

A New Approach to Student Team Formation: Speed Teaming

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Abstract

Business faculty, heeding advice from employers and others, face the ongoing challenge of developing group projects and placing students into project teams. The prevailing thought is that students will be better prepared to manage the current workplace if they have solid experience working in teams while in college. The problem professors face with using teams is exactly how to place students into teams. Previous research shows that the two most common methods for placing students into groups are either allowing student self-selection or having professor assignment. Both methods have their advantages and disadvantages, and building on the advantages, this paper presents a process for an innovative method of team development based on a concept coined "Speed Teaming." The process is discussed and some preliminary results follow.

Business faculty are no strangers to teams; we've been placing students in work groups for quite some time (Bolton, 1999; Siciliano, 1999). We understand the trends affecting organizational structure that have led to more participative management, flatter hierarchies, and work organized into self-directed teams. And as the use of work teams in organizations increased, the use of team projects in education also grew (Bolton, 1999). Because employers seek team players in newly graduated business students, teams, and more importantly, the ability to work in teams – and to lead teams, has become an important skill for any worker to master (McCorkle et al, 1999; Thacker & Yost, 2002; Tarricone & Luca, 2002). Teamwork skills (learning experiences in group dynamics) are even a learning standard that AACSB expects of its member institutions to impart on their students as part of accreditation (AACSB, 2005).

Many benefits accrue for students when they work in teams. Researchers have shown that the learning-by-doing approach of group projects results in active learning and far greater comprehension and retention (Cross, 1981; Kolb, 1984; McLagan, 1985; Pike, 1989), higher levels of student achievement (Wulff, Nyquist, & Abbott, 1987), accomplishment of sophisticated learning objectives (Bailey et al, 2005), the development of critical reasoning skills (Gabbert, Johnson, & Johnson, 1986), and improved communications skills (Meyer, 1994; Williams, Beard, & Rymer, 1991) than is found with traditional lecture-style teaching methods (Ashraf, 2004; Williams, Beard, & Rymer, 1991).

Overall, the majority of research shows that students at both the undergraduate and graduate level respond favorably to group projects and state that team assignments are useful in acquiring team skills (Deeter-Schmeltz & Ramsey, 1998; McCorkle et al, 1999; McKinney & Graham-Buxton, 1993; Hernandez, 2002). One of the few exceptions is Bacon (2005), who found that the use of group projects actually inhibited learning.

Student group projects are not without their problems, ranging from a lack of leadership, scheduling conflicts, lack of team development, free-riding/social loafing, and students who prefer to work alone (Ashraf, 2004; Beard, Rymer, & Williams, 1989; Bureson, Levine, & Samter, 1984; Cox & Bobrowski, 2000; Joyce, 1999; McCorkle et al, 1999; Mello, 1993; Pfaff & Huddleston, 2003; Rotfeld, 1998; Shea, 1995; Williams, Beard, & Rymer, 1991).

Problems with student teams often start at formation. Two main team selection methods are commonly used: professor-selected and student-selected, as described in Exhibit 1. (Some authors call random assignment a third category, but because the instructor decides on random assignment, it's placed in the professor-selected category for this paper.) Although traditionally some researchers have recommended that faculty assign students to teams (Feichtner & Davis, 1985; Michaelsen, 1994; Muller, 1989; Proll, 1972), Connerley and Mael (2001) report that this procedure is unpopular with students, while other researchers recommend student-selection because it may lead to better cohesion and less conflict (Koppenhaver & Shrader, 2003; Strong & Anderson, 1990) and more ownership (Mello, 1993), and thus fewer problems (Pfaff & Huddleston, 2003) and a better a better team experience (Bacon, Stewart, & Silver, 1999; Ettington & Camp, 2002). Both team formation methods, though, present problems.

Insert Exhibit 1 Here

Several problems may arise when the professor selects the groups. The instructor faces the extra work necessary to organize and manage the process (even if random methods are used), can face difficulty in implementing the process, and can encounter resentment and blame if conflicts arising within the groups result in a poor outcome (Bacon, Steward, & Silver, 1999; Beaman & Stolz, 1992; Holter, 1994; Verderber & Serey, 1996).

Student-selected groups also present a number of problems, including groups with no leaders (Beaman & Stolz, 1992); groups with limited perspectives (Jalajas & Sutton, 1984-85; Muller, 1989); and groups with students no one else wanted (Beaman & Stolz, 1992). Part of the problem is that students who are instructed to choose their own teams are rarely provided with any criteria or basis for which to select team members, thus often choosing team members based on their social network of friends (Levine & Moreland, 1990).

Limited evidence supports that professor-selected groups are seldomly used (Bacon, Steward, & Silver, 1999; Decker, 1995), possibly because student-selected groups perform better than professor-

selected teams (Connerley & Mael, 2001; Faria & Wellington, 1989). However, Muller (1989) states that student preferences are not necessarily the most important criterion for successful group work, while Koppenhaver and Shrader (2003) suggest that instructor-assigned teams lead to more stability in membership, and that stability enhances each team's ability to perform effectively. Faculty may also choose to select team members to force diversity within the teams (Tonn & Milledge, 2002). Contrary to earlier researchers, Hernandez (2002) states that student teams should be formed by the instructor, and that students are more likely to engage in a positive learning experience when the professor selects the groups.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to review existing methods for placing students into work teams and experiment with an innovative method that uses student input to build the teams while giving the professor ultimate control in the final groupings, forming a hybrid third category of team selection.

Thus, after studying a social phenomenon called "Speed Dating," the researcher modified the rules and applied a similar approach to team formation dubbed "Speed Teaming."

Procedure

The Speed Teaming method is adopted from the theory and premise of speed dating. Speed dating was invented in the late 1990s by a Los Angeles rabbi determined to help marriage-focused Jewish singles to meet, and has been called the most significant shift in American dating culture since the mid-1960s (Barker, 2003). The premise of speed dating is that an equal number of men and women arrive in a venue, are given nametags (first name only), a scoresheet (with yes/no columns), and a set of rules about the types of questions that are allowed. The scoresheet allows participants to choose whom they would like to meet for a traditional date. In speed dating, couples spend anywhere from 3 to 10 minutes in a conversation-driven mini-date before a whistle blows and each must move on to a new person. Before they move, however, they mark their scoresheet. If both parties express interest in the other, the organizers facilitate an exchange of contact information.

Critics of speed dating argue that the process is far too shallow because most decisions are made in the first few seconds on first impressions (Spears, 2005), while supporters stress that first impressions are critical – in dating, in job interviewing, and on the job. First impressions are often made before a word is even spoken and can lead to a halo effect that impacts the entire impression of the individual (Simons, 1995). Supporters also argue that compatibility or rapport can also be very quickly established – or found to be lacking. And for teams to function effectively, Jackson et al (1991) state that the interpersonal compatibility of its members is likely to be an important factor.

Interestingly, others have taken the concept of speed dating and applied it to business. For example, the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) has a program in which small business owners get 15 minutes with contracting executives before a bell rings and they switch chairs to meet the next executive. The SBA says that about \$30 million of contracts have been struck through the program since its launch last year (Cutler, 2005). And Apple Computer Corporation used a speed-dating approach to connect Apple specialists with vendors at two conferences (Business Wire, 2005). Several groups are also using the speed-dating method as an approach for networking for local young professionals groups, chambers of commerce, and other business groups (Arney, 2005; Crawley, 2005; Norman, 2005).

In Speed Teaming, we take the benefits and lessons of speed dating – the power of first impressions, the need to ask the right questions, and build rapport – and empower students to make choices about potential team members. We also incorporate some elements of job interviewing by encouraging students to engage each other on typical interview-related subjects such as work ethics, communications skills, and leadership. Furthermore, because of the importance of understanding type differences in relation to team dynamics (Clinebell & Steecher, 2003), students are encouraged to ask about MBTI and other assessment results.

Only five steps are required for planning and implementing Speed Teaming, as shown in Exhibit 2, and discussed below.

Insert Exhibit 2 Here

The first step in Speed Teaming is developing the team ballot. The ballot is a three-column roster of student names and boxes (or lines) for checking yes or no. You could also include some directions or rules, here.

The second step involves dividing students into equal numbering groups. For example, in the class used for this research, there were 35 students, so students were organized into four groups of 8, 8, 9, and 9.

In the third step, upon arriving to the class, students are given a nametag and ballot, along with a copy of the rules (see Exhibit 3 for details), and assigned to a specific group. Students are also provided with a series of questions they might want to ask during the process (see Exhibit 4 for details). The list of questions can certainly be shortened or adopted to fit the need of the class; the list in Exhibit 4 was developed from numerous sources, including focus groups conducted with teams from previous courses.

Insert Exhibit 3 Here

Insert Exhibit 4 Here

The fourth step begins once all the students understand the process and agree to the rules. The instructor blows the whistle for the first interview to begin. Two minutes later, the whistle is blown again, and students are told to mark their ballots – and half of the groups rotate to the next interview (by moving one seat over), while half of groups stay seated. This process continues until all students have a chance to interview each member of the class. See Exhibit 5 for a diagram of the speed-teaming process.

Insert Exhibit 5 Here

The fifth step involves collecting of the ballots at the end of the interviewing process – and placing students into teams. After the ballots have been gathered, in a location outside of class, the instructor begins the process of placing students into teams based on the ballots. The process for completing this step can vary, but the framework used in this project – in which the desired result was 7 equal teams of 5 students -- was to find the seven most highly selected students and make each a cornerstone for the selection of the remainder of the class into the teams. The only rule we established was that a person could have no more than 1 “no” for inclusion in a group. That is, if more than 1 person from the current members of the group voiced a negative vote on someone, that person was then placed into a different group.

Results and Discussion

We tested the Speed Teaming method in a first-year business class and found the Speed Teaming method for team development was a huge success. Even though these first-year students had been placed in temporary in-class groups several different times earlier in the semester, many still did not know each other’s names, let alone preferences, strengths, or weaknesses. The speed interviewing gave students one last chance to find the best matches for their teams, and based on initial feedback and noise level in the classroom, students took full advantage of the process.

One piece of anecdotal information came from the journal entry of one of the students:

Yesterday in class we interviewed everybody to make possible selections for group members for one of our group projects. It really helped me to realize and narrow down who I wanted and didn’t want in my group. I found out people’s strengths and weaknesses, whether or not they procrastinate when it comes to big projects, and if they prefer to work alone or together – which all helped me really narrow down who I’d be able to work well with.

The author has also worked with many, many student teams over the span of teaching, and while problems arose with a few of the teams that resulted from the speed-teaming process, the students generally seemed to have more attachment to their teams than in other classes in which traditional approaches were used. Team members felt more positive because they had been chosen by their classmates to be in the team.

More specifically, the results of a post-interview survey found some interesting results and comments about the process, as shown in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 Here

The vast majority of the class found the speed teaming exercise useful in getting to know their classmates. None found the process extremely useless. The biggest complaint from students was not having enough interviewing time.

Not surprisingly, the top attributes (receiving more than 50% rating) students were looking for in their classmates during the speed-teaming exercise included, in order: teamwork skills, verbal communications, work ethic, maturity, organizational skills, rapport/likeability, and compatible schedules.

A somewhat surprising result was the number of students who participated in group projects – the vast majority had been involved in many group projects – while in high school. Typically, the two most common methods for placing these students into groups in the past were random selection by the teacher and self-selection by the students.

Finally, in response to an open-ended question asking about the greatest benefit of the Speed Teaming exercise, respondents stated:

- “It gave me a chance to talk to students I never talk to – and find out their names.”
- “Being able to interview all the students in the class in a relatively short amount of time.”
- “I was able to learn new things about my classmates.”
- “You got to know what everyone’s strengths and weaknesses were.”
- “Quickly got to know many students and find out valuable information about how they work in a group.”
- “Finding out what people had the most in common with you.”
- “Got a chance to meet one-on-one with everyone in the class, know them on a more personal level.”
- “I got to talk with people that I probably wouldn’t have talked to otherwise.”

- "I knew who I wanted and did not want quickly and easily."
- "I was able to make a quick personality judgment about everyone."
- "Good way to base who you want to work with. Quick and easy."

Limitations

This meet, greet, move-on rapid style of meeting people seemed especially good to adopt for classes in which the students do not know each other – such as for first-year students or newly admitted MBA students – and may not work as well for students who already know each other from previous shared classes and group assignments and find the exercise repetitive. Speed Teaming obviously would also not work well in extremely large, lecture classes.

The process has been tested on a sample of only one class, but it worked so well, and if the results of the post-teaming survey are indicative of the future, the speed-teaming approach could be an answer to the on-going problem of team selection. Of course, more faculty need to adopt and test this process before we can begin to call it a success.

And while there was some anecdotal evidence that the teams produced through the speed-teaming method had stronger bonds, this method of selection does not address other important issues related to team-building and team development (Bolton, 1999; Deeter-Schmeltz, Kennedy, & Ramsey, 2002; McKendall, 2000; Pfaff & Huddleston, 2003).

Exhibit 1: Student Team Selection Methods

Professor-Selected:

- Instructor randomly assigns students into groups without regard for student preferences, needs, or skills.
- Instructor assigns students into groups based on knowledge of student competencies, skills, and personal characteristics (from responses to questionnaire), but with no regard to student preferences.
- Instructor presents a list of projects and asks students to sign themselves into any unfilled teams.
- Instructor asks students to rank a list of projects/topics in order of preferences, and then places students into groups based on rankings.
- Instructor assigns students into teams by proximity; thus, students sitting next to each other are placed into the same team.

Student-Selected:

- Students choose their friends or close associates, leaving some students behind that need to be placed into groups.
- Students choose the people nearest to them, again leaving some students to be assigned into groups.
- Students bid on tasks, projects, or actual members in a process similar to an auction or free market.

Sources: Bacon, Stewart, & Solver, 1999; Beheshtian-Ardekani & Mahmood, 1986; Beaman & Stolz, 1992; Chervany & Heinen, 1975; Hill, Naumann, & Chervany, 1983; Koppenhaver & Shrader, 2003; Muller, 1989; Oliphant & Hansen, 1996; Proll, 1972; Verderber & Serey, 1996.

Exhibit 2: Steps to Speed Teaming

- Step 1** Before class, develop a team ballot with each student's name and a "yes" and "no" box next to it, as shown in Exhibit 3.
- Step 2** Before class, divide students into equal groups, assigning each student a row number. For example, if you have four groups of 8 students, you would have four rows with 8 students in each row.
- Step 3** At the start of class, students are given a nametag and ballot, along with a copy of the rules (see Exhibit 4 for details), and assigned to a specific group. Students are also presented with a handout of questions they might want to ask during the process (see Exhibit 5 for details). To remind students of the rules, the professor could also write them or project them onto the board.
- Step 4** The interviews begin! Every two minutes (or longer if you have the time) the whistle is blown and students mark their ballots – and half of the groups rotate (by moving over one chair) to the next interview, while the other half stay seated. This process continues until all students have a chance to interview each member of the class. (Be prepared; this event gets very loud.)
- Step 5** At the end of the exercise, the ballots are collected. At a later time, away from the class, the instructor finds the most popular choices and use these students as anchors for the total number of groups, and then assigns students to each group based on the results of the balloting.

Exhibit 3: Speed Teaming Rules

Here are the rules of Speed Teaming:

1. This is a timed event. You have 2 minutes per interview.
2. Take a moment and make a plan for what you need to ask in the interviews. (see the list of potential questions to ask.)
3. You may want to consider your strengths and weaknesses.
4. You can choose up to 10 people for your team, and you can only reject (say no to) up to 5 people for your team.
5. You cannot ask if the other person wants you on his/her team – and you cannot reveal your preference.
6. Remember the importance of first impressions – but also remember to look beyond them and use all your time in making a decision.
7. At the whistle, make your decision, mark your ballot, and move according to the instructions given you.
8. Ballots are confidential and will be destroyed after teams have been formed.

Exhibit 4: Questions You Might Ask During Speed Teaming

(Pick the best ones to ask in the short time you have to ask them!)

- What are your best skills?
- When would you have time to meet?
- Are you more energetic or laidback?
- Do you like a fast or slow pace?
- Are you a planner?
- Are you a leader?
- Are you a team player?
- Do you like working with others?
- How do you get along with other people?
- Would you consider yourself friendly?
- Are you rational or instinctive?
- Are you more an introvert or extrovert?
- Are you willing to work hard for the grade?
- Are you open to new ideas, opinions, perspectives?
- Do you have a sense of humor?
- How organized are you?
- Are you dependable?
- Are you tolerant of others who are not like you?
- Do you take responsibility for your actions?
- Can you meet deadlines?
- Are you open to the idea of working in a team?
- Have you worked in teams before?
- Are you a morning person or a night person?
- Can you work on weekends?
- When do you get your best work done?
- Are you goal-oriented?
- How would your best friend describe you?
- What's one word that sums up who you are?
- Do you play sports?
- Do you live on campus?
- Do you have a job off-campus?
- What's your schedule look like?
- Are you a talker or a listener?
- Do you consider yourself flexible?
- Are you always right?
- Can you see yourself getting along with me?
- Are you a worker or a slacker?
- Are you willing to do your share of the work?
- Do you consider yourself a problem-solver?
- What's your MBTI type?
- What's your TrueColors main colors?

Exhibit 5: A Diagram of the Speed Teaming Process

This example is for when four groups are used for speed teaming.

Round 1:

Team 1 and Team 2 (with members of Team 2 rotating one seat down at each two-minute interval)

Team 3 and Team 4 (with members of Team 4 rotating one seat down at each two-minute interval)

Round 2:

Team 1 and Team 4 (with members of Team 4 rotating one seat down at each two-minute interval)

Team 3 and Team 2 (with members of Team 2 rotating one seat down at each two-minute interval)

Round 3:

Team 1 and Team 3 (with members of Team 3 rotating one seat down at each two-minute interval)

Team 2 and Team 4 (with members of Team 4 rotating one seat down at each two-minute interval)

Round 4:

Intragroup Interviews, with members of each group pairing up for interviews.

Table 1: Results of Team Development Survey

Number of group projects participated in during high school:

68.5 %	5 or more group projects
20.0%	3-4 group projects
8.5%	1-2 group projects
3.0%	No group projects

Usefulness of the speed-teaming exercise in getting to know your classmates:

14.3%	Extremely useful
68.6%	Somewhat useful
11.4%	Neither useful nor useless
5.7%	Somewhat useless
0	Extremely useless

Attributes sought in classmates during the speed-teaming exercise:

77.1%	Teamwork skills
77.1%	Verbal communications
71.4%	Work ethic
65.7%	Maturity
62.9%	Organizational skills
54.3%	Rapport/Likeability
51.4%	Compatible schedules
45.7%	Leadership
42.9%	Workload
25.7%	Problem-solving skills
17.1%	Written communications
8.6%	Computer/technical skills

Other methods that have been used to place you into teams in the past:

88.6%	Randomly assigned by teacher
40.0%	Placed based on project preference
57.1%	Assigned based on seating arrangement
82.9%	Students choose own groups

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