



THE LEARNING TEAM CONCEPT: EDUCATIONAL SYNERGY IN ACTION

APPROACHES TO LEARNING

The Oklahoma Wesleyan University programs are designed for you, the working professional. Unlike traditional programs that require you to either leave your full-time job and go to school full-time, or else take three to five years of part-time education, our programs are designed in an accelerated format that capitalize on your maturity, experience, and determination. The accelerated format, which allows you to earn your degree while continuing to work full-time, is built on the foundation of adult learning theory and uses andragogical rather than pedagogical methods of learning. (*Andragogy* is the art and science of adult learning, while *pedagogy* is the science of teaching children.) Pedagogy focuses on the dissemination and acquisition of knowledge, while andragogy focuses on the application and reformulation of knowledge. As a result, in-class activities differ substantially when andragogical, rather than pedagogical, methods are used. Pedagogy relies heavily on a lecture format while andragogy relies heavily on participative methods such as role playing, class discussions, panel discussions, simulations, experimental exercises, and so on.

The andragogical approach places heavy responsibilities on both you and your professors. It requires that most of the acquisition of knowledge take place outside the classroom. This means that the major knowledge acquisition activities, such as reading of textbooks or articles, take place outside of the classroom. It also requires that you assimilate the knowledge from these sources prior to each week's session so that the knowledge can be applied and reformulated during the class session. You must take responsibility for your own learning.

Meanwhile, your professors serve more as expert facilitators than lecturers. This requires that your professor know the material more thoroughly than is required to give a lecture. He or she must know the material inside and out and be ready to adapt to the wide variety of situations that occur when using experimental exercises and other andragogical methods. This often makes it more difficult for you to assess the performance of your professor in the classroom since it's harder to see what he or she is actually doing. The best way to assess your professor's performance is to ask yourself at the close of each class session, "What did I learn tonight that I can use?"

LEARNING TEAM ROLES

In Oklahoma Wesleyan University's programs for working professionals, learning teams play several essential roles. First, self-managed work groups have become an integral part of many organization's processes. Your experiences on an OKWU learning team will help prepare you to be a successful contributor to self-managed work groups in your profession. Second, learning teams fulfill social roles and help you to network more effectively with others in your cohort. Third, learning teams with healthy processes stimulate effective problem solving—and when the processes are dysfunctional, which may happen occasionally, they stimulate effective conflict resolution processes. Finally, learning teams provide educational synergy. More learning takes place in less time, thus providing much of the acceleration found in the programs.

WHAT LEARNING TEAMS DO

In any specific course, the curriculum drives the activities of the learning teams. Typically, there are weekly assignments for each learning team. These may include solving quantitative problems, brainstorming, case analysis and discussions, case presentations, marketing or business plan development, and much more. Regardless of the specific activity assigned to a learning team, the focus is on working together to learn. The group work aspects of the learning teams provide the potential for educational synergy. In other words, when each member of the learning team contributes his or her expertise, knowledge, and perspective to the activity at hand, the potential for depth and quality learning to occur is greatly increased.

For your learning team to benefit from this synergy, however, there are certain “traps” you must avoid.

- You must invest in the dynamics of the group by building effective relationships among group members. If you short-circuit the group-building process, your group will not benefit from the educational synergies of the learning team process. This is essential in the early stages of group development. Social functions, such as getting together to share a meal and a time of fellowship (including spouses, if possible), can help build effective interpersonal relationships. Work relationships among group members also require some time commitment. When attempting to solve problems during the early stages of group development, it helps to allow some time for each person's viewpoints to be shared fully, thus allowing the group members to begin to understand how each other thinks.
- You must invest in the quality of your group's performance by spending the time necessary to do a good job. The time requirements will vary somewhat throughout each course and throughout the program. However, you should plan on your group meeting for a minimum of four hours per week, on average, throughout the program.

- You must avoid the temptation to subdivide activities into pieces that are then delegated to group members and collected together without integration into a cohesive unit. If you do this, you have, in essence, turned group activities into individual activities and circumvented group processes. It is difficult to produce a quality product in this manner.
- You must avoid allowing one member of the group to dominate discussion. Educational synergy requires input from all members of the group because each group member has valuable experience and insights that can enhance the learning experience for the entire group. One way to circumvent this issue is to have group members bring written responses to group meetings for each other to read as inputs into the group decision-making process.

LEARNING TEAM FORMATION

Initial Formation. Learning teams are initially formed during the first course, CLAC 2712, thus enabling the groups to be assigned activities that are due during the first week of the second course. You should take advantage of the learning experiences in the CLAC 2712 course that allow you to get to know the other members of your cohort. Make every effort possible to evaluate every member of the cohort as a potential member of your learning team so that you can make informed decisions concerning your group's membership.

Learning Team Size. In the Oklahoma Wesleyan University programs, the ideal group size for most classes is four persons. If a four-person group is not feasible, groups of three or five may be allowed—but groups of three are preferable to groups of five. There should not be a group of three and five in the same class. Groups of smaller than three or larger than five are prohibited, as these groups are either too small or too large for effective group dynamics and group learning in this setting.

Because the nature of the curriculum drives group activities, there may be some courses where groups of a specific size are demanded by the curriculum. In this case, some shuffling and reformulation of learning teams may be necessary. Your professor will provide you with advance notification of these requirements, as necessary.

Changing Group Composition. Many events can lead to changes in group composition. For example, if a three-member group has one member drop out of the program, the remaining members will need to either find a new group or recruit new member for their group. On the other hand, if personality challenges exist in a group, a member may choose to transfer to another group. Or a group member might relocate geographically and find it more convenient to join another group. Or, in

serious circumstances, a free-riding group member might be removed from a group. (See “Free-Riding” section below.)

There are some advantages to occasional changes in group composition. For example, if the learning teams are somewhat fluid during the program, you will have gained the opportunity to develop closer working relationships with more members of your cohort, rather than working with just a few, this strengthens your personal network and your understanding of varied companies and work situations.

Since it is important, however, not to allow changes in group composition to affect the quality of learning, changes will be permitted only between courses, rather than during a course.

LEARNING TEAM DYNAMICS

Leadership. It is not necessary to officially elect or appoint a leader for your learning team, although your group may do so if it desires. It is likely that a leader will emerge as your group processes and interactions develop. It is also likely that leadership roles will change somewhat over time as you encounter a variety of subject matter in the program and as the diverse experiences of group members become relevant to specific courses or activities.

Diverse Contributions. Groups containing individuals with a diversity of backgrounds and experiences often perform more effectively than homogenous groups. But these high levels of performance often come with turbulence in decision-making. You need to be prepared for this so that such turbulence is not seen as dysfunctional.

It is essential that each group member work diligently toward the goals of the learning team. But the diversity of individual backgrounds, experiences, and abilities implies that the contributions of each group member will be different. These differences should strengthen the group as you accept such differences as a normal part of the group process. As the subject matter changes from course to course, you may find roles changing. One group member may provide significant expertise in one course while another group member brings expertise to another course. Some diversity in contributions from course to course is to be expected so long as each member contributes significantly, on the average, over a period of several courses.

Free-Riding. A well-documented group process dysfunction, called free-riding, may happen to your learning team. Free-riding occurs when one or more members of the group choose to allow the rest of the group to do most of the work. This phenomenon differs from a normal diversity of

contributions, as mentioned above, in that the contribution of free-riding members is significantly less than that of the non-free-riding members.

Simply put, you should not tolerate free-riding in your group. Tolerating free-riding will lead to dysfunctional group dynamics and substandard group performance. Even worse, free-riders hurt themselves by not getting the most out of the learning experience. When free-riding occurs, the other members of the group should follow the method of conflict resolution outlined below.

Conflict Resolution Process.

1. A member of the learning team should talk with the person with whom there is a conflict. Let him or her know why the group perceives that there is a problem. Try to find a mutually acceptable solution.
2. If the person is not cooperative, share your concerns with the free-riding member at a meeting of the entire group. As before, try to find a mutually acceptable solution.
3. If this does not resolve the conflict, schedule a time to meet with your professor to discuss the problem.
4. If all attempts to find a solution fail, then the free-riding problem should be brought to the attention of the Dean of Online Education (by the instructor) who will attempt to facilitate a solution.
5. If no solution is forthcoming from this process, the free-riding member may be removed from the learning team. The removal becomes effective at the end of the current course. Because learning teams are an integral part of the program's philosophy and delivery system, a person removed from a learning team will need to find a place in another learning team.
6. Active participation in weekly learning team meetings is required, and students who do not actively participate in the learning teams will be dismissed from the program.

SUCCESSFUL LEARNING TEAMS

In all likelihood, your desire is to be part of a highly effective, successful learning team. The likelihood of your group being successful can be improved by:

1. Adopting a standard schedule for group meetings. This will allow each group members to build learning team meetings into his or her schedule. Make sure that all deviations from the standard schedule are clearly communicated to all group members.
2. Make sure that project assignments are clearly understood by all members of your group. Each person's responsibilities should be clearly understood and communicated. When everyone knows what to do and when to do it, the likelihood of success increases dramatically.

3. Set high standards for quality performance by your group. Decide in advance that merely meeting the expectations of your professor is insufficient; your group is going to set the standards that others will want to emulate.
4. Periodically evaluate how well your group is functioning. The natural time to do this is after the completion of each course. This allows for learning to occur and for changes to be made prior to the beginning of the next course.

CONCLUSION

There is a feeling of accomplishment and exhilaration that comes from being part of a high-performing group. Very few things are as meaningful as knowing that your group has done well. Conversely, few things are as discouraging as a low-performing (or non-performing) group. Such groups end up fighting, blaming each other for the low-performance. The difference is up to you. We will provide assistance if necessary, but you determine your group's success. If you follow the principles and guidelines provided above, your group's chances of success are very high.

Most Oklahoma Wesleyan University graduates look back upon the experiences of their learning team as a high point of the program and as one of the best parts of their educational experience. The time and effort you give to your learning team is worth it.