

Teaching Tips/Notes



Coaching Student Teams: Guiding Students Through Team-Based Learning Experiences

Many of my student's most impactful learning experiences aren't necessarily the ones that happen in the classroom, but rather the ones that build on those in-class experiences through team-based competitions. Not only do I form the strongest connections to the students that are on teams that I have coached, but it seems that those experiences stay with the students much longer than a typical class as well. From case study competitions to being on a livestock judging team, these experiences challenge students to apply concepts, make decisions, and to think on their feet, as well as develop communication and leadership skills. Competition against other university teams can be a very motivating experience for students, however successful management of those teams can help facilitate an even more impactful learning experience for students and help to develop self-efficacy skills that will be essential for them to become lifelong learners. The steps outlined below highlight my techniques for helping students to get the most out of their team based experience.

Develop a Strong Commitment Early on

Regardless of the number of students interested in being on a team, making interested students work to show their commitment creates a strong buy-in from the beginning. Students on my teams apply for a spot on the team with a written application and then, if they make it past that round, have a scheduled try-out presentation and interview. The students that are awarded a spot on the team, have already showcased their willingness to put in effort to the team and, likely, feel proud of their accomplishment of making the team (even if only a small number of students apply to be on the team). This process creates buy-in from the beginning and contributes to the team's motivation.

Team Building

Once the team has been formed, I like to structure opportunities for the students to get to know the contest, their team members, and their own skill sets. By creating opportunities for students to assess where their skills may come in valuable, it also creates an opportunity for them to get to know each other better and value the individual contributions of each team member. Some examples of the tools for assessing personal strengths I have used include Myers-Briggs, Strengths Finder, and the Fascination Advantage.

Identification of Learning Goals

As students get a little more comfortable with the project, the team, and their role, I ask them to identify at least five personal learning goals that they would like to personally accomplish through participating on this team. Establishing learning goals requires students to reflect on areas of weakness, as well as skill sets that are going to be valuable as they move into the real world. Through the metacognitive process of identifying learning goals, individual team members develop a clearer sense of what they are working towards, beyond just "winning" the competition.

Weekly Progress and Feedback

A critical part of becoming a lifelong learner is the ability to be self-regulated toward individual learning goals. By asking students to assess their progress toward their learning goals each week, the students are forced to go through a self-assessment process. In addition, as coach of the team, I gain a better sense of the efforts going into the project and an opportunity to provide personalized feedback to each student.

Reflection on Progress and Learning

Regardless of the outcome of the contest the team was preparing for, the process of reflecting on the experience and the student's progress to their learning goals, typically reveals significant learning. While often that learning occurs related to specific skills necessary for the nature of the competition (e.g.

marketing, finance, livestock evaluation), perhaps even more significant is the learning related to the development of soft skills (e.g. communication, leadership, conflict management). In addition, by reflecting on how far they have come toward their learning goals (or in some cases, how far they still have to go to achieve their learning goals), students obtain a better sense their own self-efficacy.

Coaching student competition teams can take a lot of time but, for me, it is some of the most rewarding time invested in teaching. The growth and the skills that the students gain through the team experience, is worth every minute spent invested in the experience. The process of building a strong foundation through commitment, team building, and goal setting, followed by active self-assessment and reflection on the growth seems to maximize the return on that investment for both the coach and the students as lifelong learners.

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