

MANAGING VIRTUAL TEAMS

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BUILDING VIRTUAL TEAMS¹

EDWARD VOLCHOK

Every instructor who teaches online should consider introducing team projects. While they are especially useful in marketing, virtual teams are a very effective educational tool in all disciplines. When Stevens Institute of Technology asked me to develop an online graduate marketing course, I was certain of one thing: I wanted to give my students an experience that would instill a deep appreciation of marketing and the challenges marketers face. To achieve my goal—to be truly hands-on—I knew I would have to assign team projects. The looming question was: How should I structure teams in a computer-mediated, asynchronous learning environment?

The online environment presents unique challenges, especially for team projects. Online, students and faculty lack a face-to-face connection on which we all depend in on-campus classes. Its importance cannot be understated. Without 30 hours of physical presence in a traditional classroom, students can feel isolated from their instructor as well as from one another.

¹Based on an article in *eLearn* magazine, with permission.

Online relationships—built primarily by communicating with the written word, without benefit of body language, a passing smile, or an occasional joke—can seem hollow. The lack of these cues makes building trust very difficult. The wise use of virtual teams, however, can help overcome virtual distance.

Since early 2002, I have been teaching “Marketing Management,” an online graduate course in Stevens Institute of Technology e-learning unit. From the start, I formed virtual teams. Having seen the triumphs and tribulations of over 75 teams on some 300 team projects in 20 classes, I will discuss some of the methods I use—and that you might also employ—to make your virtual teams succeed.

STRUCTURING ONLINE CLASSES

My primary task was to migrate the school’s “Marketing Management” course from the classroom to the online environment. To keep virtual students motivated, I want them to wrestle with real marketing problems. I do not encourage students, already isolated from classmates and their instructor, to cram alone for an exam and spout back passages from the textbook, only to forget key lessons once the semester ends. My course is designed to make students confront the challenges marketers face; they learn by doing. Students get their hands dirty by tackling real marketing problems. Merely studying for tests is just not a sufficiently involving experience. I banished tests.

My next challenge was the lecture. I enjoy lecturing and I have given well-received lectures in the marketing classes I taught at New York University. I could have easily adapted them and added a few new ones. As they are already mounted on PowerPoint slides, posting them on the course web site

would have been easy. While I have been a fan of PowerPoint since 1985, when I beta-tested its very first release, PowerPoint is *not* a robust teaching tool for online classes. To be effective, PowerPoint slides need a parallel real-time presenter. While I could have recorded an audio track to accompany my slides—some instructors report great success doing just that and I have heard students praise the experience—prerecorded lectures are just *not* interactive.

It became clear that to build a successful online course, I would have to structure my classes around case studies, not lectures. So I introduced two types of case studies. The first is a series of nine small cases designed to be solved individually. These briefs focus on a single topic. Students are given one week to develop, present, and discuss the assignment. The second—the showpiece of the course—is an in-depth case study. These cases require students to work in virtual teams to solve real strategic and marketing plan objectives. The teams have two weeks to present and discuss their cases. As preparation often takes longer, teams may be given extra time to prepare their projects, some until the end of the semester.

Students post their individual and team projects for class discussion on a message board on the course web site. Besides coaching the teams as they prepare their projects, the principal way I insert myself in the process is by giving teams due dates and, at the end of each project, preparing an overview of the assignment, recapping strengths and weaknesses of solutions presented, and resolving issues that may have arisen during discussions. In the end, I post grades.

STUDENTS AND MARKETING MYTHS

Nearly all my students are working professionals. Typically, they may have already earned a degree in engineering or in

another technological discipline. Their employers encourage them to get advanced degrees and most companies pick up the tab for all or part of their tuition. Employers are top corporations, such as Verizon, Pearson, JPMorgan Chase, Pfizer, Boeing, Honeywell, and Johnson & Johnson.

For working professionals, online courses with anytime, anywhere opportunity offer important benefits. Online education enables them to complete their degrees faster and more conveniently than if they attended traditional classes on campus. Hectic and ever-changing schedules, pressing demands of business travel, and the obligations of growing families make attending a fixed schedule of on-campus classes inconvenient, if not impossible.

Today's best marketers say that marketing is too important to be left to their department only. That's why good teamwork is essential for successful marketing. In today's competitive marketplace, businesses must focus their entire organization on delivering superior value to customers. In practice, this means building cross-functional teams. The marketing department can no longer dictate objectives, strategies, and timetables. It must engage other departments actively and seek their support. Marketers must earn trust, which requires teamwork. For courses designed to give students realistic experiences wrestling with delivering customer value, team projects are essential. Through them, students learn the art of debating, generating consensus, and delivering cogent proposals under tight deadlines. To be collaborative team players, students need to learn how to lead *and* follow.

In my consulting practice, I have observed clients—multinationals and start-ups—increasingly rely on collaborative work performed by computer-mediated teams. As Robert Ubell, editor of this book, says, "Virtual teams replicate the way industry, commerce, and research is practiced everyday

worldwide.” Virtual teams not only are appropriate for presenting marketing subject matter in its proper context and meeting the needs of my time-starved students, but also enable students to master unique challenges of participating in virtual teams in a relatively risk-free university environment.

STUDENT RESPONSE TO VIRTUAL TEAMS

Students have strong—and conflicting—opinions about virtual teams. Most love *and* hate their team. Even students in a well-run team are frequently frustrated. At times, they would gladly abandon their project or, at the very least, a teammate or two. Students who share their frustrations with me about getting teammates to pull their weight remind me of the famous line, “Hell is other people,” in Jean-Paul Sartre’s play, *No Exit*. There is an important lesson here. Teamwork is not easy. Teammates often have unspoken agendas, which may not parallel the team’s. Getting a virtual team to work together can often seem as vexing as herding cats. Yet we need not echo Sartre’s pouting pessimism. You can develop enthusiastic teamwork in an online environment. Instructors can give teams boosts by acting as mentor, psychologist, rabbi, and arbitrator.

Suggestions that follow are designed to make virtual teams less like the strident interpersonal transactions from a French existentialist’s play and more like the immortal 1927 New York Yankees.

Tip 1. Get teams off to a strong start. To get your teams off to a running start, you must set clear expectations. My online class syllabus, for instance, is far more detailed than those

in traditional courses. It's wise to post messages about your expectations in several places—in assignments, throughout the course site, in periodic class e-mails, and in detailed reviews of each project.

It's worthwhile to get to know your students well. In my orientation survey, I ask: What do you do for a living? How much work experience do you have? What did you study as an undergraduate? What degree are you studying for now? What do you know about marketing and marketers? In a traditional classroom, this information is gathered face-to-face. Obviously, online, such meetings are impossible. I am in New York City, while my students are all around the globe—Maryland, Illinois, California, Hong Kong, Taipei, and Moscow. Even for those within commuting distance to our Hoboken campus, tight schedules make face-to-face meetings difficult.

In addition to the survey, I hold a 10–15-minute phone conversation with each student a week before our online class begins. My purpose is to greet students, tell them about myself, clarify what I expect, and hear them express what they hope to achieve. These conversations are critical for establishing teacher presence in virtual classes.

It's also useful to give students a chance to introduce themselves to each other. My first individual assignment is designed to build strong teams. I ask students to post a personal statement, sometimes called a “two-minute pitch” or “elevator pitch.” I require the assignment for two reasons. First, students will need to perfect pitches in their careers. Helping them market themselves is a good way to introduce them to the field. Second, from the team's perspective, students need to know their teammates and their competition.

Tip 2. Establish teams in the first week. To give teams a running start on their first team project, which is due the fourth week of class, I announce team rosters at the start of the first week. Typically, my teams are composed of three to five members. Because I assign four team projects, I aim for four students per team. I recommend that students not attempt to form their own teams. Virtual teams are not like pickup teams at the playground. Employees in a company do not commonly select their teammates. Besides, students do not have the time or the information necessary to form teams on their own. To move things along, instructors should select team members by trying to balance experience, skills, and background.

Tip 3. Contain the “Mussolini.” A good team player must act as both a leader and a follower. It’s best not to allow team members to dominate a team by force of personality. To preempt dictators, I recommend rotating team captains. With four members on each team and four team projects, every member will rotate leader and follower roles.

Team captains have critical responsibilities. They set the agenda, distribute assignments, and enforce deadlines. The most important responsibility of the captain is to make sure the team presents a unified solution to a problem. To achieve it, the captain must bring conflicting points of view to the fore and achieve consensus. A good team captain is a consensus builder, not a despot. Wise captains use their persuasive powers to harmonize the team’s ideas. They also make certain that contributions of individual team members are consistent with the team’s objectives and strategies so that the final submission is presented in a unified voice. If a team submits its project with disparate sections, each written in a different style,

the team lacks the essential cohesion of a successful team. With an ineffectual captain, disorder reigns. In such cases, the team experience can quickly sour.

Some students may cast themselves in the role of a “Mussolini.” They force their views on others and try to stifle discussion. When I receive e-mail messages complaining that a student is trying to suppress the opinions of teammates and force the team to accept only his or her ideas, I telephone the self-proclaimed dictator. A few gentle reminders about team spirit generally work wonders. Most students respond well to appropriate intervention.

Tip 4. Empower “Shrinking Violets,” restrain “Rambos.”

Worse than “Mussolinis” are “Shrinking Violets” and go-it-alone “Rambos.” In one of my online classes, a “Shrinking Violet” was lurking during the first team project. Her teammates complained that this wallflower was not contributing anything, disappearing entirely from the second team project. I telephoned the student to warn her that lack of participation in team projects may result in failing the course and wondered whether she wished to drop the class. While she assured me that she hoped to complete the course and that her performance would improve—which it did for a week—she then vanished entirely, reappearing 20 hours before the next project was due. She frantically e-mailed her teammates, begging for something to do. Her teammates responded politely, saying, in essence, “Thanks, but no thanks.” Violet then morphed into “Rambo,” privately e-mailing me her project two days late, with a fusillade of hostile remarks directed toward her teammates. A quick glance at her submission led me to suspect that she had incorporated her team’s research—posted on the teams’

discussion board—into her own project. Because I had been observing the team’s message board, I knew she had not contributed. I reminded her that I do not accept late assignments and, what’s more, I might enforce the university’s policy on academic integrity, which carries severe penalties for students who “borrow” the work of others. Ultimately, she accepted a failing grade for the assignment.

Establishing a strict team structure may help reduce such incidents and the need to take serious corrective action. Still, if the structure fails, instructors must hold feet to the fire. You must persuade and cajole “Shrinking Violets” to participate fully. You must encourage “Rambos” to work with their teammates. Ply them with carrots, but if all else fails, beat them with sticks.

Tip 5. Give students tools to communicate. Students should have as many tools as possible to communicate with teammates. When I announce the composition of teams, I distribute the team’s e-mail addresses and telephone numbers. I also establish team-specific synchronous chat rooms in which conversations are automatically archived, giving all members a record of discussions. I also provide each team with a private asynchronous message board. Most teams make extensive use of the board to post drafts, suggest revisions, and reconcile opposing views.

I then offer suggestions on how best to work together. I soon step aside to give teams room to succeed or fail. Students are very inventive in finding ways to work together. Sometimes, they use their company’s conferencing systems. Occasionally, teams go to great lengths to meet in person. While this is rare, many have told me of their intense desire to meet their teammates face-to-face.

Tip 6. Enlist students in holding teammates accountable. The most unfortunate consequence of poor teaming is when students ride on the coattails of others. However, there are a number of ways of preventing those who try to get a free ride. Consider these two: It's prudent to ask students in a team to assess everyone else's contribution to the project. This requirement encourages them to participate actively because they are aware that I will take these evaluations into account when determining their final grade.

Under certain conditions, however, teams may vigorously defend those who fail to fully participate. Occasionally, a team will urge instructors to give the same grade to those who did not contribute actively because the student is viewed as a valuable partner, even if he or she may not have been as engaged. You may learn that "Robert did not fully participate because his wife just gave birth prematurely," or "Maria did not fully contribute because she suffered minor injuries in a car accident." You can easily confirm these accounts with a simple phone call, and if you discover they are true, it's wise to follow the team's recommendation. Support for a teammate in need shows that the team has built an *esprit de corps*, a quality that deserves encouragement.

Another way of helping to generate participation in a team project is to give a separate grade for discussion. Discussions are based in part on questions I pose to each team and questions students pose to members of other teams. How students respond individually is an excellent way to determine how deeply they understand the assignment.

Tip 7. Encourage a competitive spirit. Encourage teams to compete against each other. In my online classes, teams work on the same case and I am amazed at the variety of

solutions competing teams offer. After they post solutions on the discussion board, a vibrant discussion ensues. To get the discussion started, I recommend that the instructor post questions about the solutions. While some of my questions are legitimate, others are deliberately tricky, the kind that a confused or hostile boss might ask. Divergent views among different teams give you an opportunity to motivate students to dig deeper into the subject. For example, in response to one assignment, a team might argue that the solution to a particular problem is to raise prices. Another might recommend cutting or holding prices. In this situation, you might ask team members to comment on why their solution is better than the other. The debate requires students to delve into other presentations, creating a lively discussion. Then I post my project summary in which I outline key concepts, reconcile or refute alternative solutions, and offer suggestions for the next team project.

Tip 8. Reward risk-takers. Encourage students to think big and take risks. I often tell students, “If you are going to make a mistake, make a big one.” In my virtual classes, big mistakes come with few penalties, especially if students can justify their ideas with sound arguments. Student errors do not lead to lower stock prices, the loss of millions of dollars, closed plants, or ruined careers. They do, however, open the class to new ideas and lively discussion. And that’s what makes a winning course.

Tip 9. Unless asked, do not participate in team discussions. While it is very important for instructors to provide strong teacher presence in online classes, over-involvement can cause students to stop “talking.” Give clear assignments, and then stand back to let students become

engaged by themselves. Allow teams to make their own mistakes. Not entering the discussion does not mean you should keep silent altogether. When asked, it's best to respond promptly. When students request help or seek clarification, be generous with your time. It's wise to provide a detailed summary of every project before the next one starts. In my virtual classes, discussions close the day before the next module begins. I post my summary, highlighting the best and least successful team presentations. Then I post grades.

Tip 10. Consider real-time presentations. Yes, I know that live presentations violate the *anytime, anywhere* rule in an asynchronous course. But as Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds." Stevens uses a webcasting software application designed for real-time presentations. Through web conferencing, teams engage in live conversations with voice over PowerPoint slides, presenting their solutions and responding to questions. Students love these sessions and so do I. They are as interactive and engaging as in any traditional classroom. They help overcome the isolation of distance education, with students feeling the presence of their instructor as well as their classmates. Students unable to attend webcasting sessions, owing to work and family constraints, can retrieve archived versions, complete with images and audio.

NOTHING SUCCEEDS LIKE FAILURE

Let's face facts. Not every team hits a home run. In fact, some teams strike out, even as good pitches fly by. We all learn a lot from our mistakes. Failure, after all, is a great learning experience. When my students submit a less-than-adequate team project, some may echo one of Sartre's more pessimistic and

misanthropic sentiments: teams are “a useless passion.” In the end, most consult with their teammates to improve coordination, planning, and presentation so that their next effort scores. This is, of course, the most important lesson any instructor can offer.

