Sentiments About Team Projects: Community vs. Stigma
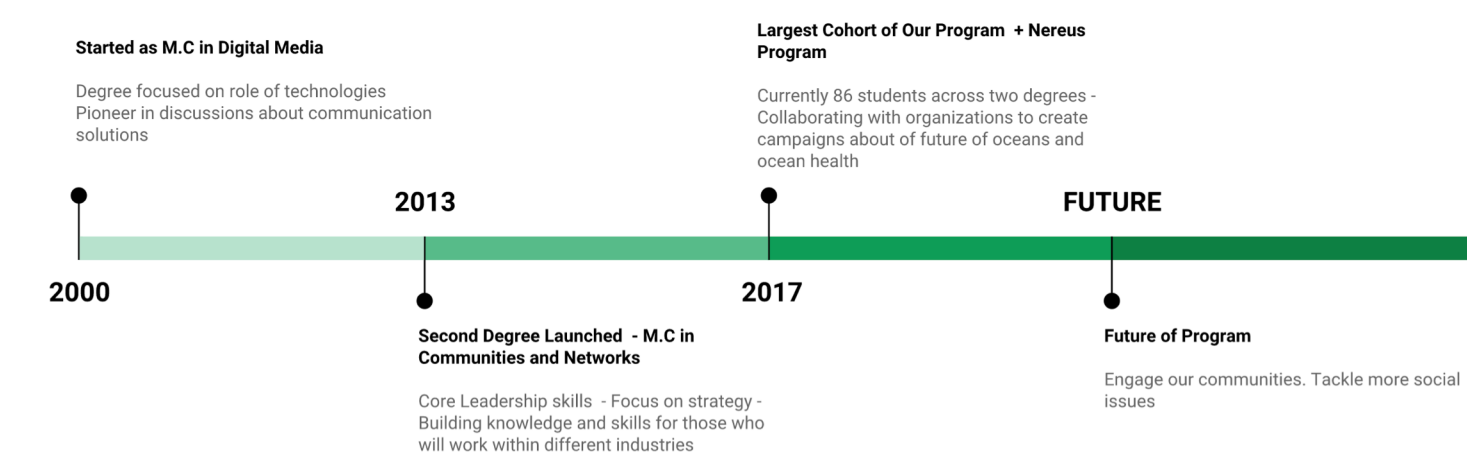
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Do students arrive to a class where they have to complete a team project with a stigma towards team projects? What are students' sentiments towards team projects in their classes? If they do indeed arrive with particular concerns about team projects, what type of professional or educational experiences resulted in students' sentiments about team projects as they start a team-based class?

The Communication Leadership Program

The Communication Leadership Program—housed in the Communication Department at University of Washington- Seattle—was founded in 2000. Currently, the program offers two professional Master's in Communication degrees: a Master's in Communication in Digital Media and a Master's in Communication in Communities and Networks. The program attracts a mix of mid-career working professionals, and also recent graduates of an undergraduate program. 86 students enrolled in the program this year. Many of the program's classes simulate a professional setting and have a project component to the class that is often completed in teams.

Started as M.C in Digital Media
Degree focused on role of technologies
Pioneer in discussions about communication solutions

Largest Cohort of Our Program + Néreus Program
Currently 86 students across two degrees - Collaborating with organizations to create campaigns about of future of oceans and ocean health

2000 — **2013** — **2017** — **FUTURE**

Second Degree Launched - M.C in Communities and Networks
Core Leadership skills - Focus on strategy - Building knowledge and skills for those who will work within different industries

Future of Program
Engage our communities. Tackle more social issues

During 2017-18 academic year out of the 30 classes offered in the program 8 had a team based final project. The program also requires incoming students to complete two core required classes. They are taught in the Fall and Spring of that given academic year. Whilst the first core class has an individual final project, the second core class requires all students to work on a project in teams for the entire quarter.

Inspirations and Motivations

Inspired by the second required core class of the program which requires all students to work in teams, this project aims to record Communication Leadership program's students' sentiments about team projects. In doing so, the goal is threefold. First and foremost the study hopes to contribute to existing pedagogical debates in graduate education, particularly in a professional higher education setting. Second, the project hopes to contribute to future team-project design models of classes in this program and beyond. Finally the project hopes to highlight the potential of team projects for giving students a chance to explore how communities are built and sustained.

Literature on Teams, Leadership and Community

There are two types of academic literature that this research utilizes. The first category of existing research is inspired by scholar Etienne Wegner's (1998) discussion of "communities of practice". In this seminal work Wegner discusses the role of practice in building community. In particular, Wegner describes a trifold relationship between joint enterprise, mutual engagement, and share repertoire that results in building community. Indeed team projects in a class create conditions for these three layers. Understood in this framework, the team work paradigms is a vital educational possibility for realizing potentials of building communities.

The second set of literature that inspires this work deals with explorations of team based assignments in higher education. There is extensive discussion in this field including explorations of outcomes and design of team based assignments (Parent, Lovelace et al., 2016; Hughes and Jones, 2011), team dynamics (Humphrey and Aime 2014), and creating accountability (Lane, 2012). Within this vast literature, there exists also established models for team projects. One of the core models discussed in these debates is TBL: Team-based Learning (Michaelsen, 2004). This model creates a framework for effective small team assignments that takes into consideration formation of groups, accountability, feedback and assignment discussion.

Project Design

The project involves multiple steps for inquiry. This ongoing research project coincides with the teaching of the core team-based class of the Communication Leadership program. Prior to the beginning of the class surveys were designed to be distributed during and after the class completion. The first step completed step involved distributing a survey to the students enrolled in class inquiring about student's prior experiences with team-based projects both within the Master's program and in professional settings. The second step will involve interviews based on questions inspired by the results of the survey to collect detailed narratives about students experiences completing projects in teams. The final phase will include a survey after the completion of the class that will also collect sentiments of students specifically in response to the project that they completed in this class in teams.

The class was designed with literature in team-based learning in mind and is implementing a variety of team-based teaching and learning approaches in the classroom.

The Class Experience

The core class of the Communication Leadership class is taking place this quarter (Spring 18). Students were assigned to teams during the first week of classes. In teams students are working on a communication solution project for different clients (a total of four) which are non-profits and start-ups in the Seattle area. Students completed a survey a week prior to class indicating preferences for their client and also sharing information about special conditions and preferred collaborators in the class. The teams of 4-5 were distributed taking this information into consideration.

Survey: Collecting Students Sentiments about Teams

During the first week of class I distributed an online anonymous survey to the students for the purpose of this research. The participation was voluntary. Out of the 86 students 53 participated in this initial survey. The survey asked in the first for students to identify their gender, age, whether or not they were international students and their employment status. The second portion of the survey asked questions that aimed to capture student's prior experiences with team projects both in professional setting and in previous classes. The survey asked students to also rate their most recent experience in one of these settings working in teams. The final section of the survey, which was an open ended question, asked students to identify what they are looking forward to about their team experience in the class and also to identify their concerns coming into class working in teams.

Survey Results

Some of the results from this survey are:

- Age distribution: Out of the 53 students who participated in the survey 49% were between the ages of 25-34, 32% were between the ages of 18-24 and 18.9% 35-54 age bracket. This percentage distribution is consistent with the overall demographic of the students in the program.
- Gender: 67.9 percent of survey takers identified as female and 32.1 % identified as male.
- International student representation: 34% of those who took the survey identified as international students.
- Majority of those who took the survey (67.9%) are currently employed full-time or part-time.
- In identifying issues that arose previous in working with a team in the graduate program, the top (3) identified issues were: issues with communication amongst team members (52.5%), issues with distributing leadership amongst team members (50%), and issues with distributing responsibilities amongst team members (47.5 %)
- In identifying issues that arose previous experiences working with a team in a professional setting the results were similar. The top (3) identified issues were the same: issues with communication amongst team members (53.3%), issues with distributing leadership amongst team members (40%), and issues with distributing responsibilities amongst team members (44.4 %).
- The survey resulted in a collection of variety of sentiments in response to the ongoing team projects in the core class.

Image: This is a word cloud generated based on the open-ended question answers in the survey asking students what they are excited and worried about their upcoming team project.

Discussion

The goal of the next phase of the project is to capture detailed narratives of students about their experience working in teams. In order to do so, this project will include interviews with students enrolled in the core class. The interviews will feature questions that ask students to describe in detail a successful and unsuccessful team project that interviewees completed both in the graduate program and in a professional setting. In the survey, many students identified communication problems as their core concern as they start their work in teams. In order to understand this sentiment during the interview I will also interviewees to describe what they perceive to be a successful communication experience working in teams.

Next Steps

Currently the project focuses solely on students enrolled in the core class of the Communication Leadership graduate program. This is a particular pedagogical setting where students vary in age and professional experiences. There are many other units at this university and beyond that include similar professionally oriented Master's programs. Understanding team experiences in this context will have implications and applications in these similar settings.

Moving forward the intention is the expand the scope of the project and interview more students in the program. Possible research directions include:

- Interviewing international students enrolled in the program to record cross-cultural sentiments towards team work
- Interviewing faculty in the program to capture sentiments about teaching classes with a team work component

The project will also inspire design of future team based projects in graduate classes.

WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT TEAM PROJECTS?
SHARE YOUR SENTIMENTS!

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