

UBC Sauder Wayne Rawcliffe

Helping students improve their collaboration and teamwork skills

A common goal for the use of group projects in universities, especially business schools, is to simulate the professional work space where students must collaborate with each other and learn how to be an effective team member but this goal was not always met.

“We know as a business school, we need to put more emphasis on improving student collaboration and teamwork but it has always been a pain point for us.”

ROB PEREGOODOFF, DIRECTOR OF UBC SAUDER LEARNING SERVICES



Students need to improve their communication and collaboration skills through group assignments, coops or internships, and part time work to demonstrate their skills to potential employers. Even though technical skills are extremely important in any role, more companies are looking for employees with specific communication, collaboration, and teamwork skills. That has always been a goal for Wayne Rawcliffe who teaches organizational behaviour and human resources at the Sauder School of Business at UBC where group projects have always played a critical role in assessing student learning.

However, the inherent issues with putting students who aren't skilled at group work into groups could potentially derail the team learning experience and hence negatively-

impact learning outcomes for students. Common team conflicts include group organization, task delegation, lack of trust amongst team members, or simply someone delivering on their commitments. Instructors such as Wayne lack the insight into student group dynamics to provide guidance early in the team's formation. Even though peer evaluations provide an easy way to receive student feedback on their peers, it is late in the process and prone to bias. The feedback is usually announced at the end of the semester, when it is too late for the instructor to intervene and help get the group back on track and students are left with a bad team experience.

“I don't like peer evaluations because I am relying on third party information to inform academic decisions on the performance of a student and many of these feedback processes can be gamed.”

WAYNE RAWCLIFFE

When Wayne heard about Enightful, he thought it could help address some of these team issues and support student collaboration in team assignments. For the Winter 2020 term, Wayne decided to pilot Enightful as the main team project tool for two courses. He hoped that the software could help students better plan and manage their group projects while providing him enough insight into team performance to gain a better understanding of how each team is doing.

Students were assigned to groups of 4 or 5 and enrolled into the platform.

“The purpose of the pilot is to see if the software helps students structure their projects and engage in communicating and managing progress in a way that would improve their team process and team performance, while hopefully improving the quality of their deliverables. Enightful enables me to see whether or not that’s happening.”

WAYNE RAWCLIFFE

What we heard from students and instructors

Throughout the course of the pilot, different teams engaged in the Enightful platform in different ways with varied degrees of engagement. Most teams utilized the platform to break down large deliverables into small tasks and assigned those tasks to specific team members. Some used the platform to communicate and share files.

In the beginning, students did not see the immediate value in using a project management tool for their projects. For some, it felt like a requirement from their instructor. The usage of the platform was not tied to their grades and many students did not feel motivated enough to use it. As the term progressed, teams began to use the platform more when deadlines approached and many eventually saw the value in using the Enightful platform.

All of the students participating in the pilot agreed that using Enightful improved their team organization and performance. By assigning tasks to specific team members, students were able to delegate better and manage the completion of tasks on time. For every task, members of the team can see the task’s owner, due date, and whether the task is early, late, or on time. Everyone knew who was responsible for what and there was little ambiguity leading to improved accountability within the team. For many students who have never been taught project management, the tool was easy and intuitive to use.

Creating and managing tasks, accountabilities, and timelines came very naturally. One student mentioned how it improved the team’s trust in each other now that there is more transparency within the team.

The students also provided feedback for improvement to Enightful. Suggestions included improvements to the chat system, better notification alerts, and a library of common tasks, and task templates. Although the Enightful platform offered a simple chat system, students defaulted to using Messenger or Whatsapp because they felt the built-in chat system was clunky and inefficient for their needs. Students had to navigate to a different page every time they wanted to communicate and that was too challenging to use. Students wanted to be notified when teammates made changes in the system so they could be kept up to date.



Wayne believes that the platform is addressing an opportunity to improve team skills in the business school. He specifically mentioned that the platform accomplished two things:

- 1) It encourages the development of team skills
- 2) Help students address issues early, reduce unproductive conflict, clarify roles and achieve better results

“We have students from all over the world and a lot of whose prior school experience does not include a lot of teamwork. Team skills and awareness of individual behaviours in a team setting are not always commonly understood. I think Enightful was able to get all students to think how they can collaborate with one another.”

When asked about whether he would use Enightful for his group projects, Wayne responded:

“I would absolutely use the platform again. Knowing that team’s performance is a problem, the more instructors that use Enightful, the better students can develop team skills and improve their team’s performance.”



Conclusion

The results and feedback from Wayne's students and himself further validate that students require more guidance and structure to get the most out of their team projects. By introducing a mindset of project management and familiarity with project management tools, students can become better collaborators and team players and that is the experience Enightful provides.