract

Groups and teams are critical to modern organizations, and consequently management education has incorporated groups as a centerpiece of both content (the study of group process) and process (the use of study groups and group projects). Unfortunately, working-adult educational programs appear to have yet to take an important final step — acknowledging that study groups often interact virtually and then providing support for
virtual study group interaction. We provide both theory and data concerning the use of study groups as virtual teams. We believe that there are important benefits to be gained when study groups make educated decisions about the design and process of their virtual interaction.

Introduction

Groups and teams have emerged as a central building block of modern global commerce (Devine, Clayton, Philips, Dunford, & Melner, 1999), with as many as 80% of Fortune 500 companies having a majority of their employees involved in work teams of one sort or another (Cohen & Bailey, 1997). The reliance of modern business organizations on teams reflects a growing understanding that the interaction opportunities provided by group settings offer advantages for both organizations and their employees. Teams provide a vehicle for employee inclusiveness that enhances organizational effectiveness (Griffith & Neale, 2001). As Lawler (1999, p. 18) emphatically noted, “The results are in: teams are more popular in the United States workplace, and employee involvement (EI) leads to better business performance.”

In concert with this apparent shift of emphasis in business to teams has been a corresponding emergence of teams as a centerpiece of cooperative education (e.g., Chen, Donahue, & Klimoski, 2004; Michaelson, Jones, & Watson, 1993; Schmuck & Schmuck, 1997). Stunkel (1998) identified an increasing use of teams and groups as one of the predominant trends in higher education. Teams have proven to be an excellent vehicle for accomplishing interactive, cooperative instruction (Lengnick-Hall & Sanders, 1997). Research has shown that students learn most effectively when working in groups, where they can verbalize their thoughts, challenge the ideas of others, and collaborate to achieve group solutions to problems (Deutsch, 1962; Johnson & Johnson, 1989, 1994).

In this chapter we focus on a particular use of teams in higher educational settings—the study group. In particular, we focus on the likely effects of study groups that meet virtually, and present some empirical evidence concerning the effects of virtual study group interaction patterns on study group effectiveness. We close with some recommendations about how to manage instruction design in order to maximize the benefits of virtual study groups.