Teaching Teamwork Skills

By Darrell G. Fontane

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Engineering is a team sport and within the College of Engineering we emphasize teamwork in many of our classes. This is most evident in our senior design projects and I hope many of you were able to see these last week during Engineering Days. Personally, I am currently involved in freshman and sophomore classes that use teamwork. I really like having the students work in teams, they amaze me at what they can do and they tell me they enjoy the teamwork.

I found a two-part article on the web titled "Teaching Teamwork Skills" from MIT and, after reading them, realized I needed to do a lot more in my classes to enhance the student's experience. The key point of the MIT articles was that as engineering faculty we need to go beyond just the use of teams in our classes. We need to help the students understand how to work in teams. As the author of these articles, Lori Breslow, states:

"But teaching students to communicate with, listen to, and work well with one another isn't simply a matter of putting them in groups and letting them go about their business. Like any skill, the ability to work effectively with others requires some basic knowledge of best practices (in this case of team dynamics, consensus building, decision making, etc.); a chance to practice the skills to be acquired; and feedback on the success of these efforts. It also requires that instructors think about how to structure teams, assignments, and class time so that the teamwork experience is optimized and the most learning that is possible occurs."

This excellent two-part article, Teaching Teamwork Skills and Teaching Teamwork Skill, Par 2 provide tips on: assigning students to teams rather than having them select their own; providing training in teamwork skills; structuring assignments so students must work together, giving feedback throughout the semester; making yourself available outside of class for consultations; communicating the message that teamwork skills are important; and providing a mechanism for reflection. I encourage everyone to read them.

Sources:


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