Managing Conflict in Online Student Groups

Richard Dool
Seton Hall University
South Orange, NJ, USA
doolrich@shu.edu

Abstract: The use of teams by organizations of all sizes and orientation has grown significantly. Almost 70% of my online students have reported working in teams in some form, in the last 12 months. Additionally, as globalization compresses time and space, the use of virtual teams continues to rise. I use group assignments in virtually all my online and on-campus courses because I believe that learning to be an effective member of a team, especially a virtual team, has become a necessary career competency. The sources of conflicts in student groups mirror those of face-to-face groups. Most conflict can be traced to differences in expected outcomes (grades), roles, style, values and resources (time), or basic personality conflicts. Because communication is often asynchronous and virtual, there are more opportunities for miscommunication. Online instructors often do not have the luxury of "seeing" the conflict holistically. This paper discusses the causes of conflict in student groups, the various behaviors that contribute to the conflict and the instructor strategies and practices that will reduce the impact of conflicts on the learning experience. In practice, the processes offered in this paper have reduced evident conflicts by 70%.

Introduction

Almost 70% of my online students have reported working in teams in some form in the last 12 months. A study by Ceridian Employer Services found that the ability to work in virtual groups plays a significant role in recruitment and retention.

I have had the privilege and at times, the agony of overseeing more than 250 graded group assignments in 25 online graduate and undergraduate courses. After enduring many instances of conflicts in student groups and making mistakes in handling them, I realized that I needed to do something to either reduce or manage the conflicts. Through research, discussion with peers and experimentation, I have learned how to mitigate much of the inevitable conflict that arises. What follows below are a set of practices for handling these conflicts. These practices can help ensure that learning objectives are met and that students have a positive experience. Implementation of these guidelines has reduced the instances of conflict by 70% in the subsequent student assignments that I have overseen.

I conducted an informal poll from (2005 – 2007) of more than 300 students at the four universities where I have taught online courses asking about their overall experience with group assignments. I offered three response choices (positive, mixed or negative experiences) and results indicate that 63% (see Table 1) either had a mixed or negative

experience ("disliked"). The primary reasons students offer are difficulty in getting everyone on the "same page," unclear instructions and expectations, and the fact that their grade depends on others.

Table 1: Student's attitudes towards online group assignments

Students	% who have participated in an online team assignment	Enjoyed the experience and thought it was a positive learning experience	Thought it was a mixed experience, overall worthwhile but some aspects detracted from the experience	Disliked the experience and thought it detracted from the learning experience
303	252 (83%)	93 (37%)	51 (20%)	108 (43%)

Given the potential conflicts in group assignments and the general disdain by students, why do professors persist in using group assignments? In discussions with many of my peers, the answers range from a belief in the value of learning how to be a positive team member to reducing their grading load.

Discussion

The Use of Groups - *An Essential Skill*

Almost 70% of my online students have reported working in teams in some form in the last 12 months. Additionally, as globalization compresses time and space, the use of virtual groups continues to rise. Learning to be an effective member of a team, especially a virtual team, has become a necessary career competency.

A study by Ceridian Employer Services found that the ability to work in virtual groups plays a significant role in recruitment and retention. 50% of surveyed companies considered the ability to work in virtual groups a very attractive recruiting tool and 66% of the surveyed employees found the ability to use the Internet and work in virtual groups an "excellent" reason to stay with a company (Smith, 2008, p. 3).

On the other hand, the use of virtual teams brings challenges as well. These include issues related to trust, communication, the dependence on technology, time management, and team cohesiveness (Smith, 2008). It is more difficult to build trust virtually due to the lack of many of the clues that characterize face to face collaboration (non-verbals, proximity, consistency, observation). It is also more difficult to detect individual expectations in virtual groups compared to face to face groups. Expectations are individually-bound and often implicit. It is easier to detect mismatches face to face (Bosch-Sijtsema, 2007). Because they are distant, team members have more difficulty creating a "shared context" which helps shape expectations and build trust (Hinds & Baily, 2003).

Communication and language differences, time zone differences, differences in personal schedules, other time commitments, inconsistent time management capabilities and even cultural views on time can all create sources of conflict in student groups.

All of these can undermine team cohesiveness and serve as a foundation for conflicts in student groups. Virtual team members are more likely to experience task, role or responsibility ambiguity due to these factors (Shin, 2005).

Specific Sources of Conflict in Student Groups

The sources of conflicts in student groups (see Table 2) mirror those of face-to-face groups. Most conflicts can be traced to differences in expected outcomes (grades), course assignments, team roles (e.g. editor), style, values and resources (time), or basic personality conflicts. Because communication is often asynchronous and virtual, there seem to be more opportunities for miscommunication, much like those we find in the workplace today with e-mail and instant messaging.

I have been tracking instances of evident conflict in my online classes for the last three years. It that time I oversaw 127 online student assignments without the benefit of the array of conflict mitigation practices listed below. Seventy eight or 61% had evident instances of conflict. "Evident" is defined as a clear instance of conflict that is visible to the instructor either in the form of a student complaint or can be observed in a group forum.

In that time, group members "going silent" (missing in action) was the number one source of conflict (42%) in the student group projects. The number two conflict involved "quality" - students unhappy about the quality of some of the input from their peers for the group assignment (31%). Number three, unfortunately, has been accusations of plagiarism about a teammate (12%) (See Table 2).

Table 2: Sources of Conflict in Online Student Assignments

Online Team Assignments (Tracked)	Evident Conflicts	Sources of Conflicts
127	78 (61%)	Differences in Expected Outcomes and Commitment ("Going silent"): 33 (42%)
		Differences in "Quality" (Deliverables): 25 (31%)
		Differences in "Values" (Plagiarism): 9 (12%)
		Personality Conflicts: 8 (10%)
		Other (including miscommunication): 3 (4%)

Student Reactions to Team Assignments

As instructors, we must do all we can so that mixed or negative group experiences do not detract from the overall learning experience of our online students.

As noted in Table 1, over 60% of the students surveyed either disliked virtual team assignments or had a "mixed" experience. Their reactions to a review of the class syllabus and the inclusion of group assignments often results in either unsolicited emails saying they would do their best but they have had some "bad" experiences.

In using group assignments, instructors are likely to experience an array of student behaviors. I have witnessed the emergence of several "roles" that students will assume in group assignments.

Role Players

Conflict seems to bring out a number of personalities in students. I often run into the "Martyr," the "Excuse-meister," "Breathless in…(fill in your town here)" and the "Silent Partner."

The "Martyr" is quick to point out that he has had to do much more than everyone else on the team because no one else seems to be taking his/her part seriously. His work schedule is "unique" and his commitments unusual.

The "Excuse-meister" has a lot of creative energy, unfortunately he tends to focus it on why he could not do his full part for the team. He has an array of excuses that he uses to persuade his teammates to carry more of the load, somehow rationalizing that they have less to do than he does. These almost always seem to be about a sudden illness, computer challenges, or a last- minute work assignment.

"Breathless in …" will call at the first sign of an issue and tends to cry wolf a bit. This can be annoying, but this student also often serves as an "early warning system" to the instructor. They tend to overreact to any deviation or lack of response by a teammate, especially if they have had a prior negative team experience. They can lead to an escalation of conflict in the team by their early overreactions.

The most problematic is the "Silent Partner." The Silent Partner is not really a partner in any meaningful sense, other than he expects to receive the same credit as the other team members, though he has been absent from much of the team process. He prefers to let others carry the load and then appears at the end with his tale of woe. I see "going silent" as a group member's top transgression. It is a significant source of stress and frustration in groups and the top source of intra-team conflict in student projects.

Mitigating Conflict in Student Groups

Evidence suggests that team-building exercises (Kaiser et al., 2000), the establishing of shared norms (Sarker et al., 2001; Suchan & Hayzak, 2001), and the specification of a

clear team structure (Kaiser et al., 2000) contribute to virtual team success. I have used these as the basis for the creation of the conflict mitigation guidelines listed below.

Creating a Collaborative Learning Atmosphere

I believe the foundation for mitigating team conflict is laid before the group even starts. It all starts with the instructor. The instructor needs to create a "collaborative learning atmosphere" where group members can share experiences and are encouraged to pool resources (Smith, 2008).

Instructor Roles

It begins with the instructor's attitude towards team assignments. I have learned that students will often perform to expectations if they are properly and consistently reminded of them.

The instructor must be a facilitator, boundary setter, traffic cop and chief cheerleader. The main role of facilitation is well understood by online instructors. If the instructor is only minimally engaged, discussion often loses energy or structure, team assignments can go awry and the antecedents to conflict missed.

The roles of traffic cop and chief cheerleader are two sides of the same coin. The instructor must regulate traffic flow, team expectations and team activity. If the group is slow to start, he must remind the students of the need to engage with the team. If the quantity, quality or visible interaction is drifting, the instructor needs to energize them. If individual students are not doing their part, he must "ticket" them and get them on track. The other side, cheerleading, is just as important. Creating a positive environment is critical to managing conflict. Praising the group in public and critiquing any individual students in private, acknowledging focus and commitment, or thanking the group for productive work are examples of how the instructor can motivate student groups.

Preventative Actions

There are several preventative actions an instructor can take before the groups are set in motion. The syllabus needs to use "explicit structuring" of the teaming expectations to ensure greater content and context understanding of the team expectations. This will help to facilitate knowledge exchange between members and mutual understanding of the requirements (Hron, Hesse, Cress and Giovis, 2000).

The grade for the assignment should be significant enough to warrant proper attention and make meaningful participation worthwhile. I recommend somewhere between 15 and 30 % of the final grade. Additionally, the grading portion should clearly state that there is only one grade for the group assignments, and each member will share that grade.

I also make use of a "Group Charter," to which I attach a portion of the group assignment's grade (5 %). It is developed by the team based on a template I provide, which includes role assignment, a skills inventory, contact and meeting information, and the process to manage conflict within the group. At a minimum, the Group Charter

focused the group members on the team requirements so there is the added benefit of subconscious "pledging" when the team commits to a Group Charter.

Additionally, I expect a "Group Log" to be turned in with each group deliverable. The Log essentially documents the team's activities and describes who did what.

The last section in setting the stage is the actual group formulation. Instructors form groups several ways. They sometimes let the students decide amongst themselves. If groups existed in the past, they may re-use them. Finally the instructor will assign the groups themselves. I have tried many different methods and have learned that when I assign them, there seems to be less conflict. I usually put together students from the same time zone, if possible, but certainly not more than 1 hour different. This has the effect of greatly reducing the complaints about access and scheduling. After logistics are considered, I look at talent level (attitude, writing skills, work ethic and quality of content). I spread out the talent a bit ensuring each team had both strong and weaker students. There is no full-proof method to team formation and because it is early in the semester typically, your selections are based on limited data.

Managing the Teaming Process

Once the groups are set, the instructor's role shifts to monitoring and encouraging. Because many team conflicts are often presented to instructors as "he said/he said" situations, it becomes challenging to manage interventions in an appropriate manner. I expect groups to perform "in the open." I create " group rooms" of some sort, to which I have access, so I can "witness" the team in action. Obviously, this does not always happen but I let students know that unless I have "evidence" of the conflict, I will assume the entire group is at fault for the dysfunction and grade accordingly. This seems to keep most of their activities out in the open. Finally, I monitor the group rooms from time to time (1-2 times per week), usually posting a message asking if they need anything or are having any issues. This lets them know I am hovering in the background.

Instructor Interventions

Despite this active preventative approach, conflicts do happen from time to time. I usually use three types of intervention: soft, hard, and "shock & awe."

Soft interventions are gentle reminders that the team needs to solve its own problems. When I see an issue developing or receive a call or e-mail from a group member who is "worried" about the team, I will post or send a reminder about positive teaming behaviors, the need to adopt a group-first attitude, and their grade interdependence. I am not solving their problem but I am nudging them in the right direction.
If that does not work, I take a more direct approach. Hard interventions may include an array of instructor actions such as speaking to a specific student, speaking to the team itself, or changing the group parameters. In "hard" approaches, my focus tends to shift to specific recommendations to help them overcome the conflict.

If "hard" interventions fail, and the learning objectives are clearly in jeopardy, it is time for the "shock & awe" approach. I usually conduct a live conference call with the group and actively monitor the team room for a period, posting directive comments. At this point, the team can no longer operate effectively so I have to be more direct and prescribe how the team will operate from this point forward. I remind them directly that the group will suffer in the grading if they cannot find a way to get their act together.

I wish I could say that these interventions work 100 % of the time, but sadly I have had situations where the team dysfunction was so bad it could not be resolved and the group experience was poor and the group deliverables below expectations. These, fortunately, have been rare.

The Aftermath

The biggest challenge for the instructor is to assign grades fairly for a group assignment. Many instructors use a "one grade fits all" approach, not allowing for any distinction between group members. Other instructors create a means to adjust the grades within the group based on individual contribution. I use a "Group Evaluation" method that asks each student to assess their own and their teammates' contributions to the group assignments. The ability to administer grades individually has helped in specific situations, and just the potential for a grade adjustment within the group seems to lessen some of the students' angst about team assignments and grade interdependence.

Conclusion - Worth the Trouble

Because of the early painful lessons I learned in trying to deal with conflict in student online groups, I developed the process outlined above. Yes, it adds to an instructor's workload and can be tedious at times, but it does work. After deploying the full array of conflict mitigation steps listed above, evident conflicts in student groups have dropped almost 70 % in my courses (see Table 3).

Table 3: Reduction in Conflicts after Conflict Mitigation Conflicts were Deployed

Online Team Assignments (Tracked)	Evident Conflicts
127 (Before conflict mitigation steps)	78 (61%)
98 (After conflict mitigation steps)	19 (19.4%)

I continue to use group assignments because I strongly believe this is a necessary career competency and I hope that the students will learn how to be positive group members.

References

Bosch-Sijtsema, P. (2007). The impact of individual expectations and expectation conflicts on virtual groups. *Group and Organization Management, 32*(3), p. 358.

Hinds, P. & Bailey, D. (2003). Out of sight, out of sync: Understanding conflict in distributed groups. *Organization Science, 14*(6), p. 615.

Hron, A., Hesse, F., Cress, U. and Giovis, C. (2000). Implicit and explicit dialogue structuring in virtual learning groups. *British Journal of Educational Pyschology, 7, pp 53-64.*

Kaiser, P., Tullar, W., & McKowen, D. (2000). "Student Team Projects by Internet," Business Communication Quarterly, Vol. 63, No.4, pp. 75-82.

Sarker, S., Lau, F., & Sahay, S. (2001). "Using an Adapted Grounded Theory Approach for Inductive Theory Building About Virtual Team Development," Database for Advances in Information Systems, Vol. 32, No.1, pp. 38-56.

Shin, Y. (2005). Conflict resolution in virtual groups. *Organizational Dynamics 34*(4), pp 331-345.

Smith, R. (nd). Learning in virtual groups: A summary of current literature. Retrieved September 3, 2008 from: http://www.msu.edu/smithre9/project12.htm.

Suchan, J. & Hayzak, G. (2001). "The Communication Characteristics of Virtual Groups: A Case Study," IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication, Vol. 44, No.3, pp. 174-186.

Appendix

Group Charter Example

Learning Team Charter

Course: _____   Semester _____

Team Identifier: _____

Team Members:

Team Members	Phone	Email	Fax

Team Member Skills Inventory

Team Member	Skills	Team Role

All learning team members participated in the creation of this team charter and agree with its contents and its use to manage team interactions.
☐ (Please check)

Learning Team Objectives:
-
-
-
-
-

Potential Barriers to achieving our team objectives we must be aware of and overcome:
-
-
-
-
-
-

Learning Team Charter

Ground Rules:
(Meeting schedules, locations, attendance expectations, assignment expectations, communication methods, meeting agendas, etc.)

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Conflict Management:
What are the areas of potential conflict in the team?
How will we deal with the conflict? What steps will we take to manage internal team conflict?
What is the escalation process we will follow?

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Faculty Review and Comments:	☐ Approved
_____ _____ _____	Date: _____

Positive teaming is a program expectation and a career necessity. All team members are expected to fully participate in team's activities. There is no "I" in team, we want to encourage team-first attitudes so that the whole outperforms the sum of the parts.

Group Log Example

Learning Team Log

Team Identifier: _____ Date: _____
Course: _____
Semester: _____

Team Communications Activities
Meetings:
Conference Calls:
Chats:
Other:

Team Members:

Team Members	Participated
	☐Yes ☐No
	☐Yes ☐No
	☐Yes ☐No
	☐Yes ☐No
	☐Yes ☐No

Team Assessment for the Period
☐Exceeded our expectations
☐Met our expectations
☐Did not meet our expectations*

*Issues (what got in the way): _____
_____
_____

Team Actions (what did you do about it): _____
_____

Lessons Learned (what have you learned): _____
_____
_____

Assigned Tasks:

Student	Task	Status
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____